

RESENHAS/BOOK REVIEWS

Haughton, Miriam. *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Luke Lamont¹

¹University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Miriam Haughton's monograph *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow* examines how contemporary performance in the UK and Ireland has attempted to stage the experience of trauma and its aftermath — although these two experiences are often intertwined in non-linear temporality. As Haughton explains, “Linearity and logic do not hold court in the study of traumatic experience, PTSD, and live performance” (Haughton 5). While issues of trauma and performance therefore lend themselves to comparison, Haughton's study must use a multidisciplinary approach in order to grapple with their complexities. “To write on the staging of trauma”, Haughton begins, “is to write on the staging of suffering” — a topic that is “uniquely personal [and] complex” (1). Faced with Jean-François Lyotard's renowned conundrum of how to “say the unsayable,” each of the chosen case studies — *On Raftery's Hill* (2000) by Marina Carr, *Colder Than Here* (2005) by Laura Wade, *Laundry* (2011) directed by Louise Lowe and *Sanctuary* (2013) directed by Teya Sepinuck — undertake what Haughton calls an “effort of limited articulation” (2). In each case, this effort is made to better understand, and to give voice to, the traumatic experience; in particular, on behalf of those in society whose experience is, in some way, culturally marginalised or obscured. The monograph aims to place these “shadowed bodies” — and how they came to be shadowed or marginalised — “as a centre point of enquiry” (5).

Haughton's case studies are notable for their contemporaneity, and for their formal and thematic variety. *On Raftery's Hill* and *Colder Than Here* are both domestic dramas (though admittedly depicting the very different contexts of rural Ireland and middle class suburban England) written by prominent playwrights. *Laundry* and *Sanctuary*, meanwhile, are post-theatrical, collaboratively-devised works: the former is a site-specific, interactive performance, while the latter is based around the real-life testimony of people in facilitated auto-performance. The selection of plays demonstrates the contemporary variety of theatrical approaches being utilised to engage with

¹ Recently received his PhD in Drama Studies from University College Dublin for his thesis “Act of Witnessing: Analysing the rise of a documentary aesthetic in Irish theatre”. His research interests include documentary theatre, site-specific and immersive theatre, autobiographical performance and memory studies. Email: luke.lamont@ucdconnect.ie ORCID: 0000-0002-2505-422X



subjects of trauma and marginalisation in the context of the global West. Such societies, for Haughton, are “informed by major transnational patterns in consumption, movement, digitisation and disorientation” (4). These plays arise from the experience of a social context that is increasingly globalised and driven by neoliberal agendas; one that is “dizzying, anxious, and indeed, traumatic” (4). That these productions are all written or directed by female artists is also significant to the broader theme, as all too often it is the female body that is traumatised, marginalised, and forced to exist in shadow. Though she had originally intended to undertake this project without specific regard to the female traumatic experience, as Haughton puts it, her study was “confronted with, and at times overwhelmed by, the magnitude of theatre and performance which tell of crimes against women” (14). Indeed, the intersectionality of the social context — one that is both patriarchal and capitalist — is plotted out by Haughton in her attempt to clarify the disorientating and disturbing modern landscape explored in these plays.

First, however, Haughton has the onerous task of mapping the history of Trauma Studies: “a non-linear journey of study that cannot begin and thus does not end” (7). From the nineteenth-century research carried out in the Salpêtrière Hospital, Haughton describes the early breakthroughs and missteps in this burgeoning field. In particular, Sigmund Freud’s hypothesis that “childhood sexual abuse being endemic in the family home and perpetrated by patriarchal structures” (7) was a prominent cause of PTSD was dismissed by peers; Freud recanted this theory — setting the field back almost 100 years. More recently, the work of Roger Luckhurst, according to Haughton, “explicitly argues that trauma embeds contemporary Western cultural experience” (8). This is particularly evident in the shared characteristics of trauma and performance. Dominic LaCapra’s work, which examines the processes of “acting out” and “working through” following trauma, is drawn on by Haughton, who links his examination of “compulsive repetition” with “the performance environment, where repetition is central to rehearsal and a production run” (9-10). Furthermore, citing the work of Patrick Duggan, who notes the “liminality that exists for both trauma and performance” (9), and Anna Harpin, whose analysis of performance dynamics “are deeply pertinent to the dialogue of trauma and performance” (13), Haughton argues for the necessarily intersectional use of gender, trauma and performance studies in order to answer the question: “what can performance addressing trauma do?” (30). The centrality of gender studies in Haughton’s project is made particularly urgent by what she calls “The Extraordinary Everyday Experience” — derived from Judith Herman’s assertion “that the characteristics of PTSD are more prevalent in the experience of female civilian life than returned male veterans” (26). Haughton’s framework for analysis is multi-faceted, tying together many diverse strands of critical theory in an effort that betrays the complexity of her study and the dramatic works examined therein.

The introductory chapter provides critical context for the four case studies that comprise the body of the monograph. These four chapters examine these plays through close reading, through analysis of their reception and, crucially, through analysis

of the performance event, with particular interest in audience dynamics and affect. The latter analysis provides rare and detailed insights, primarily from Haughton's self-proclaimed "palimpsestuous" remembrance (149), into specific performances of productions that, in some cases, will never be revived. Studies of this kind are essential for the efforts of theatre criticism to capture and reflect upon the ephemeral dramatic moment in which its subject exists, which is especially so given the precarious circumstances in which theatre makers produce work.

Chapter 2, "Violation," in which Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* is examined, reflects on the ambiguity to which the playwright employs animal imagery in contrast with the lack of ambiguity surrounding the central action of the character Sorrel's violent rape by her father, Red, at the end of the play's opening act. The central conflict lies in the structures that make society complicit in violation (such as the intergenerational incestuous rape in the Raftery home) while also denying such acts of violation as products of extra-societal, animalistic behaviour. As Haughton contends, the characters responsible for these acts "are precisely located within notions of civilised community enshrined in Irish and Western law and dynamics" (46). The barbarity that takes place at the Raftery home is predicated on the microcosmic structures upon which modern society is built, namely the patriarchal family unit. The play was not as successful as Carr's earlier *Midland's Trilogy*, particularly given its international audience of Irish diaspora, who perhaps hoped for an idyllic depiction of rural Ireland. Haughton, asserting that "Western civilisation is built on laws which practise violence against women", wonders if the negative receptions were a result "of how it functions as a reminder of this history" (71-72). Narrowing her focus, Haughton highlights where the show breaks for an interval, just as Sorrel is being attacked: "The house lights go up and the audience no longer embody the role of spectator hidden in the darkness, but are a community of people in a shared visible place". The shadowed bodies are not only those depicted on stage; they are also the audience who are now implicated as witnesses.

Colder Than Here by Laura Wade is examined in Chapter 3, "Loss." In this play, the Bradley family come to terms with the death of the matriarch, Myra. Here, the theme of terminal illness offers an insight into the continuum of trauma experienced by the bereaved: the characters simultaneously experience the initial shock of her diagnosis, the impending impact of her eventual death, and the purgatory in between. As Haughton puts it, "[their] trauma is, problematically and paradoxically, in the past, the present and the future" (92). The play, in which the Bradley family epitomises Western middle-class society, acts as an allegory for the gradual effects of climate change. In her analysis, Haughton balances this shared experience of anticipated cultural trauma with the more personal and intimate act of dying. Just as capitalism drives climate change, it also produced the conditions for the prevalence of cancer: "Cancer and capitalism are inherently connected, one feeding the other, and inevitably reproducing its own parasitic cycle" (99). However, Haughton's focus is always trained on the representation of trauma in this play, and she praises it for

“contextualising death and dying as open topics for conversation and as naturally and inherently part of human life” (90). This ties in with Carr’s resolve, as highlighted in “Violation”, to confront the audience with the traumatic. In the case of *Colder Than Here*, however, the audience is brought together to collectively encounter the process of grief after trauma.

By contrast, *Laundry*, examined in Chapter 4, “Containment”, isolates its audience members so that they would interact individually, and in close physical proximity, with each of the performers. These performers represent the shadowed bodies of Ireland’s abusive institutional past and history of coercive confinement. Set in a former Magdalene Laundry in Dublin, this performance asked each audience member to remember four names, and Haughton repeats these names at the opening and close of the chapter, underlining the sense of duty she felt following the performance she attended: “Political empowerment resulting from the performance derives from how an audience participant engages with the experience post-performance” (150). Given the intimacy, subjectivity and exclusivity of the performance experience (only three audience members could attend at a time), the majority of “Containment” comprises Haughton’s own experience of *Laundry*. By breaking *Laundry* into fifteen *performances*, Haughton summarises the structure and chronology of the production, giving explanatory context where necessary. She reflects that *Laundry* “is not the story of fallen women but of a fallen state and church, and a complicit society” (145). Given the near impossibility of revival and absence of a published script, Haughton’s account is a valuable source, but it is also one that raises questions about the possibility of research in a field where the artistic event is so subjective and so transient. Haughton, however, argues that these qualities allow for “a considered and fraught openness that must remain regarding the analysis of audiences and reception” (149).

Audience dynamics and reception are key facets of this monograph, as further demonstrated in Chapter 4, “Exile,” where Haughton reflects on *Sanctuary*, from Sepinuck’s Theatre of Witness project in Derry-Londonderry. In this production, members of the community were facilitated to tell, indeed, to perform, the stories of their own traumatic experiences, and the dislocating effects of these events. Contrary to the hopeless repetition compulsion exemplified by *On Raftery’s Hill*, the feeling of hope is nurtured by Sepinuck in conjunction with the audience. As Haughton observes, “the encounters the audience is invited to share [...] appear almost as a celebration of their survival and anticipation of their future journeys.” The utopian terms in which this production is framed and discussed might invite scepticism as to the true motives of those involved, and the efficacy of such a method in overcoming trauma. However, Haughton is keen to defend the production against charges of “exploitation and opportunism,” asserting that any cynicism in this regard “can only be counteracted or checked by the individual experience of attending a ToW production” (181). While this is not entirely satisfying, it does tally with Haughton’s emphasis on audience dynamics. Indeed, she likens the audience-performance relationship to a communion, one that facilitates the performers’ process of working through trauma. Throu-

gh this journey, from trauma to expression and communion, Haughton writes, the performers “illuminated a circular path, from here, to away, to here again” (200). This coherent circularity reflects the structure of Haughton’s own monograph, in which analysis ranges from the irresolvable despair of *On Raftery’s Hill* to the optimism and peace of *Sanctuary*. *Staging Trauma* moves through the seemingly disparate and incoherent strands of trauma and performance studies, intertwining them and offering a direction for the future conjunction of these two fields: “Onwards”(220).

Reference

Haughton, Miriam. *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Recebido em: 01/10/2019

Aceito em: 20/01/2020