

Inchley, Margaret. *Voice and New Writing, 1997-2000: Articulating the Demos*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, vii + 204 pp., £55.00 (hardback), £55.25 (PDF ebook).

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Maggie Inchley's impressively researched, interdisciplinary exploration of the UK's theatrical voice is a welcome and original enquiry that appropriately positions dramatic audio expression within the political climate dominated by the Tony Blair administration of 1997-2007. At its heart, the book presents Inchley's compelling philosophy that "the representation and sounds of diverse and non-standard voices in theatre space can challenge and scrutinise society" (41). And Inchley is not afraid to tackle head-on the complex and paradoxical definitions of 'the writer's voice' and importantly, the often neglected issues associated with voice training. As she insists:

A discussion of the 'writer's voice' must recognise that it is dealing with a highly textured and apparently contradictory concept, resonating both with the qualities of body and speech, with notions of writing and language, and with political and ideological implications. (36)

Ambitiously, Inchley examines this broad canvas with admirable precision, investigating "how voices were scripted and trained, performed and perceived" (135). And she makes a compelling case that the book

has explored some of the ways in which playwrights and performers represented the voices of characters in theatre space. It has tried to hear in the voices of theatre practitioners and in the responses of audiences the values of theatre itself and, in a much broader sense, the values of wider society. (135)

It is interesting to note that Inchley states that she is more concerned with the "negotiations made in their [the writers'; LP] work by the articulation of identities through material, social and representative spaces, norms and practices" than the "so-called unique qualities of writers' individual voices" (6). This aim of critical distance and objectivity, although admirable, is sometimes difficult to maintain in the book and, I would argue, counter-productive to immersing the reader in the *zeitgeist* (the smell and the feel) of the Blair years.

Indeed, the book is at its most compelling and readable when Inchley considers both the political context and the personal perspective in complementary tandem, for example in the presentation of the range of young people's voices associated with the *White Boy* (2007), *Citizenship* (2005) and *Chatroom* (2005) productions.

Inchley examines multiple definitions of the voice, but primarily as “‘cultural evidence’ of the shifting values of the voicescapes” (135) to investigate the synergies and conflicts of public policy, with the changing aesthetics – both philosophical and emotional – promoted during the Blair years of the New Millennium. Inchley also explores the artistic triggers of this time, such as the encouragements to “look inside” (39) oneself, to find one's inner voice both in terms of the evolving physical manifestations of sound, accent and meaning – that social philosopher Raymond Williams describes as “an indissoluble element of human self-creation” (1) – and that of emerging voice training and new writing perspectives encouraged or inspired by the New Labour project.

To this end, the book examines a comprehensive range of theoretical frameworks, including references to Habermas, Goffman, Bourdieu, Chomsky, Bakhtin, Giddens and Butler amongst many others. Where appropriate, these frameworks are impressively contextualised through the lens of New Labour policies to reveal the relationship between the theory and the resultant practical outcomes.

Inchley applies this clear methodological focus to describe and challenge many of the claims of ‘new writing’ theatres and, fascinatingly, the promises of the New Labour administration to promote ‘minority’ or previously marginalised voices that, in many cases, owed their emergence, support, and/or funding, to the policies of the Blair government. This forensic examination of the authenticity of political pronouncement promising empowerment and inclusion, *and* the new writing that emerged at this time includes the examination of many case studies of the playwrights and the plays produced. For example, Inchley provides

a fascinating deconstruction of “the negotiations of black identity within the climate of empathy prevailing in theatre’s voicescapes in the 2000s” (83), with the analysis of Kwei-Armah’s trilogy of plays at the Cottesloe at the National Theatre, *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003), *Fix Up* (2004) and *Statement of Regret* (2007).

As Inchley recognises to her credit, the book is rather England/Scotland-centric and excludes many interesting and important creative and cultural shifts in Wales and Northern Ireland. There is little mention of the influence of European or other international theatrical voices, although Pakistani and Indian voices are cited in relation to *East Is East* (Royal Court 1997) and *Rafta Rafta* (Lyttleton 2007). Indeed I would also add that the book appears rather selectively metro-centric in that it omits a number of important regional initiatives, for example, The Manchester Royal Exchange’s acclaimed Bruntwood prize for new writing (2005-present) and companies such as Northern Broadsides in Halifax (1992-present) that aims to present Shakespeare with ‘non-standard’ regional voices.

Furthermore there appears to be a rather curious cultural void at the heart of the book. Blair’s policies for the arts are meticulously described and deconstructed, but strangely for a book so impressive in its wide-ranging perspective, the numerous influential film, television and radio new writing initiatives at this time, especially those offered by Channel 4 and BBC radio and television (for example The Radio 4 Alfred Bradbury Bursary Award, 1992-present), are all too briefly mentioned, for example in the context of television drama of the 1990s and 2000s. It is my experience that a majority of new and emerging writers, theatre-leaning or not, write for many varied media and see these as important, if not crucial, training grounds for developing individual expression and voice. In a decade that saw a burgeoning of intermedial production, it is surprising that there is not more reference to these important cultural connections. The result is to leave the reader with the rather unfortunate impression

of an elitist stage where the theatre in general and stage writers in particular appear to live in a cultural bubble removed from other (more populist) media initiatives and opportunities.

However, in the final analysis, the book is a valuable guidebook to past practice that now helps serve analysis of contemporary arts and cultural policy, which is especially relevant and important set against the context of present-day debates concerning migrant identity, voice and belonging. The possibility of resistance, challenge and transformation that Blair's arts policies promised are critically examined through many cited creative outputs and training practices. As New Cynicism replaced New Labour hope, it is perhaps unsurprising that Inchley concludes that many of these well-intentioned initiatives ended in political and creative compromise if not downright failure. In a concluding chapter entitled "Betrayal and Beyond", Inchley describes the narrative of betrayal challenging Anthony Giddens' "promise of democracy" (25) where the hopes of transparency, authenticity, representation and inclusion are ultimately compromised. It is therefore uplifting to find that Inchley concludes with a final section where she cites a number of production and playwriting successes that help "surprise, scrutinise, stretch and challenge the values of the demos" (145).

Ultimately, the book succeeds in opening up this often neglected field of study to scrutiny and further discussion, and helps, as Inchley states, to "demonstrate the ways that inclusion of marginalised, diverse or rarely heard voices in the theatre can articulate and scrutinise society, and more generally the value in attending to the voice as a tool of both creative and reflective practice" (145). *Voice and New Writing, 1997-2007* can claim to have made a valuable contribution in this regard and may help to inform the positioning of 'the voice' at the centre of national expression and identity, especially relevant given the current political and cultural climate.

