

Book review of *Autobiography and Performance* by Dierdre Heddon. *Theatre Journal*. 61:2 (2009): 344-346.

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In *Autobiography and Performance*, Dierdre Heddon offers a highly selective overview and critique of autobiographical performance in the United States and UK. She notes the lack of critical writing dedicated to autobiographical performance and suggests that her book will help fill this gap by introducing, what Heddon considers to be, “the key concerns implicated in performances that take personal material as their primary source” (12). Her chapter delineations address one (or more) of these concerns, namely: identity, testimony, place, and ethics. In each chapter she provides an overview of the concern at hand, a critical reading of two or three performance artists’ work, and a complication of her original concern. She aptly critiques and theorizes both within and across each chapter, illustrating that in any combination each of these concerns is inter-related. But before embarking on her journey, Heddon first defines “autobiographical performance” as “a broad term which encompasses examples of solo autobiographical work, community and applied drama, oral narrative and oral history performance, verbatim drama, documentary drama, testimonial performance, performance art and instances of site-specific and time based practice” (11). Indeed, the sweeping definition is seemingly too grand to tackle in such a short book; however, Heddon’s examples are carefully chosen and her discussion is concise.

In chapters one and two respectively, Heddon focuses on the concerns of identity and testimony. She begins her discussion of identity with the autobiographical work of 1970s feminists and writes that, “the translation of the personal - or autobiographical - material into live

performance was inarguably tied to consciousness-raising activities which focused analysis specifically on women's experiences (under the banner of the 'personal is political')" (21).

Heddon articulates a number of well-known tensions surrounding these early feminist works and proposes that "the assumed authenticity that attaches to experience serves to equate it with 'authority' and personal experience can easily become an unwitting but persuasive guarantor of 'truth'" (26). This point is particularly important as Heddon refutes the equation autobiography equals "truth" throughout the remainder of her book. Her refutation relies on the principle that for autobiography to equal "truth," an authentic or essential self must actually exist. Instead, she argues that "there is always more than one self to contend with" (27). Searching for a way to deal with concerns of "truth" and identity, Heddon turns her attention to autobiographical performances "that work *between* identity and its construction" (31, emphasis in original). The performers she discusses are: MCT (theatre company in Glasgow), Bobby Baker, Tim Miller, and Joey Hateley. In chapter two, Heddon examines testimonial "public performances that bear witness to specific historically located traumatic events, but traumas that necessarily transcend their 'histories'" (60). She includes Kim Ima's *The Interlude*, Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*, and Lisa Kron's *2.5 Minute Ride* as representative of testimonial performance.

I was particularly intrigued with chapter three, entitled "Place: The Place of the Self." Here Heddon proposes the term "autotopography," which she defines as "writing place through self (and simultaneously writing self through place). Autotopography, like autobiography, is a creative act of seeing, interpretation and invention" (91). Furthermore, autotopography foregrounds the subjectivity and multiplicity inherent but often undisclosed when theorizing "place" (90-91). Each of the performances she critiques foreground the profound influence place has on the performers' identity and vice versa. Heddon argues that "conceiving of place as

‘performed’ and made is politically important” (111). To further flesh out this point, she critiques two different performances, one by Bobby Baker and one by Curious Theatre Company (112-113). She illustrates how conceptions of home vary dramatically in these performances because the meaning of “home” is contingent on both the performers’ and audiences’ own experience (117). As opposed to the warm and fuzzy feeling often stereotypically associated with “home,” these performers instead offer a different narrative of “home,” one rife with conflict and disease.

In chapter four, Heddon discusses the ethical considerations involved in authoring and performing autobiographical material. She explains that while autobiographical performance is about one’s self, “in and through our everyday practices the self exists in relationships with others” and because of these relationships the performer has a “responsibility” to others (125). She then turns to a critique of “verbatim theatre” and argues that the term “verbatim” (“documentary” in the USA) is problematic because, like the term “autobiography” it connotes an essential “truth” (130). Heddon points out that “rather than showing their processes of creativity, verbatim dramas . . . strategically deploy their closeness to the signifiers of ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’” (133). She finds fault in this process because “theatricality is often . . . erased by the strategically deployed rhetorical appeals to veracity” (135). I wonder if Heddon unintentionally underestimates a knowledgeable theatre audience’s ability to understand theatricality and, while she never addresses the credibility of the theatre audience, later in the chapter Heddon admits that her propositions regarding verbatim theatre might be “naïve” (135). She bases her admission on the idea that “every self is also . . . relational” and acknowledges that ethical appeals might “problematically assume in advance some idea of the ‘original’, to which representation can then remain ‘faithful’” (151). To further explore these ethical dilemmas, Heddon critiques Spalding Gray’s *Rumstick Road* and Lisa Kron’s *Well*.

Given our current confessional society and the over-saturation of testimonial material in the media and on the web, Heddon acknowledges that many actors turn to naïve autobiographical performance in hopes of making their big break. She further acknowledges that much autobiographical work has become formulaic. Still, Heddon sees the lasting potential and the political work that can be done through autobiographical performance and she argues that to regain its value, practitioners need to return to “where we started (second-wave feminism) in order to re-examine the relationship of the personal to the political” (161). Furthermore, she argues that we need to remind ourselves that “the politics of the personal is that the personal is *not* singularly about me” (161, emphasis in original). In her conclusion, Heddon illustrates what I believe to be her greatest strength: that is her ability to negotiate and complicate her own and others’ ideas, to offer arguments and counter-arguments in balance, and throughout it all to maintain hope for the future of the art of autobiographic performance.

SEASON M. ELLISON
Bowling Green State University