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***Twenty theatres to see before you die: a love letter to Britain's theatres*, by Amber Massie-Blomfield. London: Penned in the Margins, 2018; ISBN: 9781908058454 (£14.99)**

Ask anyone who loves theatre to list their favourite venues, and you'll undoubtedly receive a unique selection, whether large or small, extant or demolished, real or imaginary. People might choose the first auditorium they ever visited; rhapsodise over the stage on which they performed in youth theatre; celebrate the building where they got their first job; talk about that wild show on a clifftop, or in a field, or under a railway arch, or winding through a town centre. Amber Massie-Blomfield's lyrical paean to Britain's theatrical estate ticks off all these and more, from the Minack to Mull, noting that when she explained her project to the people she met on her travels, this routinely resulted in 'everyone jostling to explain why their proposed theatre is more deserving of being on this list than any other. They're all right, of course' (p.294).

Her survey takes in the Roman auditorium of Verulamium in St Albans, Belfast's Grand Opera House, designed by Frank Matcham in the gloriously garish Oriental style, Battersea Arts Centre just before it reopens, and that *other* 'national theatre without walls' in Wales. Theatres

the size of countries, theatres 10-metres-square; all are included in this capacious and inclusive text.

At its heart, the book is about theatre as space. Massie-Blomfield returns again and again to the concept that spaces can be—must be—shared: ‘being with other people is better than being alone... Sharing space is the beginning of kindness’ (p.339). An auditorium without an audience can still be a place where work happens, but only by inhabiting it for the purpose of watching a story unfold do we create the *theatron*, or seeing-place. Our communal act of seeing (before we die, as the seemingly clickbait title jokes) becomes an act of place-making.

Her chapter on Edinburgh’s Summerhall epitomises this concept. Massie-Blomfield quotes Chris Goode: ‘At its best, you can live inside theatre... theatre’s what I think with’ (p.115). Later she builds on this with the statement, ‘Edinburgh. If you can live inside theatre, this is where the idea becomes manifest... the city is a stage’ (p.171). She talks about muscle memory as she traverses the centre of Edinburgh, feeling the physical impact of its cobbles and wynds. Space explodes as the city transforms each August, performance bleeding from one venue into the next like traffic noise. Memories of Action Hero’s *Watch Me Fall* five years earlier blur with her experience of an unnamed show in Summerhall’s Anatomy Lecture Theatre; in the same way, we find ourselves casting our minds back to previous shows as we take our seat in a venue, memories populating the space alongside actual companions. Here, Summerhall is a synecdoche for Massie-Blomfield’s deliberately quote-marked ‘Edinburgh’—by which she means the festivals, not so much the city—where bars are piled on top of theatres and ringed with exhausted flyerers. She astutely notes that ‘this building is still becoming itself, stranded between its identities as a scientific institute and an arts venue’ (p.179), very much in keeping with the long tradition of Edinburgh’s most famous dualisms, from Wringhim / Gil-Martin to Jekyll / Hyde and even fur coat / nae knickers. The rich blend of architectural critique, historical context, knowledge of contemporary theatre

and sheer love for the art-form in this chapter brings the building to life, whether you know it intimately or have never crossed the Tweed.

This is an accessible text that wears its scholarship lightly; Massie-Blomfield avoids theory-heavy discussions of the public sphere, preferring instead to push into the intimate histories of the people behind the theatres. This approach highlights both the malarial grip of theatremania on individuals (with which many readers may have sympathy) and the quixotic, generous, maddening, stubborn, open-minded, practical personalities needed to juggle the often overwhelming demands of venue management. Rowena Cade, who built the Minack Theatre by hand on a Cornish cliff-top over many years, stands as a ghostly reminder of this tendency: 'how she realised her remarkable vision through decades of arduous labour and sheer bloody-mindedness is, for me, one of the most inspiring stories of holding faith in theatre' (p.33). I have visited the Minack a number of times, as spectator, actor, technician and car-park attendant, and its wild mythology never fails to capture the imagination. The scrappy Portakabins that serve as dressing-rooms, teetering above the sea, speak just as eloquently of Cade's can-do attitude as the serried ranks of hand-carved concrete seats where punters unpack their sandwiches as the show begins. I once watched a basking shark swim lazily round the rocks from stage-left to stage-right during a weekend matinée, and wondered whether Cade had dreamed of these impossible encounters at the same time that she designed the stage.

From the start, Massie-Blomfield acknowledges the deeply personal choices she has made without defensiveness. My list would be different (although there would definitely be overlap), as would yours. I can only join with the author in saying: 'Start your own list. Have your own adventure' (p.25). This book would make a fine road-map, but there's even more fun to be had in creating your own.

About the review author

DR BEN FLETCHER-WATSON manages the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. His research explores performance for non-traditional audiences, including babies, people with dementia and spectators on the autism spectrum. He was a founding editor of the *Scottish Journal of Performance*.