Dementia: The International Journal of Social Research and Practice *Book Review*

Review of Morgan Batch, *The Loss of Small White Clouds: Dementia in Contemporary Performance,* Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon, 2024, 234 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-25202-5, paperback

Morgan Batch's timely book *The Loss of Small White Clouds* (2024) is a comprehensive exploration of 11 dementia-centred theatre performances staged in the Global North since the 2010s, which draw on familial, clinical, socio-cultural, political, communal, experiential, (non)spatial, religious, and interior dementia narratives. Batch challenges outdated stereotypes about the realities of living with dementia by spotlighting dementia narratives that lead the story, performance and (re)presentation. From traditional to radical, spoken word to more-than-verbal, tragedy to ownership, conventional plot to non-linearity, characters arcs to destabilisation, fairytale to realism to crude dystopia – the chosen performances are considered by Batch for their dramaturgy, themes, and broader messages about dementia. The book not only discusses how these dementia stories are portrayed, but also who the creative force or data source is behind them, be it autobiographical, research-informed verbatim theatre, or works informed by medical professionals or creative practitioners. Taken as a whole, this is a substantial undertaking but one that Batch artfully achieves through careful consideration of theatrical composition and subject matter.

The Loss of Small White Clouds is organised into three principal parts. In Part 1, Batch delves into micro to macro dementia narratives through three separate chapters, moving from internalised renderings of reality, time, and selfhood, to the positionality of dementia voices through professional care and wider socio-political contexts. Chapter 1 explores internalised (re)presentations of dementia, uncovering how the liveness of theatre can depict, defy and layer (non)reality and (non)linearity to subsequently foreground stories "about people living with dementia and their retained, if transformed, selfhood" (page 23). Simultaneously, the chosen performances touch on symptomology by addressing changes in coherence of spoken word and memory recall. Ideas of anachronism raised by Batch – not belonging to the time within which they are situated – lead the reader to question whether 'living out of time' is a representative or empowering way of demonstrating individualised dementia experiences. Chapter 2 analyses one example of research-informed educational verbatim theatre which explores dementia in an institutional care setting, albeit with a humanising quality applauded by Batch. This production plays on contentious themes of loss of skills, liability, and personhood, leaning on voices of family and care workers in discussing who people with dementia 'were' or 'are'. Chapter 3 closes Part 1 with an exploration of a dystopian performance considered by Batch for its insights into generational discourse, portrayals of ageism, and political detachment from public health, thereby contextualising the interior experiences of dementia within wider society.

Part 2 sees the analysis of active and passive embodiment in the depiction of dementia stories through more-than-verbal, metaphorical, material, and place-based means. Moreover, Batch argues that greater attention must be given to 'being-in-the-world', what she refers to as embodied selfhood, and also to the body's role in memory (page 97). Hence, discussions of embodiment – and theatre's contribution to it – are not only centred on portrayals of dementia symptomology, but the enduring capacity for people with dementia to be present, sensing, feeling, and communicative in more-than-verbal ways. Chapter 4 is a comparative

analysis of two performances, both (re)presenting more-than-verbal accounts of younger-onset dementia, where the aging body and domestic place exemplify (un)familiarity and transformation in inimitable ways. Batch shows how both of these performances exploit place and time to 'disrupt the consensus of reality' (page 104), including the use of natural disaster metaphors and time blurring methods. Building on these themes of liveness and materiality, Batch dedicates Chapter 5 to the exploration of puppetry. The first theatrical performance uniquely situates the narrative in an outdoor night scene, reinventing the notion of 'wandering' to something of an empowering adventure; the second performance, set in a care facility, is discussed by Batch for its presence of live actors and created ones (via the puppets) and whether this lends itself to 'othering' of people with dementia, when they are the puppet.

Finally, Part 3 takes on postdramatic theatre: the more radical, problematised or markedly agential autobiographical works diverging from the 'norm' in style, message, and creator. Through interactive multisensory theatre, religious imagery, or performance by people with dementia, Batch purposely chooses to close her book with insights into performances that move further from conventional theatre and diegesis. Chapter 6 examines a more-than-static performance, experimenting with approaches that demolish the 'fourth wall' and cross boundaries between performance, participation, and exhibition. Contrastingly, Chapter 7 visits taboo through bodily themes and religiosity in a production with shock factor, rather than catharsis, to render fears of/with dementia affective to the audience. Chapter 8 closes the section with a look at a one-woman show and deeply personal monologue, where placelessness is adopted to remove the otherness often instigated by setting and time in conventional theatre. Batch explores how the actor, who lives with dementia, *performs* and owns their dementia instead of *representing* it, self-demarcating their personhood and body.

Batch light touches and deeply explores a diversity of topics, too wide to give credit to within a review; however, some of my favourites include time – anachromatic roles, the overlapping of past-present dichotomies, in addition to the timeless and non-linear; place and space – from placelessness through to site-specific stories in homes, care facilities, and outdoors; power – themes of dependency and parent-child role reversals, co-presence and shared journeys, dramaturgical power, through to agency, defiance, and acceptance; reality – interior realities coexisting with shared realities, and concepts of non-reality; mind and cognition – plays of symptomology as seen in behaviour, through to performances of interiority as understood through livened thoughts; individuality – the expression of personal identities clashing with dystopian categorisation, ageism, and depicted loss of self; and corporeality – being-in-the-world, personification of the non-living, through to (un)becoming. What I especially admired about Batch's approach to this book is her way of recognising 'voice' in conventional and alternative forms, and how these reiterate both dementia's symptomology and the innate need for people to express themselves. People living with dementia were variably shown as vociferous or voiceless, existing as disembodied voices or unvoiced bodies, and at other times exhibiting circumlocutory discourse or 'breaking the fourth wall' by asking the audience to fill in the gaps.

The book also addresses tricky tropes in theatre and challenges unhelpful dementia discourse that has, at times, been represented within performances through dialogue, action, and imagery. Such discourse includes creating *'burden';* viewing dementia as a *'social/living death';* the (un)becoming of *'passive victims';* people with dementia being *'infantilised';* and the popular 'brilliant *sufferer'* figure of a genius 'falling from grace' to a *'fate'* of dementia. These concepts and descriptions evoke sensationalism and arguably conflict with guidelines

for writing about dementia, as shared by Dementia Australia (2022) and the DEEP guide (2014). Batch draws attention to how these concepts are still characterised within dementia-centred productions, but is careful to show how some performances touch on these concepts to then contradict them. For instance, Batch explores characters with dementia who contest the 'passive *victim*' image by asserting their presence, selfhood, and enduring life story through more active and agential roles. Batch disputes the common demarcation of people with dementia from their pre-dementia selves and indorses performances that (re)humanise the dementia story, demonstrating dementia through less of a 'transformation' lens and more for an individual's resilience.

Whilst it is a substantial feat to cover so many topics and themes related to dementia within 11 selected performances, Batch also highlights that some themes were limited based on the chosen performance case studies the subsequent scope of the book, especially in terms of ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, culture, and disability intersections. Other areas lacking representation in the book including dementia in the Global South, non-English theatre productions, and other necessary storylines such as care home platonic relations and romantic relationships that focus on couple dynamics as opposed to the care partnership, particularly LGBTQ+ couples. A gap is felt where real perspectives of people living with dementia are not well represented, but this is potentially because their involvements in theatre and applied performance are normally framed away from their diagnosis (e.g. McCabe et al., 2015).

This book is ideal for students and scholars based in theatre and performance studies and I would recommend this book to those who want to expand their knowledge of dementia through artistic forms, particularly those who already possess some knowledge about dementia studies or performance. Given that this book introduces a wide range of terminologies and theatre concepts that were new for me, as a gerontologist, it slowed my reading and required greater concentration. Nevertheless, Batch has provided excellent explanation – including a glossary section – to welcome those who are new to theatre but who endeavour to better comprehend dementia representations through theatrical methods, to gather new insights into dementia research knowledge gaps, and to uphold the person-centred nature of the work that is needed within research, practice, and policy.

The (re)presentation of dementia narratives through active art forms matters; yet, as this book explores, there are fine lines to be drawn between what is the 'right kind' or 'wrong kind' of dementia story in terms of performance intention, delivery, and reception (Gibson, 2020). Including dementia narratives within theatre performances, however, is not necessarily enough on its own. One of the greatest messages from this book is that (re)presenting the *person* who has a dementia diagnosis is essential for promoting their selfhood in the face of stigma, infantilisation, and tragedizing. As with research contexts, creative and performance-based settings are slowly moving away from creating *about* people with dementia, towards creating *with* and *by* them. As concluded by Batch, the future of theatre-based dementia narratives is being defined by "(re)thinking, (re)imagining, (re)experiencing, and, ultimately, (re)humanising people with dementia" (2024: page 211) be it performances *about, with,* or *by* people with dementia. The lived experience of dementia forms part of nuanced and personalised narratives existing beyond medical and care discourse, which Batch shows can be effectively and 'affectively' portrayed through means of live performance.

References

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