

Book Reviews

The Actor's Art and Craft. By William Esper and Damon DiMarco. New York: Anchor Books, 2008; pp. 286. \$13.95 paper.

William Esper is perhaps the most well-known of the first-generation Meisner acting teachers and is sometimes referred to as Sanford Meisner's most "authentic protégé." Esper trained at the Neighborhood Playhouse, and then continued his collaboration with Sanford Meisner as both a teacher and director. Esper went on to found the William Esper Studio in 1965, and in 1977 established the MFA and BFA Professional Actor Training Programs at Rutgers University. In his long-awaited book, co-authored by Damon DiMarco, Esper documents for the first time the technique that he has developed over the last thirty years of teaching. Esper's technique extends, refines, and details exercises that were omitted from or developed since Meisner's own book, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (co-authored by Dennis Longwell), was published in 1987. Although the exercises described in *The Actor's Art and Craft* follow the basic process intended by Meisner, Esper's ability to articulate the pedagogical and philosophical rationale for each exercise make this book a valuable record of the technique.

Using a familiar style seen in the Meisner/Longwell book, Esper and DiMarco create a fictional class of sixteen students to help illustrate the step-by-step approach to Esper's training methods. By way of the students' trials and errors in the classroom, Esper and DiMarco present a detailed account of Esper's distinctive interpretation of Meisner's technique. After each lesson, DiMarco reviews questions brought up in the classroom, which present Esper with an opportunity to elaborate on the objectives of a particular lesson and discuss his overall philosophy on the craft of acting. Each chapter begins with a quote drawn from contemporary playwrights, novelists, philosophers, artists, or actors, which offers a thought-provoking framework for every step in the technique. The chapter titles also frame the lessons and define basic guidelines; for example, chapter 1's "Begin Again—Empty Your Cup," or chapter 6's "Don't Gird Yourself to Act; Open Yourself to Receive."

Using the metaphor of building a house, Esper's technique centers around securing a foundation on which to build. On the second day, the fictitious class is introduced to the most familiar and often misunderstood aspect of Meisner's technique: repetition. Esper compresses several of Meisner's steps in the repetition exercises efficiently, guiding the reader to the root of the work: reacting from impulse. The book proceeds beyond the repetition exercises to a point where repetition work is completely supplanted and replaced with improvisations based on given circumstances. This

challenges the students to apply their newly acquired skills of listening, creating contact, and responding from impulse to a new context. Later, Esper illustrates Meisner's concept of "playing an objective while leaving it alone" by introducing an exercise rarely used by those who did not study directly with Meisner: the "Criminal Action Problem." The exercise is based solely on physical action, with no dialogue, and it requires the actor to create a circumstance where need can only be satisfied by committing a crime. Esper describes the substance of this exercise to be "quintessential" to Meisner's technique, in that the lack of dialogue prevents the student actor from making intellectual choices and forces him or her to be specific in a dramatically heightened situation.

Particularly valuable to students of acting is the chapter on emotional preparation titled "Daydreams, Fantasies, and Your Inner Life." In it, Esper describes how the Meisner technique differs from Stanislavski's original system and the American Method as developed by Lee Strasberg because Meisner rejected the practice of affective memory in favor of "emotional preparation." The purpose of the emotional work, Esper says, is to "give a depth and fullness to your acting that carries you into the first moment of the scene" (209). The crux of Esper's argument is that working with daydreams and fantasies supplies the actor the freedom needed to explore his or her personal areas of sensitivity, while affective-memory work locks the actor into what has actually happened to him or her. Daydreaming, Esper argues, creates endless possibilities and develops the actor's most valuable tool: the imagination.

By the end of the book, we have followed the students through the first year of their training. Throughout the text, Esper's passion for Meisner's work and the approach that Esper has developed over the past thirty years are apparent. What also occurs to the reader is the respect and care with which Esper handles his students. Unlike the more authoritarian style of teaching that he has previously ascribed to Meisner, Esper comes across in the book as possessing a gentle manner. This compassion seems to be Esper's trademark, and the book presents this approach as providing freedom and a sense of safety for the student actor that leads to positive results in the studio.

Although previous knowledge of Meisner's work may enhance a given reader's experience with the book, the text is useful to anyone with an interest in learning about the Meisner technique. Esper and DiMarco present the work in a straightforward manner that makes the book both informative and practical. There are other books on the market that more specifically define Sanford Meisner's approach, but the true value of *The Actor's Art and Craft* is found in page after page

of Esper's inspiring perspective on the craft of acting and on Meisner's technique in practice. Esper's book provides the reader a front-row seat in the classroom of one of our most important contemporary master-acting teachers.

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Dramaturgy and Performance. By Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt. *Theatre and Performance Practices*. Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; pp. 256. \$24.95 paper.

One of a handful of new monographs on dramaturgy, Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt's *Dramaturgy and Performance* was published only a year after Mary Luckhurst's *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*. When laying out what their work will accomplish, Turner and Behrndt clearly establish how their book differs from Luckhurst's, stating that "it is now necessary to broaden the picture to include a wider range of practices . . . articulating contemporary approaches to the dramaturgy and the practice of the twenty-first-century dramaturg . . . to discuss a spectrum of possibilities and to place these in relation to ongoing international debates" (2). Luckhurst focused on new play dramaturgy; Turner and Behrndt cover a variety of current dramaturgical practices, concluding with a section titled "Millennial Dramaturgies." Their goal, then, is to explore the practices of contemporary dramaturges, and envision how these practices will evolve in the future to further expand beyond traditional new play and production dramaturgy. Generally, the book successfully accomplishes these tasks.

Turner and Behrndt plot a careful course, beginning with an introductory chapter that lays out their approach and introduces the major issues they will address in the book. This is followed by a history of dramaturgy that focuses on Germany's strong historical influence, and progresses to discuss more recent trends found in British political theatre. Drawing a somewhat tenuous trajectory between Brecht and contemporary British playwright David Edgar, this historical framework sets up the second part of the book, which covers dramaturgy in contemporary England. This section is broken down into chapters based mostly on the dramaturg's working relationships: with the institution, the playwright, the production, and devised work.

The historical overview of the first section provides little in the way of either new information or perspective. Those familiar with theatre history will be familiar with the names and works included, while those familiar with the more specific history of dramaturgy will find the commonly accepted narrative of the development of the practice. The section is not poorly researched or written, but the overview does not link strongly enough to the second part of the book that examines contemporary practices. It is true that "Brecht's work has been key to the development of contemporary dramaturgy and the dramaturg" (12)—this is neither a new nor debated statement—but since the

authors do not draw clear connections between Brecht and the dramaturgical practices they discuss later, the amount of detail they present seems superfluous to their exploration of new dramaturgies.

Turner and Behrndt "hope to encourage a sense of the diversity of the field" (14). For the most part they succeed; by introducing a number of new dramaturgical practices in alternative performance forms and new media, the reader gains an understanding of the ways the field is expanding and diversifying. One of the strengths of the book is the inclusion of dance dramaturgy and multimedia dramaturgy, including video games and virtual space/reality. These new and emerging fields have been addressed only in limited fashion in performance scholarship, but more and more dramaturgs are branching out into this type of work. Unfortunately, Turner and Behrndt limit the discussions on these innovative approaches to only a few pages each, providing an important acknowledgment of changes in the profession, but failing to offer full descriptions or complex interrogations of these practices.

In their attempt to describe dramaturgical practices beyond the traditional, Turner and Behrndt rely heavily on extensive interviews they conducted with practicing dramaturgs. These interviews provide numerous case studies and commentary from dozens of dramaturgs who work in a variety of different contexts and utilize a number of different approaches. The reader hears from dramaturgs who work in England, the United States, Bulgaria, and many other Western countries. These dramaturgs talk about their experiences creating new works with avant-garde companies, their work with dance companies, and even how dramaturgy applies in video-game development.

This cacophony of voices contributes to a problem that is simply endemic to the study of dramaturgy: dramaturgy is an unwieldy topic to tame in a scholarly work. Turner and Behrndt open the book by admitting that it is "an impossible book to write," citing the vastness of both dramaturgy and performance as areas of study, realizing that "we are unlikely to do justice to both, or to either term" (1). Given the difficulty of the authors' task and their frank awareness of the challenge, they do manage to create a useful work. They handle the slippery notion of dramaturgy by contributing to current discussions of the broad range of practices that define contemporary dramaturgy in the West. The text functions well as an introduction and overview to dramaturgical practice, and successfully draws attention to some newer practices that will offer both opportunities and challenges to dramaturgs in the future.

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