

## Jazz and theatre

Sven Bjerstedt, 2021. *Storytelling in Jazz and Musicality in Theatre: Through the Mirror*. London: Routledge. 134 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-31296-8 (hardback), 978-0-367-77578-0 (paperback), 978-0-429-45788-3 (e-book).

Sven Bjerstedt is both a jazz pianist and a senior lecturer at the Malmö Theatre Academy and Lund University. In the book *Storytelling in Jazz and Musicality in Theatre* he combines these experiences and as the subtitle indicates, he discusses how these art forms mirror each other.

The theoretical basis for Bjerstedt's investigation is Nicholas Cook's 'model for integrated art forms' (p. 4), which builds on the assumption that different art forms – despite their differences – have common attributes. This, then, makes it possible for them to meet on common ground: a so-called *blended space*. In this meeting space, the two art forms combine characteristics that are unique to them, and thereby construct a new meaning. Bjerstedt approaches such a meeting space by focusing on the blended space of jazz and theatre that he analyzes from both perspectives.

The book's central aim is to conceptualize the borderland between temporal art forms and investigate 'conceptual loans between the arts' (p. 3). With this term Sven Bjerstedt means the way in which practitioners from these disciplines set words to specific parts of their practice in order to explain the parts of these activities that they find hard to express otherwise. Thereby practices from one art form become metaphors that turn into vehicles that make these elusive practices sensible in the other art form.

The book is divided into four parts, with the first part positioning the study and clarifying the theoretical and methodological approach. This section is followed by the two core parts (II and III) consisting of 'Musical Storytelling' and 'Theatrical Musicality'. Part II focuses primarily on storytelling in jazz, whereas part III discusses musicality in the context of theatre. These two parts are, in turn, divided into four chapters each. The fourth and final part serves as a conclusion to the book as well as an investigation of its implications for artistic practice.

The central method of the study is interviews with practitioners from the respective art forms jazz and theatre that were held in 2010 and 2011. In the first part, Bjerstedt opens by arguing that the arts create metaphors and that this is an essential part of what the arts can be about, which I read as a testimony to the creative power of the arts and its practitioners, which is not in all cases easily translated into (written or spoken) words.

In order to analyze and understand this empirical material, the author explores the conceptual loans (artists using other art forms to explain what they do). Bjerstedt argues that his study does this in relation to the following areas: 'narrativity, on musicality, on metaphor, as well as on educational and sociological issues. In brief, then, this is an exploratory study' (p. 3). Of the book's core concepts, the metaphor is the most central one. Here, it is important to point out that the focus on metaphors is a way to enable artistic practice to be understood and transferred, rather than a way to analyze the use of metaphors as a kind of discourse surrounding an art form writ large. This does not mean that Bjerstedt is unaware of the power of metaphors, which he does discuss situated in the highly influential work by Lakoff and Johnson and all the metaphor theorists that have followed in their footsteps. As he shows in the final chapter, Sven Bjerstedt has reflected on the various ways in which the use of metaphors and the 'intermedial use of concepts' has influenced artistic practice.

Bjerstedt thus discusses the use of metaphors as significant ways in which artists operate but also reflect on their production. There are of course some issues with the idea that art forms

mirror themselves, the metaphor of mirroring reduces relations between different art forms to binaries which reduces the borderlands or the blended space to only two art forms.

The book not only combines a multitude of Bjerstedt's research interests, as his discussion of jazz musicians as storytellers is based on his 2014 PhD dissertation. Already in his dissertation, he commented on the potential of the area he had explored for jazz musicians: 'The field of conceptual loans between the arts has been demonstrated to be a rich and fertile domain for further research. In order to not only deepen but also broaden the investigative perspectives on intermedial metaphors, other art forms ought to be taken into consideration' (Bjerstedt, 2014, p. 349). Here, he specifically refers to the use of the word 'musicality' in spoken theatre. The book takes this previous research one step further, connecting his earlier work with new findings into a coherent publication that also reflects on the particular ways these metaphors influence the creative practices of artists.

Especially the educational possibilities of the metaphor of storytelling make the book interesting. As the author argues, this metaphor can be used to summarize important elements (especially temporal aspects) of jazz improvisation. In that sense, storytelling is a way to analyze the act of improvising and a pedagogical tool to underline the multidimensional character of jazz improvisation. The metaphor thereby turns into a way to make tangible skills that go beyond music theory. 'Storytelling' can function as a multidimensional temporal analysis of improvisation as a 'now', an inner voice and vision and relations to pre-existing materials as well as plans or expectations of what is to come.

Bjerstedt opens his conclusion by stating the contribution of his book as follows: 'This study could be viewed as an expansion from word to world: from the terms "storytelling" (as used with regard to jazz improvisation) and "musicality" (as used with regard to spoken theatre) to a multitude of implications regarding theoretical issues and artistic practice, as well as educational and sociological perspectives' (p. 127). The author finds many similarities between the ways in which theatre and jazz practitioners use these metaphors, metaphors that are both appealing and useful since these art forms have common attributes: 'Both have to do with qualities and abilities that are needed throughout the sequence of consecutive moments that make up the temporal performances of jazz improvisers and actors' (p. 130).

Bjerstedt concludes that the metaphors he has investigated should be seen as bidirectional. With that he means that if musicality is used as a metaphor in a theatre setting, it says something about what theatre can be as well as it says something about what musicality can be. He continues to argue that if a jazz solo is considered to tell a story, this is a metaphor based in written or spoken language, but at the same time, the sounding music itself is a metaphor. In that perspective the meeting point - or blended space - between the different art forms means that the metaphor is active on a linguistic as well as a musical level.

As language also structures reality, a question that arises is if a discourse about 'telling a story' also constructs some kind of reality that musicians have started to believe in? Does that create a kind of circularity in the argument of storytelling as a metaphor? This chapter is an interesting reflection as it shows how theoretical discussions and abstract concepts can influence the way practitioners think and the way their practice is formed. In other words, academic reflection turns into a catalyst for new artistic practice. Therefore, questions such as those posed here above are not the most important, as the book is not primarily focused on thinking about jazz and theatre, but rather about how to create them.

The main contribution of the book is in the areas of artistic practice as it analyzes the ways in which artists aim to make those parts of their practices that are hard to describe conceivable by using metaphors from other art forms. In that perspective, the book has great potential in educational contexts, as it both indicates how those parts of practices that are hard to express in words can be transmitted, and at the same time provides food for reflection on the fact that

many ways in which practices are described rely heavily on metaphors. Finally, the book is a valuable reminder of the impact that academic research has on the practical activities of artists.

*Mischa van Kan*