Review: Kate Craddock and Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and its Audiences: Reimagining the Relationship in Times of Crisis*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024.

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Written by academic Helen Freshwater and academic-practitioner Kate Craddock, *Theatre and its Audiences* is a collaborative exploration of the relationship between performance and its audiences, reflecting on the profound disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This engaging read blends academic theory and practical insights to analyse how material conditions shape the dynamics of performance. Building on the idea that the pandemic was a 'teachable moment' rather than just a disruption (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 2), the authors highlight the importance of rethinking established norms and reimagining how theatre connects with its audiences in the present and future. In doing so, they challenge comparisons with past crises, suggesting that traditional methods of addressing disruptions in theatre are insufficient for meeting the demands of the present moment.

An intriguing, albeit unsettling, idea running throughout the book is the framing of the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'dark festival'. Drawing from Richard Schechner's (2002) concept of 'dark play', this framing reflects the heightened awareness of mortality, risk, and uncertainty. It offers a compelling lens to understand the disruption in theatre and festivals during the pandemic. In addition, the integration of personal reflections from the authors, drawing on their own experiences during the pandemic, provide an intimate and experiential reading of this interplay between theory and practice. Interspersed at various moments throughout the text, these reflections offering valuable insights into how the pandemic has shaped their perspectives on theatre and performance. Admittedly at first, I found the placements of these interruptions throughout the text to be jarring, until I realised that was – in fact – entirely the point. As the authors note:

> Covid can be interpreted as a planetary-level interruption: an intervention from a distressed and imbalanced system which desperately needs our attention and care. Interruptions may frequently be unwelcome, but they may also be telling us something we urgently need to know. (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 18)

The book is structured into five thematic chapters, each addressing different aspects of theatre and performance: time; space; technological innovation; communication; and care, access, and sustainability. The first chapter, titled 'Performance's place in time', examines to what extent the pandemic disrupted temporal norms in performance, particularly in terms of duration, frequency, and tradition. Alongside many valuable reflections on time, the way the authors encourage us to reconsider the relationship between audiences and performance as a long-term commitment rather than a single, transactional encounter was particularly compelling (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 56).

The second chapter focuses on spatial dynamics, particularly 'exclusivity and inclusivity'. Challenging traditional notions of theatre spaces, the authors explore how streamed performances, outdoor productions, and unconventional venues can shift our understanding of accessibility and proximity. They place an instructive critical lens on how theatre spaces have historically reinforced social hierarchies, highlighting class distinctions embedded in Britain's oldest theatres' architecture and auditoria pricing structures (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 62-63). Indeed, despite more recent innovations in theatre design—such as raked seating and lowered stages—the authors explore the ways in which these spaces can still be tied to issues of social inequality.

In the third chapter, Freshwater and Craddock explore the relationship between theatre and technology. For example, the authors discuss the significant, often criticised impact of 19th-century lighting innovations—gas, limelight, and electric lighting—on theatre, citing scholars like Bennett (1997), Heim (2016), Ridout (2006), and Nield (2017) who argued that these technologies diminished audience-performer interaction and concealed theatrical labour. Here the authors critique the nostalgic belief in a 'technology-free' theatre, pointing out the ways in which it has always been part of performance (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 98). For example, the authors emphasise that not all audiences want visibility, citing scholarship on marginalised spectators' experiences, such as those conducted by Sedgman (2018), Hadley (2014), Sörgel (2020), Snyder-Young and Omasta (2022) and Syler (2022). They also reference Palmer's (2017) research, which considers the historic uses of darkness in theatre for dramaturgical purposes.

From this broader context on technological innovation, the chapter moves on to critically review how the pandemic accelerated the use of digital platforms for theatre performances, exploring both the opportunities and limitations of this shift (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 88). They acknowledge the work of scholars like Dixon (1999), Aebischer et al. (2018), and Masura (2020) in documenting the substantial history of digital performance and livestreaming, helpfully situating pandemic innovations within a broader historical framework. While these innovations have broadly improved access for many – particularly disabled – audiences, the authors are keen to provide a closer interrogation of these practices to reveal a more complex reality. With their characteristic, and refreshing, take on wider debates in performance, the authors remind us that theatre has never been an inherently democratic medium, and that this fact did not simply change because performances moved online (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 118). Thus, they call for more thoughtful integration of technology and a reimagining of copresence as the creation of meaningful connection to enhance both in-person and virtual audience experiences (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 104).

The book's fourth chapter delves into how theatre communicates with its audiences, starting with an examination of how playbills, programmes, and publicity have historically shaped audience behaviour, and evolved into tools that inform and influence audience

expectations and responses, shaping how institutions relate to their public (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 127). A particular personal highlight for me in this section is the parody of 'theatre puffing' from 1816, cited in Gowen's 1998 publication, which provides a telling reminder that the language of sales hype is hardly a recent invention. Overall this analysis connects to the broader theme of trust and communication, raising important questions about how theatre can foster more honest and meaningful relationships with its audiences.

Given the authors' strong critical engagement driving the books discussions around time, space, and technology, I felt their analysis of cultural engagement and value perhaps could have been more deeply explored: for example, in their examination of practices such as dynamic pricing and reciprocal marketing that they argue erode trust between audiences and organisations. However, I wonder if the well-documented resistance to the concept of relationship management more broadly within the arts sector, and the development of such tools, might be a result of the limitations of the relationship marketing model itself, in practice, rather than the limitations of what the authors describe as its 'superficial' application (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 142). As the authors go on to conclude, 'relationships come in many different forms' and '[m]aintaining a long-term relationship with an audience requires ongoing commitment' (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 143). Arguably, it also requires adequate resourcing and a shift away from the desire to manage relationships to one dedicated to fostering quality engagement across longer time frames.

In the final chapter, Craddock and Freshwater explore the concepts of care, access, and sustainability in theatre, reflecting on how the pandemic has prompted a re-evaluation of these issues. It is particularly notable that the authors were not tempted to follow the well-trodden path of simply listing current inequities and challenges in the arts, cultural, and wider sectors. They go one step further: to begin to reimagine and revision possible solutions and alternate realities. Crucially in doing so, they highlight the significant role of independent practitioners in advancing care, access, and sustainability, noting their sustained efforts to redefine audience relationships and 'shape a new set of conventions and expectations' (Craddock and Freshwater, 2024: 151). Models explored here include concept touring and continued digital offerings as well as innovations such as virtual residencies and hybrid events, which enhance accessibility and sustainability.

Theatre and its Audiences is a timely and insightful exploration of how the Covid-19 pandemic has reshaped the relationship between performance and its audiences. The book effectively combines historical analysis with contemporary examples, offering a fresh perspective on how theatre can and does evolve to meet future challenges. By critically examining issues of time, space, technology, communication, and care, Craddock and Freshwater provide a comprehensive and thought-provoking analysis that will resonate equally with scholars and practitioners. Their call for more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable practices in theatre is a necessary and urgent one and the book brims with valuable insights that enrich our understanding of the evolving relationship between theatre and its audiences.

Biographical Note

Emma McDowell is currently Lecturer in Cultural and Creative Industries at the School of Performance & Cultural Industries, University of Leeds. Their PhD "From transaction to enaction: reframing theatre marketing" explored the processes of theatre-making, marketing and audience engagement in contemporary theatre practice through the enactive theoretical framing of participatory sense-making. Their work explores how we articulate, communicate and enact cultural value within marketing, evaluation, management, and leadership structures in the arts and cultural sector.
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