

TNT (*The New Theatre*) by Paul Stebbings and Phil Smith. April 2020

A response from Simon Murray, University of Glasgow

This is a beguiling, absorbing and thought-provoking book. I love it. It has spoken to me partly because it tells multiple stories of a theatre landscape that I have also inhabited, but in a narrower and infinitely less plentiful and rambunctious manner than the experiences which Paul Stebbings and Phil Smith chronicle in their account of *TNT (The New Theatre)*. I also love it because it is a book of many tones, textures and registers: descriptive, subjective, self-critical, honest, poetic, analytical, anecdotal. A glorious mix of fine, precise detail and broad sweep commentary and reflection on the last four decades of living in the world. Its very hybridity and discursive style of writing is always an invitation for further thought, always an opportunity to make connections, always a dialogue and never a judgmental or declamatory closure on events and human behaviours. A model of writing which allows for feeling and passion to co-exist alongside and become intertwined with 'cold' consideration and incisive scrutiny of how to position TNT within the cosmology of theatre and performance both within Europe and beyond. This is a notebook, a dialogue between Phil and Paul which invites us the reader to eavesdrop and to peek. It is also absolutely a dialogue with me – with us – the reader. So different from all too much academic writing which seems to speak only to itself. If categories matter this book is impossible to position: part travel writing, part (auto) biography, part political and cultural history, part philosophy, part theatre and performance studies, part poetry and always story-telling.

Phil Smith perhaps asked me to read TNT and provide a response as I have been involved both as actor/director and as writer/teacher/academic in the performance world of physical theatre since the early 1980s. I wrote a book (with John Keefe) called *Physical Theatres: a Critical Introduction* (2007 and 2016). We insisted on physical theatres plural and as the book unfolded became more and more sceptical about whether the term had any useful critical or descriptive purchase on the multiplicity of theatre work from the 1980s which chose to describe itself – or was assigned by marketing departments – as physical theatre. Throughout the book both Paul and Phil seem proud to acknowledge the physical theatre lineage - roots and routes - of TNT's practice (Meyerhold and Grotowski in particular), whilst at the same time playing fast and loose with the term in the sense that the Company's extraordinary array and quantity of productions has ranged across many forms and theatre genres. For the authors I have a sense that the descriptor 'physical' placed before 'theatre' is or should be redundant. The countless productions described in the book speak of performance practices which are always resolutely and joyfully physical. One might say – and I think the authors would - that if theatre is not 'physical' then it is almost certainly dead, lifeless, bloodless and comatose. TNT has always taken pleasure in being described as 'rough theatre' (Peter Brook) and, like a number of theatre companies born at the same time, been resistant to the 'acting from the neck up' traditions which have characterised all too much of conventional British theatre: beautiful speaking and enunciation of text out of inert, mute and wooden bodies.

Despite my apparent immersion in physical theatres, to my embarrassment I knew little of TNT until reading this book. It, as far as I know, been little written about by theatre academics, not part of the contemporary canon for better or worse. Perhaps, for the better. If I have any excuse it is because the Company's touring has been almost exclusively outwith the UK over the last 30 years. Possibly, above all else, it is this characteristic which renders TNT's story so extraordinary and, whilst I hesitate to use the word, unique. The authors claim that no other theatre company has toured so widely and in so many different geographical and political contexts. I have every reason to believe this is true. This book can be read at many levels and through diverse lenses, but the accounts of

touring across Europe, China, Japan, Central and South America, for example, are compelling for the sheer sense of adventure, ingenuity, resilience and compassion they evidence and perform. The enabling and generative partnerships that Phil and Paul establish with 'oddball' producers, venues, actors, audiences and artists across the world are not only crucial to the Company's success, but also are a tribute to a deep but unshowy internationalism that pervades the spirit of the book and the actual workings of the Company.

In this short response I don't feel I am writing a 'review', rather an intuitive reaction which attempts to gather and identify my own feelings, my own understandings of TNT's unfolding Odyssey over 40 years. In the book's structure, and more importantly through the tangible lived practice of the company and its main protagonists, this a project which joyfully refuses the lock of categories and categorisation. It is therefore, without ever being worthy or sanctimonious, an honest book. They write of failures, of van journeys across Europe in freezing conditions, of terrifying encounters with security police, of love affairs, of exhaustion, of things going wrong, of some projects which have not worked, of fallings out and of actors (but only a few) with monstrous egos. Phil and Paul write of countless productions and of the Company's delight in sharing its rough, passionate, ribald but ultimately respectfully loving adaptations of Shakespeare, and of sensitively but highly politically charged devised work. Of their work on Shakespeare they write of 'not bringing Shakespeare to China, but of finding him there'. I like that. I like the perpetual openness to discovery which characterises their productions and their journeying. When reading TNT there were many, many occasions where my eyes opened wide, where I laughed out loud at the absurdities encountered (The People's Liberation Army Shanghai Farce Troupe, for example) and where I quietly kept nodding to my computer screen, 'yes, that's how it is'.

Much, much more to say. At one moment I am reminded of Ronald Harwood's play *The Dresser* filmed with Albert Finney playing 'Sir', the impossible actor-manager who bellows furiously into the wings while acting Lear, 'more wind, more wind'. A sense of what has driven TNT and its actor/manager/director, Paul Stebbings and dramaturg/writer, Phil Smith is when they identify their 'gods': Meyerhold and Grotowski (of course) but also Ken Dodd, Pina Bausch, Monty Python, Lev Dodin, Richard Eyre, Charlie Chaplin and Brecht – though an ambivalent relationship with the German Marxist. I am thinking too, of matters we rarely write about when discussing theatre, namely the generative creative power and pleasure of friendship and how this – when it exists as it clearly does between Phil and Paul – becomes a crucial element of the dramaturgy of any project. As I finish reading the 250 pages, I am also left in a slightly desolate and elegiac mood which co-exists, I believe, productively with the exuberance I feel about so many of the stories and reflections articulated in the book. This melancholy is doubtless infused by the Corona Virus which is preventing the performance of that most crucial and essential quality of theatre, conviviality, sociability and the very opposite of what our obligation to be 'socially distanced' stands for. But beyond Covid-19 I am reflecting ruefully on the UK's unwillingness to embrace and support TNT over the decades and our imminent sundering of formal relationships with the rest of Europe. An inward-looking, small minded and fearful decision which seems to run counter to everything this remarkable gang of people who have constituted TNT for 40 years stands for.