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Book Review:

Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Neuro and Physical Diversity

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Petronilla Whitfield (ed). *Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Neuro and Physical Diversity*. New York and London: Routledge, 2022, pp. vii- 300, £31.99/\$34.95 Cloth

Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training is an edited volume focusing on neuro and physical diversity. The editor, Petronilla Whitfield, brings together contributions from 19 authors in the UK, USA, and Australia who have explored through research-informed practice inclusive models of performance training. Crucially, as Whitfield points out, “many of the authors have learning differences or physical dis/abilities themselves—their contributions come from a place of embodied, situated knowing and understanding” (1). As such, the volume offers rich and nuanced accounts of the challenges individuals with neuro and physical differences commonly face, as well as strategies to promote inclusivity and diversity in the classroom and performing professions.

The volume, organised into 16 chapters, includes an introduction by Whitfield and a foreword by Victoria Lewis. There are contributions from authors working with wheelchair-using artists, and actors with aphantasia, dyslexia, vision and hearing-impairment, neurodiversity, physical dis/abilities and learning differences. Rather than structuring the content into, and under, definitions of disability, Whitfield has, in her own words, “grouped [chapters] together when they have interlinking themes, or sometimes they stand on their own” (13). In doing so, dis/ability and difference is re-envisioned through a lens of collective experience, which seeks inter-connectivity and commonality between the various authors and contributors.

A key concern is a rejection of the medical model of disability, which, as critics have noted, can be binary and reductive. Here, Whitfield advocates social models of dis/ability within complex and, at times, highly politicized areas for discussion. The volume speaks to multiple perspectives, bodies, and identities, while drawing attention to the lack of diversity in drama schools and the under-representation of disabled actors on stage and screen. Furthermore, the focus on professional performance training addresses a significant gap in the literature, and thus makes an important contribution to an overlooked field.

What makes this volume so interesting to read are the rich descriptions of pedagogic strategies developed by artists and practitioners for their own teaching and training communities. In “Acting Without Imagery, Aphantasia in the Theatre Classroom,” Black, Chase, deVries, and Rozonowski offer a valuable insight into aphantasia, a little-known condition “of reduced or absent voluntary imagery” (44). The authors show how relatively simple shifts in the language of instruction can create greater inclusion in the classroom. Oram’s 12-step approach to training actors with neurodiversity (60), May’s work with vision-impaired actors (157) and Whitfield’s “Sensing Shakespeare Program” (101), a bespoke computer program for dyslexic actors, are other exemplar examples. On this theme, see also: Leveroy (78); Bartram (125); Allinson (140).

Lewis suggests that “the most critical site for social change might be the classroom/studio” (xvii). Central to this idea is a re-defining of the instructor-student relationship, described by Linton as “flattened knowledge hierarchy.” With reference to wheelchair-using artists, she writes: “We must acknowledge potential areas of limitation and work alongside wheeling artists as creative allies, building new practices and processes together” (35). Similarly, Dennis proposes “co-reflexivity” (249), while Oram advocates sharing theories of learning with student actors. Their insights illustrate the possibilities afforded when inclusion is placed at the forefront of the learning experience.

The work described is located within a keen sense of its historical, cultural, and political significance. Ronan puts this elegantly when she writes: “to dismantle historic inequality we must actively destigmatize disability in the learning environments we create” (172). McAllister-Viel makes a similar effective argument when challenging ableism in conventional voice-training (188) as too, Hayhow’s work and advocacy for actors with learning disabilities (271). Of note is Garfield’s chapter on training for deaf actors who use British Sign Language (253); not the least because the chapter was written in BSL and translated into English by Katherine Yeoman. A strength of the volume is its theoretical positioning. Illustrative examples include Sheehan’s discussion of the posthuman (200) and Oliver and Majumdar’s approach to neurodivergence and live art (217).

This is a timely volume and essential reading for practitioners, educators, and students of acting, drama and performance training. The strategies and approaches discussed have a real potential to effect positive and welcomed change. Moreover, the work has a currency beyond that of the performing professions and would be of value to readers interested in equality, diversity, and inclusion.