

Evelyn Tribble. *Early Modern Actors & Shakespeare's Theatre: Thinking with the Body*. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017. Pp ix, 232. Hardback £67.50. ISBN: 9781472576033.

PAUL MENZER

Mary Baldwin University

One way to index how innovative Evelyn Tribble's book on early modern acting is would be to look at, well, the index. One would seek there in vain for entries on Harley Granville-Barker, Alfred Harbage, B.L. Joseph, Marvin Rosenberg, Bernard Beckerman, et al: the usual suspects in what Joseph Roach once called 'the tiresome debate over the relative formalism or naturalism of seventeenth-century acting style'.¹ Rather than further fatigue this weary debate, Tribble, mercifully, does not even mention it. Instead, she explores acting where it lives, in the skilled application of the human body to histrionic occasions. In other words, this exciting book ignores meaningless quibbles over whether early modern acting was 'natural' or 'formal' and looks, instead, at what actors do with their feet while dancing, their hands while fencing, and their bodies while clowning. As such, it resets the conversation about seventeenth-century acting from taxonomic (and largely literary) terms like 'naturalism', 'formalism', 'presentational', or 'rhetorical' and comes to grips with what early modern actors actually *did* when they took the stage, which was far more than simply 'speak the speech'. The book's subtitle is *Thinking with the Body*, and it fulfills its promise by thinking *about* the bodies that peopled the early modern stage.

Early Modern Actors & Shakespeare's Theatre must be viewed within Tribble's larger program, which has been to examine early modern acting through the lens of dynamic 'enskillment'. Drawing effectively and engagingly upon neuroscientific insights into cognitive development, Tribble is interested in 'corporeal eloquence' as a way to think about acting both in the past and in the present (102). This book therefore joins Tribble's earlier excursions into distributed cognition (2005, 2011) as well as her work on enskillment (2009, 2016).² Taken together, these books and articles offer nothing less than a paradigm-shifting rethink of our critical encounters with the boys and men who first gave flesh to the plays of Shakespeare, Jonson, Marlowe, and others.

In her latest work Tribble organizes her efforts around what first seems little more than a conceit, a mere opening gambit, but one that gradually materializes as an abiding presence throughout the ensuing pages. She starts with a discussion of Simon Jewell's box, left in his 1592 will to Robert Nicholls, a fellow player

in the Admiral's Men's employ. Jewell bequeathed 'all my playing things in a box and my black velvet shewes' (1). The box is lost, of course, but that loss is Tribble's gain because it stands for the 'tool box' of skills, aptitudes, and habits that every actor brings to and develops on the stage over the years. Tribble uses this approach to overcome the challenge of writing about bodily practice at an historical remove. Focusing her chapters on topics such as 'The Skill of Weapon' and 'The Art of Dancing', Tribble is able to home in on the physically demanding practices repeatedly invited by early modern dramatic texts.

As an instance of Tribble's method, take this sentence: 'All of the movement arts that actors had to master — gesture, walking, swordplay and dance — are intimately linked to the development of a distinctive kinesic intelligence that could on the one hand emulate the elite and on the other hand descry a range of postures, body types and social classes' (115). The theatrical ecology of the early modern stage — including but not limited to its dramatic texts — relied upon, called for, and produced 'mindful bodies' (147), then. This might seem just a useful rejoinder to logocentric approaches to early modern acting except that Tribble here and elsewhere reminds us that speech is also an embodied practice. (Hamlet's 'trippingly on the tongue' is about the motion of the body, not the meaning of the text.) Moreover, Tribble is concerned here about the apprehension of the audience: its ability to assess just how mindfully, or mindlessly, the bodies before them manifested skill. Among other things this attention redeems from critical neglect — or worse — both the early modern clown and the audience, the latter often caricatured as either inattentive or only attentive to nuances of rhetorical or metrical variety.

Conventionally, this would be the part of the review to quibble with Tribble and find fault with the book, but this unconventional book deserves an unconventional review that finds 'fault' only with the title's modesty. The first part of the book's title — *Early Modern Actors* — understates the book's implications since they range well beyond the early modern. In her conclusion, 'Reconstructing Skill', for instance, Tribble makes the excellent observation that 'thinking — including thinking with the body or kinesic intelligence — is very differently distributed in the cognitive ecology of the "reconstructed" stage' (155). Theatres that specialize in 'original practices' — or even ones with looser allegiances to historical practices — have often emphasized the reconstruction of historical materials, particularly architecture, but have largely misconstrued what constitutes a 'practice'. Tribble uses modern stage combat, which has any number of laudable 'safety first' protocols in place, as an example. For instance, stage combatants are taught today to telegraph their attacks to their partners, rather than obscure their

intentions, but an audience of skilled combatants, or trained observers of skill, might have expected something very different from the frequent fights called for in early English drama. For that matter, the dances so often invited by the period's dramatic texts are often omitted on the modern stage, since dance 'tends not to affect plot in as direct a way as a fight does'. Such an omission, Tribble winningly notes, 'leaves an affect gap rather than a plot gap' (156), and such an 'affect gap' might represent the larger space between the modern and early modern actor: the latter quite differently skilled than the former. Tribble's book therefore carries serious implications for modern actors, and modern acting, and should be required reading for all theatrical practitioners of early modern drama.

In the end, if all the book did was to banish a century's worth of arguing over whether early modern actors were 'natural' or 'formal' — a debate that takes up space but gets us nowhere — it would have provided a valuable service. But Tribble's latest foray into the world of actors and acting, into the question of what actors actually do when they act, is a tour de force of historical phenomenology. Tribble has pioneered a method of thinking about acting within an ecology of kinesic experience and, in so doing, opened an avenue of inquiry into a subject — and subjects — that might seem to resist critical engagement. Tribble does provide local readings of this or that play text to instance her examination of the skilled bodies of early actors, but the measure of this book is the generous invitation it extends to its readers to see the skilled bodies of early modern actors suddenly materialize between the lines of every play in the period. And that, finally, is the ultimate index to this remarkable book.

Notes

- 1 Joseph P. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (University of Delaware Press, 1985), 30, <http://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.7827>.
- 2 'Distributing Cognition in the Globe', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56.2 (2005), 135–55, <http://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2005.0065>; *Cognition in the Globe* (New York, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230118515>; 'Marlowe's Boy Actors', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 27.1 (2009), 5–17 <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.0.0060>; 'Pretty and Apt: Boy Actors, Skill, and Embodiment', Valerie Traub (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment* (Oxford, 2016), 628–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxford-hb/9780199663408.013.35>.

