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Book review: Drama, Disability and Education by Andy Kempe

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**Drama, disability and education** by Andy Kempe, Oxford, Routledge, 2013, 192pp, £19.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-67504-8

Petra Kuppers has written of the need ‘to move from non-disabled certainties about disability to disabled perspectives on these certainties’. One such certainty is the anxious perception that discussing disability is to enter a highly sensitive field in which the dangers outweigh the benefits. Andy Kempe’s book – incorporating essays from Lionel Warner and Simon Floodgate, and scripts by Rob John and Alun Bliss – alleviates these concerns, offering provocation and encouragement in equal measure. Primarily of value to teachers and students within mainstream education, the plentiful insights and propositions are framed by Gavin Bolton’s contention that the study of drama allows for the exploration of a play’s content, presents opportunities for social and personal development and develops an understanding of dramatic form and structure. Kempe’s wide-ranging discussion insists that all four of these must be held in balance when approaching questions of disability representation in drama.

The first four chapters are concerned with literary texts rather than live performance. Kempe’s aim here, in addition to establishing the educational necessity of examining such representations, is to offer a survey of relevant play texts and characters, from the canonical to the obscure. The focus is on plays where disability is itself a thematic subject and Kempe skilfully draws out key themes, concerns and reflections as starting points. After recognising the melodramatic convention of using disabled characters, the book turns to a reflection on plays from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. While not exhaustive, the list gives a comprehensive overview of mainstream or educational drama in the period. There is a more developed historical or ideological context given for American or Victorian works than more recent British texts. The sheer volume of plays covered in the brief chapters means that some are only cursorily mentioned, while others are treated to more sustained and repeated attention.

Kempe notes that he has wilfully produced a ‘messy’ book, and this tactic refuses any dogmatic or coherent theory of disability representation that would limit educational approaches and deter rather than encourage exploration. At the same time, the chapter on symbolic uses of disability draws appropriate attention to the pitfalls and dangers of such representation. Lionel Warner’s essay considers student responses to literary plays to investigate the tropes that structure representations and student responses. The thesis that these responses reveal a polysemic understanding of disability is used to highlight the positive outcomes of such study, and allay the worry that opening up such debate is inevitably negative or politically risky.

Simon Floodgate’s chapter shifts the direction of the book, and focuses more on performance than literary analysis. It also introduces a welcome expansion of the debate to consider the aesthetic, material and economic realities of disabled experience, as well as representational concerns. His comparison of three plays concerned with deaf issues – Mark Medford’s *Children of a Lesser God*, Kaite O’Reilly’s *peeling* and Nina Raine’s *Tribes* – is more substantially underscored by performance theory and disability politics than the other chapters, offering rounded and subtly sustained arguments.

These arguments also throw the wider limitation of Kempe's overall approach into relief. The focus on literary representations may mean that the material is readily available to students and teachers, but there is restraint in dealing with the page rather than the stage. It is not only the complexities of dramatic performance that are smoothed over; the valuable disabled perspectives on non-disabled certainties also get lost. None of the authors declare a disability, and there is little consideration of the work of disabled artists. Even maintaining the literary focus of the book, discussions could extend, for example, to Nabil Shaban's 'Hamlet' or Mind the Gap's production of *Of Mice and Men* (in which Lennie and George are both played by learning disabled actors).

Floodgate's chapter also acts as a bridge to the second half of the book, which moves away from the literary to a concern with classroom projects and opportunities. Kempe offers overviews of a series of disability-related classroom projects: two run in mainstream schools that allow students to examine questions of representation and ethics, and a project run by Kempe himself in a special school. The strategies here promote self-directed learning as a means of fulfilling Bolton's framework through, for example, Mantle-of-the-Expert style projects or utilising Forum Theatre techniques. This section also includes two previously unpublished plays, each with an introduction by Kempe: *For Ever and Ever* by Rob John and *Buckethead* by Alun Bliss. The two plays are interestingly chosen. Accessible and suitable for either school productions, classroom analysis or workshop exploration, they have a more progressive approach than some of the other plays discussed, but are also open to critical interrogation.

The combination of materials in the second half extend the scope of the book by offering teachers ideas for initiating classroom explorations of these ideas without, again, prescribing the direction or content of such debates. Overall, the quantity of material in the book is impressive and presents a reassuring inspiration for teachers and students to address these issues head-on, though a fuller engagement with the shifting perspectives offered in performance work by disabled artists could strengthen this further.