

Laura Higgins

Whither Political Theatre?

Abstract

Opening up Spaces of Hope: Rethinking the Politics of Empowerment in Theatre

Although critic Charles Spenser saw David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003) as 'political theatre that transcend[ed] the old conflicts between Right and Left', Lynn Gardner commented 'you leave the theatre aroused and angry, though also desperately impotent'. More recently the premiere of Richard Bean's *Great Britain* produced an opposite condition of reception as, ultimately, the playwright's 'incensed' response to 'the intrusive, illegal carry-on in Fleet Street and the merry-go-round of cronyism and corruption' (Dominic Cavendish), comprised an excess of 'finger-wagging' that left the audience seeming not to care (Alex Siers). Drawing on Ben Anderson's reappraisal of Bloch's 'utopian moment' and 'principle of hope', this paper seeks to address the problem of these two polarised and equally debilitating responses of helpless indignation and indifference. I argue that what Anderson refers to as 'a positive metaphysics that moves, and inspires' and 'cultivate[s] a politics of becoming' (Anderson 740), was demonstrated in the Georgian Marjanishvili Theatre Company's production of *As You Like It* (Shakespeare's Globe 2012), and I explore how the sense of empowerment conferred on the audience by the performance of this historically distant text not only enhances current conceptions of political theatre but might impact on new writing.

Biography

Dr Laura Higgins is Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Drama at Oxford Brookes University and Visiting Lecturer in Shakespeare: Text and Performance at Arcadia University, London. She has also lectured in Drama and Theatre at Royal Holloway University of London and Kingston University. Her research interests include theatre history and historiography; Shakespeare in contemporary production; and performance spaces. Her research and teaching are underpinned by an interest in the continual dialogue between the theatrical past and contemporary theatre practice and her work draws on theories from cultural geography to articulate the complex interactions between actor, text and place in performance. She has published on Shakespeare in contemporary production and is currently working on a monograph which explores the staging and significance of ghosts in drama from Shakespeare to present day.