Louise Owen. *Restaging the Future: Neoliberalization, Theater, and Performance in Britain*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2024, ix + 246 pp., $95.00 (hardback), $36.00 (paperback), $36.00 (PDF ebook).

Reviewed by **John Yves Pinder**, E-Mail: john.pinder@leuphana.de

https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2025-2032

With *Restaging the Future*, Louise Owen makes an important and incisive contribution to ongoing debates relating to socially engaged forms of performance and neoliberalism or what she more cogently refers to as "neoliberalization." The latter term designates the uneven and contradictory process and "normative theory" by which the practices of state-subsidized theatres but also performance and dance institutions and groups are subjected to marketization (7). Owen examines this process and its effects through four cases of social performance that function as prisms refracting the complexities and contradictions of the social formation within which they were produced. One of the strengths of *Restaging the Future* is that, in contrast to accounts of neoliberalism which focus on the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007/2008, the book zooms in on the years in which the Labour Party had returned to power as "New Labour" under the leadership of Tony Blair (1997–2007), which Owen situates squarely within what she – drawing on Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore – calls the "roll-out" phase of neoliberalism (9).

The first chapter, "Double Shuffle: Dance and Entrepreneurialism," is dedicated to the Geneva-based dance performance artist La Ribot and her project *40 Espontáneos* (2004–2007), which was performed in Nottingham and London in collaboration with nonprofessional dancers. The title of the work refers to bullfighting spectators who break into the arena to steal the bullfighter's show. The *espontáneo* is thus a loose cannon, a risk-taker blurring the boundaries between the spectacle and spectators, the star of the show and the anonymous crowd. In this context, *espontáneos* refers to the nonprofessional performers, whose qualities (lack of formal training among others) offer La Ribot a way of subverting and de-centring the usual codes and expectations of the dance industry. Owen, however, interprets the project as performing what she – following Stuart Hall – aptly calls a "double shuffle" by which the residual social-democratic logics underpinning the histories of community dance are realigned to a now more dominant neoliberal norm (27). Ideas of "participation" were historically linked to political efforts to democratize access to culture or, conversely, to strengthen cultural democracy from below by affirming the value of nonprofessional cultural practices. However, Owen argues that in the age of New Labour the term *inclusion* had primarily come to connote a concern for economic integration. For this reason, the nonprofessional dancers in the show also

represent the underpaid "precarious" labourers of the dance sector and post-Fordist economies more broadly (53). Thus, while the work's critical gestures and textures testify to the persistence of older impulses attached to social dance and live art practices, these older meanings are also shown to be residual.

The remaining three chapters follow the same fruitful theoretical schema and methodological approach, by which the cases under discussion are contrasted with older examples of practice serving as critical counterpoints. The second chapter examines the relation between public art and regeneration through *The Margate Exodus* (2005–2007), "a collation of projects and events" produced by Artangel in Margate, Kent, in collaboration with a range of artists including Wendy Ewald, Antony Gormley, and Penny Woolcock as well as local schools and residents (57). Artangel's 1990s strain of public art was understood by critics at the time to be "transformative" of public art in Britain. The case is nevertheless contrasted with the *Cable Street Mural* (1983), adorning St George's Town Hall in London's East End. The mural commemorating the Battle of Cable Street was not only anti-fascist in content and form, it was also co-funded by – among others – the Greater London Council, a bastion of left-wing municipal socialism dissolved by Margaret Thatcher in the mid-1980s. In contrast to the mural, the creative probing of place and issues like immigration and asylum as well as the rise of the far right in *The Margate Exodus* is contradicted by the way in which the high-profile, prestige project contributes to gentrification, a process pithily captured by the quote forming the title of the chapter: "Places, like Property Prices, Go Up and Down" (55).

The third chapter displaces the geographical locus of the analysis and adds a layer of complexity to it by discussing another composite project called *Favela to the World* (2006). The project instigated by People's Palace Projects, an organisation based at Queen Mary University where Owen completed her PhD, was centred on an intercultural collaboration between the Rio de Janeiro-based AfroReggae and British arts organizations. The UK practitioners were interested in asking what they could learn, if not emulate, from AfroReggae's model on the basis that "Brazilian favelas/shanty towns have developed sophisticated cultural strategies to combat the extreme effects of social, political and economic exclusion" (Ings 5). The project thus inverts the usual developmentalist assumptions about exemplary models of practice to be replicated and followed, while offering another interesting twist to the problem of mixed temporalities featured as the "double shuffle" in chapter one. On the one hand, Owen argues, AfroReggae's practice reminded British practitioners of "British youth work and associated initiatives of the mid-twentieth century" (112). The British contingent thus saw in it a possible antidote to the neoliberal instrumentalization of social art in Britain which had become inseparable from stringent forms of performance management systemized by New Labour. On the other hand, Owen shows us that these projections conceal the shared but misrecognized present

of globalization, in which both British and Brazilian cultural practitioners learn to seek inclusion "as mobile subjects of global capitalism" by becoming more entrepreneurial (113).

The last chapter, entitled "'Privatised Politics': Verbatim Theater in the Public Sphere," examines *Unprotected* (2006), a play produced by the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool in the context of a debate about the creation of a managed zone for sex work which took place in the wake of brutal murders targeting sex workers (115). The negative side of regeneration rears its head once more, as the idea of the managed zone and debate around it as well as the renewed success of the Everyman as venue are tied to Liverpool's gentrification as European Capital of Culture in 2008. Once again, Owen meticulously contrasts an older and more organic model of documentary theatre with the more recent emergence of verbatim theatre. Building on the critical assessments of the genre, Owen argues that while the newer forms of verbatim theatre also seek to capture social reality in an authentic way, they tend to individualize narratives and modes of address and also fetishize the document, which blunts the form's critical edge. Combining this argument with Rebecca Schneider's feminist theorisation of the archive, the author argues that the performance does critically interrogate the conditions of sex workers in contemporary society, but that it also ends up reifying its object and reinforcing the diffuse patriarchal power undergirding the regeneration process of which it is part.

Readers will appreciate the explicit feminist angle brought to the topic of inclusion/exclusion. However, this chapter is perhaps the least satisfactory. In all chapters, Owen seamlessly interweaves different strands of analysis (social and cultural, formal and thematic) to produce complex and lively accounts of theatre and performance's "neoliberalization." She achieves this by using what she refers to as "close-focus, experience-near, low flying methods" (157). This certainly comes through in her richly developed discussions of Margate, to which she returns in the conclusion of the book, and in her account of the Brazilian-British collaborations. However, it is a misleading description of the last chapter, which feels more distant. In contrast to her treatment of Margate, the discussion of Liverpool as urban centre and centre of regeneration remains somewhat underdeveloped, and the theoretical treatment of the issue of sex work is equally abstract. Geographical and time constraints may have played a role here, as the performance seems to have been encountered on the festival circuit (Owen states she saw the Edinburgh production) and through the archive rather than *in situ*.

Discussions of individual projects and genres aside, Owen makes an important contribution to current debates about neoliberalism and performance. The concept of neoliberalism underpins seminal works of scholarship on socially-engaged performance, including Jen Harvie's *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neo-*

liberalism[1] and Shannon Jackson's *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. However, Owen's approach to "neoliberalization" constitutes an advance, clearly capturing the unevenness of the historical process and of a social totality made up of different yet interrelated instances of social practice carrying within them multiple "spatiotemporal layers" (16). According to this conceptualization of "neoliberalization," which draws on Jisha Menon's work, the older welfarist social infrastructures and cultural forms are still shown to shape contemporary artistic practices, even as these critically refract the contradictions of the dominant neoliberal order and index other ways of envisaging the future. In this respect, and while not devoid of optimism, Owen's analysis has the merit of remaining uncompromisingly sober in its assessment. Even as the title invokes "restaging the future," what is left of the future outside of its neoliberal present appears to be wafer-thin, if anything at all.

The work's singular form of exposition and the place of performance analysis within is also noteworthy and raises valuable questions relating to writing and presenting materialist research. The book, which was originally a PhD thesis, has retained a very pedagogical organisation, with each chapter moving from a dense exposition of social context and artistic antecedents to an analysis of the artistic projects themselves. The two central chapters give more space to performance analysis, while in the chapters bookending the work, the examination of performances is much sparser (the discussion of *Unprotected* takes up five pages at the end from a total of 31). Where this is the case, the chosen mode of exposition risks becoming disorientating. However, this is perhaps one of the book's welcome effects. The historical structures, both discursive and material, artistic and social, shaping the event of performance are foregrounded and become the primary event with which Owen asks us to engage. The performances, by contrast, tend to acquire the status of epiphonema which are also epiphanic. Owen's first-person accounts of performances are vividly written and often condense the different strands of the preceding analysis. The researcher as narrator and spectator thus becomes an agent in a process of totalisation which maps out how art and society intertwine and relate to each other in complex and contradictory ways. At the same time, by virtue of their length and position within the overall analysis, the performance analyses reintroduce a sense of indeterminacy into the way that the theatrical event relates to its determining context. The performances appear to take on a life of their own. Transindividual emotions and corporeal experiences are foregrounded and something akin to autonomy and counter-agency appears to be recovered, if only momentarily, during the theatrical event. The tension between the mode of exposition and the

1 See also Harvie's more recent (2021) discussion of the question.

effect of the analysis thus reinforces the thesis that while neoliberalization has changed performance practices in Britain through and through, performance practices should not be thought to have been completely subsumed by it. This is a precious way of seeing and feeling that the reader will have the opportunity to develop and practice by reading this book.

Works Cited

Harvie, Jen. *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
—. "Neoliberalism, Theatre, Performance, Inequality, and Alternatives." *Neoliberalism, Theatre and Performance*. Ed. Andy Lavender. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. 13–41. Print.
Ings, Richard. *From the Favela to Our Manor*. London: People's Palace Projects, 2007. Print.
Jackson, Shannon. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011. Print.
Menon, Jisha. "Palimpsestic City: Nostalgia in Neoliberal Bangalore." *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres*. Eds. Lara Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 237–252. Print.