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Melanie Bennett

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## Reviews

***Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, and Elevator Repair Service***

Sara Jane Bailes

London and New York: Routledge, 2011

MELANIE BENNETT

My review of Sara Jane Bailes' *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* will depart periodically from a standard appraisal to take up a subjective artist-scholar position that reflects the book's own concerns with unconventional forms of representation. There are currently two reviews of Bailes' book, one by Sarah Gorman in *Contemporary Theatre Review* and another by Dan Venning in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Gorman's review in particular has offered a thoughtful, thorough and informative evaluation of the manuscript's strengths, its relevance to contemporary performance scholarship and its value as a pedagogical resource for teaching undergraduate students. So, instead of risking repetition, this will be a reflexive account of how *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* has been invaluable in helping me ponder and articulate my research and practice as a failure aficionado.

In a capitalist society that promotes a drive towards success and winning, all failure is perceived as defeatist, except in cases where failure is reframed as a learning experience that leads to victory, a narrative that is promoted in many self-help scripts. Within this dominant

belief system, it appears incomprehensible that anyone – artists or otherwise – would fail on purpose. However, as an alternative narrative, a poetics of failure confronts, undermines and restructures 'the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology's preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed, or win ... Failure challenges the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality and the fictions of continuity that bind the way we imagine and manufacture the world' (Bailes 2011:2).

In conjunction with the 2011 release of *Theatre Performance and the Poetics of Failure*, there has been an influx of scholarship dedicated to the discourse of failure in art practice (Lisa Le Feuvre's *Failure*, the 2012 *Performance Research* issue edited by Róisín O'Gorman and Margaret Werry, and Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, reviewed in this issue by J. Paul Halferty). What makes Bailes' contribution particularly exceptional is the manuscript's density and scale, which is perhaps a result of her pondering failure in the context of theatre since she was sixteen, when she was first introduced to the plays of Samuel Beckett while attending Hereford Art College as an emerging director and performer (Bailes 2011:xiv–xv). Instead of the more popularized phrase 'aesthetics of failure', Bailes uses 'poetics of failure' to describe the radical artistic and cultural forms of representational failure she analyses. Borrowing from Rancière and Heidegger's conceptions of poiesis – the root

word of poetry – poetics indicates a threshold state, a 'bringing-forth' or a state of 'becoming' (Bailes 2011:38). A poetics of failure then, conjures a performance practice that is a process of perpetual modification and possibility. This process-oriented rendering and state of becoming contrasts with traditional theatre's pursuit of a fixed representation or product.

Like Bailes, my own path towards studying and practising representational failure began with Beckett. I started an undergraduate degree as a mature student the year I turned thirty. I enrolled in an introductory theatre class for one practical purpose: to overcome my paralysing insecurity and self-consciousness. I had hoped that an acting course could teach me how to feign confidence.

### REPRESENTATIONAL FAILURE OF A FIRST IMPRESSION

It's my first day of theatre class. The campus resembles a country club where I, in my slinky black polyester tube dress (working-class misfire), don't belong. I choose a seat at the back of the classroom near the door in an attempt to remain unnoticed. The professor's appearance is designer business casual and not at all the cool sex-crazed bohemian I imagined theatre people to be. He's high-status but nevertheless personifies a comforting familiar presence from the twelve years since graduating from high school where I worked in various entry-level pink-collar positions, including a receptionist, an

accounting clerk, a 'Girl Friday'<sup>1</sup> and a secretary. Only a week prior, I could have been transcribing a phone call from his wife on pink message pads and organizing his mail. However, instead of catering to his professional needs, I'm one of about fifty other captive students listening to his opening lecture, which takes the form of an anecdote. He speaks of impulsively quitting his profitable corporate career in response to having attended a live production of *Waiting for Godot*. He talks of an impassioned lunch date with a friend – no doubt a meal enhanced by alcohol – that contributes to his realization that there was more to life than climbing the corporate ladder. He describes the significance of Beckett to his epiphany, the plot (or lack thereof) of *Waiting for Godot* and quotes the famous 'Fail again, fail better' mantra. His lecture is not only inspirational but hilarious in the way his example ridicules the pursuit of success and takes the piss out of theatre's pretentious quest towards polished representation. With his commanding presence, designer clothes and flawless navigation of a PowerPoint presentation (which used the same stock template as the presentations I prepared for my former male bosses), I can't help thinking that he is the last person I would expect to endorse failure. I am enthralled with that paradox despite the hierarchical structures of gender and class that separate us. Suddenly, my cheap tacky dress feels more radical and counterintuitive than pathetic.

What occurred during that first class has endured as one of the most crucial hours of my life, since it convinced me to stay enrolled in the course and eventually to

major in the discipline. Despite the ten years spent immersed in performance scholarship and creating solo and devised shows, I still haven't overcome the insecurity and self-consciousness that led me to enroll in a theatre class in the first place. Instead, I've adopted a creative practice that mines the treasures of failure, and I have promoted failure's potential as a method of scholarship. Due to its 'undisciplined tactics', 'unanticipated effects' and 'anti-conformist ideology' (Bailes 2011:2), a poetics of failure has sometimes been a hard sell to artists and scholars in Canada, where I live and work. The reasons for this resistance are, in part, connected to graduate-level curriculum structures that lead to aesthetic prejudices too complex to detail within the scope of this book review.<sup>2</sup> *Theatre Performance and the Poetics of Failure* has mapped a historical and cultural context and has afforded a vocabulary from which to draw upon whenever I'm questioned on the legitimacy of the unorthodox and eccentric model of performance as failure.

Bailes uses Marxist theory, slapstick and punk as a framework for analysing the work of Forced Entertainment, Goat Island and Elevator Repair Service. The qualities that the three theatre companies have in common are that they are considered 'experimental' in the way they play with the limits of theatre and challenge the rules (Bailes 2011:13); they work collaboratively, albeit with a director (16); and they all developed work in the 1980s and 1990s during the rise of neoliberal ideologies characterized by the conservative political reign of Margaret

Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the USA (15). However, the text also ably shifts into a cultural-studies discourse, allowing for further possibilities of perceiving a poetics of failure outside art and performance. This inspired me to widen my own consideration of a poetics of failure to include an investigation of documentary films and literature that transgress the veneer of realism; adopting antidisiplinary models of academic performance, such as performative writing, that is transparent about confessing contradictions and partialities in research; and an examination of tourist venues such as cruise ships that manufacture amateur spectacles as part of their entertainment programme. Nevertheless, performance is where I began using a poetics of failure, and it remains my predominant context of artistic experimentation.

#### REPRESENTATIONAL FAILURE OF AN AUDITION

My husband carries a large hockey bag onto the stage with my six-foot frame squeezed inside. I am clutching a small tape recorder, which is playing a Julie Andrews melody, from her iconic role in *The Sound of Music*. Her refined, classically trained voice cheerfully recites, 'I Have Confidence', and I can hear muffled laughter in the theatre by the artistic team overseeing the auditions. When the song ends, I unzip the vinyl sac and awkwardly emerge feet first. My granny panties are exposed from my skirt getting caught in the zipper, and I can't seem to detach the material from its grip, so the bag follows me as I hobble across the stage to a closer position

<sup>1</sup> 'Girl Friday' was the name given to me for a position I held at the head office of a department store. Its meaning is a female employee who completes multiple lower-skilled office tasks. For me, that meant running errands, cleaning the lunchroom, making labels, photocopying and sorting mail.

<sup>2</sup> Part of my dissertation, 'Failing to Succeed: A Dramaturgy of Failure in Performance' speculates as to why Canadian Performance Studies discourses have largely ignored a poetics (and aesthetics) of failure in comparison to UK performance and scholarship. Generally, Canadian university theatre programmes don't offer formalized practice-as-research initiatives in their graduate curriculum at the Masters and Ph.D. level, which leads to a lack of encouragement towards process-oriented methods, non-disciplined performers and embodied research.

in front of the adjudicators. My body is stiff and uncoordinated, an indication to those evaluating me that I am not as young and limber as my student cohort. My hair's a staticky mess, and my make-up is smudged from being inside the hot airless bag. The room is silent, perhaps from the shock of my total lack of skill and professionalism. I clear my throat in preparation for my monologue. My voice and body begin to quiver uncontrollably, my throat closes over, I forget my lines and the actions I'm supposed to perform. I anticipated this would happen and came prepared. I clumsily pick up the cassette recorder still inside the bag and try to flip the cassette over, but my hands are shaking so badly that I drop it several times. I hear more laughter, brought on by the comedic potential of the moment in a performance when something goes 'horribly and irreparably wrong' (Bailes 2011:39). I am eventually able to get the tape sorted out and press play. My voice is heard. The recorded monologue begins with an earnest apology for wasting everyone's time, that I'm probably not the right person for the job of actor and that I wish them the best in their production. I confess that I collapse under strict competitive conditions, whether it's a job interview, a first date, a sporting match or a fucking audition. I tell them that their stupid play isn't worth the stress and humiliation for me and that I think the structure of auditions is cruel. While the tape is playing, my live body is trying to make the grand gestures that I had seen other actors do on stage. I try out a little dance, and it hurts my knees. I practise exaggerated facial expressions in parallel

to the emotions expressed through the recorder. By the time the recorded monologue finishes, I have had enough. The people in the room are staring at me, and I can't determine if they're angry or mocking me. I may have gone too far. I have insulted them. I have revealed too much. Instead of waiting to be dismissed, I gather up my props and speak the only live vocal communication of the audition, 'I'm so sorry', before storming out of the auditorium. The following Monday, on my way to class, I see a fellow student sobbing. I rush over and wrap my arms around her to offer comfort. She shoves me away and tells me to 'fuck off' and complains that I was cast in a role that she would have been better at because at least she has had conservatory training. It was the moment that I found out I was cast in the department's production, and it was a moment that reaffirmed why I hate theatre.

The nature of auditions and resulting callback sheet personifies a heightened version of capitalist and Darwinian hierarchies of winners and losers. I didn't like the toxic atmosphere of meaningless competition that theatre engineers, and I wasn't thick-skinned enough to cope with the jealousy and aggressive rivalry. The theatre department and broader university propelled me into unforeseen obstacles where I was perceived as a threat to someone else, and this made me queasy, since up until then I'd avoided situations that manufactured a so-called 'healthy competition', whether it be sports or contests. Growing up, I was neither a winner nor a loser, but rather irrelevant, unthreatening and unremarkable. I managed to avoid spotlights,

never pursuing activities or situations that could lead to rejection or embarrassment and never allowing myself to desire anything more than mediocrity. But more than a decade after corporate PowerPoints and pink message pads, I was weary of being in subservient positions designed to elevate others in their crusade towards success. I was interested in creating (and supporting) performances that foregrounded excluded or disenfranchised voices and bodies.

The audition described above was freeing because, similar to Bailes' first time performing a Beckett character, 'There was little to pretend. I felt liberated by not having to appear on stage as a realistically drawn character' (Bailes 2011:xv). I embraced my innate amateurism, physical limitations and awkwardness. Performing a poetics of failure was accessible, but what I found discouraging was trying to think critically about the characteristics of 'representational failure' and its counter-hegemonic context. This is representation that 'intentionally destabilizes frameworks and techniques that are more usually co-opted to consolidate the conventions of representational order in mainstream theatre' (Bailes 2011:7). Representational failure can be difficult to advocate for or to uphold in the conservatory-school environment where I currently teach. I frequently meet undergraduate students who, like me, don't fit into the prejudiced and narrow model of a 'professional' theatre actor. The majority of these students compete for a handful of spots in the coveted acting programme at the end of their first year. Most are cut during the selection process,

and many stay on as 'generalists' in the theatre programme. For those students who internalize this process as a personal failure, I draw on Bailes' work and the artists she writes about in order to propose a hopeful alternative to the 'country-club' acting programme that rejected them. Quoting Bailes I tell them that, 'Adopting failure as a political and formal strategy ... suggests ways to maintain art practice beyond the purview and controlling mechanisms that regulate commercial artistic production' (Bailes 2011:10).

Forced Entertainment's iconic use of amateurism is one such strategy for fighting the disciplinary power of the theatre industry. The 'professional amateur' that the company playfully fabricates confronts the inequalities of everyday life and offers a perspective of losers in a society that is fixated on winners. Forced Entertainment commemorates the underachiever and those who miss the mark by intentionally 'doing something badly in a professional context' (Bailes 2011:93). Bailes provides an example of this intentional failure when she discusses the 1993 production *Club of No Regrets*, which stars a 'staggeringly disorganized narrator' Helen X (Terry O'Connor) who 'resists codes of conventional theatre practice' in her attempt to entertain the spectators (2011:94–5). Helen X is hallmark Forced Entertainment: in her refusal of mastery and feigned incompetence she problematizes the assumptions around who has the right to be in the spotlight.

While Forced Entertainment are the torch-bearers of a vanguard amateurism, Goat Island is distinct for experimenting with the impossible. What is most

appealing about Goat Island's poetics, conveyed by Bailes, is their tendency to create obstacles that are impossible to accomplish 'within the temporal and spatial limitations of live performance' (2011:112). This penchant for having performers toil at an impossible task creates a sensual atmosphere that is reminiscent of acting auditions with circumstances designed to set up a population of performers to fail no matter how much they rehearse. In this sense, their performances illustrate systematic inequalities and political conditions that produce success for one population at the expense of discounting another.

Finally, Bailes discusses how Elevator Repair Service's poetics of failure is predicated upon a zealous awkwardness affected by an 'onslaught of constant disruptions' or misfires (2011:152), such as a character who accidentally wanders 'into the wrong set' or the performance being interrupted by 'the lights going out mid-scene' (153). Human awkwardness and malfunctions are mandated as performance concepts that present a compelling imaginary of performance creation which performers snubbed by traditional acting fields can capitalize on.

To conclude, what I most appreciate about *Theatre Performance and the Poetics of Failure* is that it's a paradox much like the authoritative and well-groomed professor who first introduced me to failure in performance. By yielding to the rigorous standards of traditional academic knowledge production, Bailes' book validates a method of practice that blatantly undermines such formal conventions. I have attempted to adopt a similar

paradox in my own academic and artistic journey where, instead of conforming to conventional tenets of performance and scholarship, I have attempted to occupy a hybrid space that allows me to 'fail again, fail better' within the educational, artistic, societal and domestic realms I inhabit. This border space strives to cultivate some semblance of professional and intellectual integrity that seeks to earn a place at the Performance Studies table, while endorsing the perspective of a loser in an environment that appears only interested in promoting winners.

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