

BOOK REVIEW

Daniel Johnston. *Phenomenology for Actors: Theatre-Making and the Question of Being*

**Chicago: Intellect Ltd
2021, 174**

Performance phenomenology is a niche but packed field of philosophical literature that discusses the intersection between performance and phenomenology, which often unavoidably includes existential themes. Daniel Johnston's *Phenomenology for Actors: Theatre-Making and the Questions of Being* positions itself among this literature, particularly in the intersection between philosophy and theatre-making. In this scope of philosophical literature, books and authors that can be found similar to Daniel Johnston's work are as follows. Bert O. States, in his 1985 work entitled, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, presented a critical description of theatre performance that focused on the activity of theatre-making and enumerated its essential properties, which are speech, movement, text, scenery, and the like. He puts forward that the origin of theatre is not of imitation but of entering into nature by presenting truth through performance. Stanton B. Garner, in his 1994 *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary*, on the other hand, examined specific dramatic texts and performance productions to move towards a phenomenology of performance, specifically that of the body in a theatrical space. Susan Kozel, in her 2007 book *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*, focuses more on technology and the intersection between philosophy and dance. Furthermore, Phillip Zarrilli's recent book, (Toward) a Phenomenology of Acting, described acting as that which explores and reflects upon a question; and explores inward and outward to 'touch the untouchable.'

Now going back to the book at hand amidst contextualizing the present literature, what is now notable is that Daniel Johnston's *Phenomenology for Actors: Theatre-Making and the Questions of Being's* contribution to the literature can be described as a practical extension in the academic field of performance phenomenology as it extends from merely conceiving philosophy as tools to describe performance processes or related human experiences. It does this by considering it as a rich source of material useful for creative processes such as actor techniques and, most notably, the essential workshops in theatre-making. With this, Johnston, in his latest among considerably many valuable contributions to the field, being focused on the philosophy of acting all throughout his career, conceives theatre-making and acting as philosophical works. Through this analogy, it can be seen that not only can philosophy enrich performance, but the philosopher-artist can also bring forward philosophical

contributions from the artistic practice, removing a conception of art as only an application of philosophy.

I take philosophy not simply as a lens for examining and describing the embodied experience and nature of the performance process but also as a rich source of material to ponder through the creative process, thus considering the practice of actors as philosophical work. ... Theatre-making can be thought of as a phenomenological investigation in at least some instances. Philosophy can ask questions and offer provocations for creating performance — not just analysing it — while also allowing theatre's creative processes to 'talk back' to theory. Conversely, the role of the philosopher-artist might be in articulating the philosophical contributions of an artistic practice."

As seen in the structure and content of the book, the findings are of great benefit to the literature of performance phenomenology as it provides a springboard for future investigations of utilizing philosophy for creative process. Johnston did this by illustrating points of phenomenological exploration in dramatic texts for the purposes of theatre-making. This includes essentially formulating structured workshops and guiding actors' philosophical reflection of the dramatic text for creative process inspired by phenomenological inquiry and existential themes. This exact idea was proved to be practicable and productive as Johnston manifested and exemplified them through the means of discussing active, creative processes for three dramatic texts in theatre-making – Checkov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Johnston advocates for a philosophical approach in theatre-making and motivates actors to be phenomenologists – essentially with the objective of investigating their being and existence to deepen their own performance process. With this, the answered goal of the book is to illustrate how exactly philosophy can be utilized to develop this creative process. This was done by creating practical workshop prompts and activities as well as sample dramatic text analysis that can actually be applied in the creative process – usually in the rehearsal portion of theatre-making. These activities are to spark phenomenological analysis and reflection towards existential themes that will drastically improve the insight of the actor towards the play at hand, including their own being. This method directs the focus on relevant philosophical or phenomenological themes, particularly conceptualizing being-in-the-world, in the dramatic text and shows how uncovering these could develop the craft of acting and improve the theatre performance. In this way, not only does theatre-making become relevant to actors but to everyone as it utilizes philosophy and theatre practices to examine and discuss experiences in the world. This would also reinforce Phenomenology's importance in theatre-making since it is shown to be valuable in seeking what is being investigated in the play, in the same way, that it is valuable in its original mode of investigating experiences and being. This whole process, if applied properly, offers greater meaning to the artistic performance, obtaining the potential to deliver valuable insights directly to the audience. With this, the feature of art is practiced to be world-revealing and a medium for uncovering and happening truth, just as discussed in the book's last chapter. Though

it may seem like a heavy task to give to an actor, techniques and responsibilities with weights such as these are nothing uncommon in the process and preparation an actor must do for their creative performance. Thus, this method is not only feasible and practical but also indeed incredibly useful for the creative process.

I suggest that artistic performances can allow a moment of 'unconcealing' of something about the world, bringing something into 'unhiddenness'. This is not simply the naturalistic representation of material reality as it is uncovering an existential reality through the process and production.

All this considered, the audience that will be most benefited by this book is not simply the actor amidst the title but theatre-makers. Theatre-makers can value philosophy and include it in their art practice. Johnston emphasized on multiple occasions a very important feature of theatre-making is that it is collaborative. It is not only the sole responsibility of the actor to formulate their role and reflect on the probable being of the character. It often is a collaborative effort including the director, dramaturg, and any other relevant individuals part of the team. Thus, an actor's performance process and the performance itself is usually a combination of inputs from a larger collective group, all artistically creating. This also shows how theatre-making is interconnected with being-with-others. This entails a collective reflection on being, which means that each of them ought to see the findings of this book as valuable. Likewise, the workshop prompts of phenomenological analysis are not only useful for the characters in a theatre production but also for the costume, set, staging, movement, props, music, and the like. This implies that the book is also for the designers, creative team, and other similar theatre-makers since the process shown by Johnston, including his philosophical mode of dramatic text analysis, can stimulate ideas for these. Commendably so, the book was able to illustrate exactly how this is possible. Furthermore, as a secondary target, the book is also greatly useful even to those that simply want to explore the intersection of philosophy with performance art or those who value either. For all these purposes, the book would sufficiently be of great value.

A philosophical perspective is also relevant to directors, designers and the creative team of theatre-makers. Theatre is, after all, a collaborative process. And the journey of the actor is very often realized in conjunction with the input of a larger group of people who combine and influence the gift of storytelling and careful curation of experience for the spectator.

A Phenomenology Crash Course for the Sake of Theatre-Making

Daniel Johnston's *Phenomenology for Actors: Theatre-Making and the Questions of Being* begin as a great book for introducing phenomenology as a

philosophical discipline for those that may still be unfamiliar – and of course, especially the smaller academic field of performance phenomenology. It provided clear and concise explanations of basic themes and concepts in phenomenology, essential to understanding the objectives and discussions of the book. This includes important philosophers and established literature in the field. It is commendable for simplifying many phenomenological and even existential concepts but explaining them enough to show how it is possible to apply them in theatre practice. Before anything else, the book can spark an appreciation for Phenomenology. It is only after this that the book proceeds with its true purpose of intersecting it with theatre-making.

The first concepts discussed were that of being and selfhood, as understanding these are the ones significantly useful for theatre-making. This includes surveying the different perceptions of selfhood across history. By understanding different disclosures of truth, the philosophical-actor can better continue searching for the meaning of it, which can then open a range of different acting techniques and approaches. By doing this, theatre-making itself attains the capability to shine a light on being and selfhood since its creative process involves reflecting on the world, the world of the fictional character, and how the performance reveals being-in-the-world.

Johnston pushed for these concepts to be given focus when analyzing dramatic texts, since the text itself may bring out philosophical ideas for these phenomenological themes. The dramatic text can contain historical perspectives of being that may challenge society's current perspectives. This is why theatre is regarded as part of the process of development in society's worldview on things. This is significantly so since theatre has the ability to display ideas in a way that the audience can authentically receive. Additionally, these conceptions in the dramatic text must have a significant influence on how it ought to be performed. With all of these, just as phenomenologists, theatre-makers are invited to return to the things themselves and question being in their process of theatre-making. Luckily, this is exactly what the book illustrates. It shows how the creative process of theatre-making would look like when applying phenomenology.

I would argue that specific practices, dramatic texts, and works of art offer specific phenomenologies that bring to light new insights into the structures of Being and how they appear in the given circumstances.

... theatre-making has a particular capacity to shine a light on Being.

Philosophy to Theatre-Making

At the heart of the book is its exemplification of how phenomenology can be applied to theatre-making. This is shown through Johnston's structured workshops with guide questions for actors that serve as prompts for phenomenological analysis, as well as similar dramatic text analysis. This can be through instructing actors to observe specific experiences such as walking or stillness. Other workshops can dissect, describe, unpack, or recreate themed experiences such as a moment when your life is in danger or a moment when you are given an important life choice. Furthermore, the workshops could include thinking about what the character would do or feel about

certain situations such as death or those already mentioned. Of course, and as emphasized in the previous section, this is only possible by first understanding the related phenomenological concepts. These workshops primarily foster reflection of phenomenological themes and personal awareness by employing exercises. This includes an investigation of the actor or the character's experience of things. Exploring these themes exercises the actor's character to be portrayed and allows the actor to foster creative choices. In addition, the actor can explore how these phenomenological themes, such as time, history, or being-towards-death, for example, can affect the actions of the character. This application is the goal of this whole process which means that if the phenomenological analysis remains only in a theoretical discussion and not having an effect on the performance, it might as well be useless.

The focus of this philosophical approach to theatre-making must be on one's experience, the world of the play, and the reality of the performance situation. These represent the actor's self, character, and audience. Looking into these things will spark ideas on how one ought to portray a role as well as ideas for costume, design, music, and the like. Given these focuses, exercises can be constructed, together with giving attention to other phenomenological themes. This process is illustrated more as Johnston proceeded to apply the approach to actual theatre-making. In discussing this, it must also be noticed that a bulk of the work is done in the dramatic text analysis or the analysis of what the text would offer to the examination of phenomenological themes. Of course, to do this dramatic text analysis, knowing the background and historical context of the text as well as the story itself is essential. For the *Cherry Orchard*, the themes explored were involvement, touch, equipment, being elsewhere, dwelling, and being-with. For *Antigone*, the themes were falling or forgetfulness of being, nothingness, moods, faring, thrownness, projecting, fate, and destiny. Lastly, for *Hamlet*, the relevant themes were timeliness, temporality, historicity, being-a-whole, resoluteness, and being-towards-death. Given these concepts, what the actor must do is to perform phenomenology, but no longer limited to one's own experiences but with the dramatic text and the character. With every theme in every play, the book was able to provide very specific guide questions and points to think about that will surely help in doing a phenomenological analysis.

It is undoubtable that these workshops would have positive effects on the performance by merely deepening the understanding of the actors towards the text. As can be seen in the phenomenological analysis of the exemplified dramatic text, it is more than possible to bring out profound insights from the text. Of course, it is uncertain to assume if the same can be said for all examples of dramatic texts as the chosen plays are all conveniently already known to be classics and thus meaningful. Still, it is less debatable that the guide questions are on the right track to help the actor both do phenomenology and improve their creative process. This exemplification proved how practical, practicable, and benefitting the process could be. The workshop prompts were very comprehensive. Because of this, it is already possible for a theatre-maker to pattern their own creative process of theatre-making with the ideas of Johnston. Developing these workshops or exploring for modifications or personalization that can better fit the theatre-makers' play is now also possible.

Having said all this, Daniel Johnston's *Phenomenology for Actors: Theatre-Making and the Questions of Being* proves itself as a book that successfully brought forward a uniquely fresh idea of showing how philosophy can contribute to the creative process and theatre-making. It is undeniable that this is relevant to the literature of performance phenomenology as well as its practical use for theatre-makers. Giving attention to the book as being easy to digest while discussing heavy phenomenological and existential themes, even those who have minimal to no background in phenomenology will be able to find this book useful and apply its samples. As one begins with the book, it is possible to have doubts about the practicality of its claim, if it could provide significant improvement to the performance that is greater than the demanded effort. Although the illustrations and sample produced insights that actors can achieve provided by the book, it can remove most doubts and confusions about the process. This makes the book an enlightening and, at the very least, enjoyable read worth purchasing for valuable artistic and philosophical development.

Bryle Louis T. Dayacap
De La Salle University - Philippines