Michael Balfour’s book *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice* is a kaleidoscopic view of prison theatre, from Boal-inspired projects and Moreno-based psychodrama to skill-acquisition work based on cognitive-behavior methodology. The book contains the writings of practitioners and scholars from England, Australia, Africa, and the United States in an attempt to locate the field theoretically, reflect on practical applications, and contribute to the tradition of self-reflective scholarship.

Balfour’s book makes a significant attempt at unifying a concept best expressed in his introduction: “the theatre practitioner is often forced into a duplicitous position, caught on ‘a knife’s edge between resistance to, and incorporation into, the status quo’ of the criminal justice system” (16). Indeed, some of the programs presented within the chapters appear as cautionary examples of compromised or even misguided attempts at using theatre in a prison environment, so that a more precise title might read *The Ethics of Theatre in Prison: The Best and Worst Practices*.

Using performance theory to frame his chapter, James Thompson, founder of Theatre in Prisons and Probation Centre (TIPP) and director of the Centre for Applied Theatre Research, describes prisons and punishment as performative. Thompson cites examples of how the punitive within prison systems is used as part of a spectacle of shame, from the constant presence of surveillance to the public nature of execution. Thompson takes a critical look at how psychodrama in the hands of the Texas Youth Commission is used to “resocialize” the prisoner, becoming an extension of the performance of punishment for the juvenile offender rather than part of the rehabilitation. Here, in a facility where young men narrowly escape the death penalty because of their age, Thompson provides a chilling account of the misuse of this drama-based intervention by describing the prisoners’ traumatic reenactment of their offense and the daily rehearsal-like recitation of the grim details their crimes.

In his chapter, Paul Heritage, Director of People’s Palace Projects, employs a dramaturgical model of “entrances and exits” to explain the “ins and outs” of his prison theatre experience in Brazil. Using Boal-based methodology in collaboration with TIPP, Heritage trains prison instructors to teach exercises and games to non-actors, having succeeded in seeding the development of programs for prisoners and guards in thirty-seven Brazilian prisons. In keeping with Balfour’s objective of exploring the compromises inherent in prison theatre practice, Heritage deliberates over the challenges of preserving the quality of the work with so large a project, speculating that he had been “caught up in the imperatives of a capitalist model that gives value only to that which can be reproduced” (199). He deliberates over the efficacy of the work, giving less...
credence to qualitative data as a measure of effectiveness than to factors such as institutional change and humanizing the environment through mutual respect.

In my view, one of the controversial aspects of the book is the choice to include a chapter by Philip Zimbardo and his associates on the 1971 Stamford University Prison Experiment, a world famous study on human aggression based on a simulation of a prison environment. The chapter may be timely, given the recent television reality show based on a similar model; however, it is unclear whether Zimbardo’s experiment is included as an example of just one more reprehensible use of theatre in an already oppressive, de-humanizing environment. Although the experiment using role-play did not take place in a real prison, it was an egregious violation of human rights, due to the lack of safeguards to protect the participants. Whether Balfour wishes us to view this example of theatre in a mock prison as one of the worst uses of role-play, making it an unfair indictment of theatre practitioners, or as performative, which would require considerable supplemental analysis, remains unclear.

By the same token, I have some reservations about Balfour’s critical stance on a chapter written by Arnold Goldstein, Barry Glick, Wilma Carthan, and Douglas Blanco. The chapter is devoted to an intervention program based on a three-pronged cognitive, affective, and behavioral model designed to teach prosocial skills to gang members. The program is ambitious and the chapter is well written but its impact is somewhat sabotaged by Balfour’s introductory remarks: “I thought it more provoking to see theatre through the lens of an educational psychologist developing what is still a highly innovative program, if one that needs to be approached critically and with a good deal of suspicion” (12). Balfour would have done well to preview in greater detail what emerges in the book as the current debate in England over the use of cognitive skill methodologies, especially for practitioners in countries where prison theatre programs are still struggling for survival at the mercy of the criminal justice system.

Balfour brings a less critical stance to other contributors. Clark Baim describes a program grounded in role theory using psychodrama with violent and sexually abusive men. Baim contends that offending behavior is often driven by early trauma in which the offender is a victim. Since the offender’s personal history and her/his social environment contribute to the roles she/he plays, it is essential for prisoners to work through these traumatic experiences. Baim provides a clinical example that includes offence-focused work as well as healing, striking a balance between reconciling eternal causes and responsibility for the crime. On a similar note, Chris Johnston’s chapter argues for an approach that engages the social and psychological dimensions of the “career criminal” by narrating and rewriting personal mythology. His process utilizes theatre games and exercises, personal stories, body maps and finally the design and construction of a kinetic sculpture. Although his use of theatre is
less in the foreground than in the other programs in the book, Johnston, of all the authors, makes the most meaningful contribution to the debate on the limitations of the cognitive skills model, advocating for a program that shifts attention to the “imaginative/feeling part of the self” (110).

Kate McCoy and Imogen Blood bring a fresh approach to their work with a project, “Dealing with Drugs.” Working in conjunction with counselors, these practitioners combine a cognitive behavior approach with Forum theatre techniques, allowing their clients to experience a cycle of creativity. The men generate a final performance project that ultimately returns their focus to the depiction of drug rehabilitation and intuitional life through a comic perspective. With theatricalized “prison promises” and a strip search turned striptease, humor facilitates a fresh perspective as the prisoners began “to harness their creative energy in a purposeful and challenging activity” (136).

Overall, there is much to commend in Balfour’s provocative, eclectic selection of articles on prison theatre. One may wish that his agenda as it relates to the current debate on methodologies were more explicit. Or, that his discussion of the paradox of facilitating creative work within a punitive, regimented system, a recent perspective that raises questions of ethics, were more effectively contextualized. The book neglects to include the work of American practitioners using educational theatre, as well as innovative projects throughout the State of Michigan in over one-hundred-and-fifty prisons and institutions. Nevertheless, the collection represents the perspectives of many of the most experienced prison theatre practitioners committed to safeguarding the integrity of this enormously challenging field.