

On Failures

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I find myself more and more often in contact with artists, students, and scholars interested in championing “failure” within theatrical practice, pedagogy, and discourse. This championing merits some consideration, particularly from those of us interested in performance and pedagogy. For, when spoken of *in general*, failure is not the clearest of concepts. To define it, we might say it articulates some kind of disjunction, or falling short—can such a general and highly relative concept actually be thought of in isolation? To make more sense of failure, we require identifiable reference points—a context. And if this is so, then perhaps different kinds of contexts or events produce different kinds of failures that we risk collapsing conceptually when we encourage “failure” *tout court*.

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In her book, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, theatre scholar and practitioner Sara Jane Bailes champions failure within the context of contemporary experimental performance theatre.¹ She seeks to affirm the political possibilities of failure through an exploration of the methods and works of three major experimental theatre companies in the English-speaking world: Forced Entertainment (Sheffield, UK), Goat Island (Chicago, USA), and Elevator Repair Service (New York, USA).² As I read it, a familiar Marxist critique lies at her book’s core: *x* identity or image does not fit *y* norm, and the distance between these categories gives the “failing” *x*, now separated from the normative consciousness, a kind of mobility for political action to *change* the normative consciousness. The book’s project and rhetoric is, in all honesty, quite inspiring.

Importantly, Bailes tries to speak of failure without generalizations. From start to finish, she focuses upon failure as happening within the greater context of representation. For Bailes, drawing explicitly upon Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s argument in *The Communist Manifesto* that the bourgeoisie “creates a world after its own image” (quoted in Bailes 2011, 35), this link to representation necessarily politicizes the discussion. She writes: “representation offers an arena in which to refract, deflect, extend, challenge, or entirely reject dominant political assumptions and beliefs” (146). Any process of producing images (which includes creating theatre) necessarily invokes a certain injunction to “*produce a different world after a different image*” (36, emphasis added). In short, if you aren’t fitting the mold, make a new mold.

With this in mind, the representations Bailes pursues and finds throughout her case studies, as well as in her reflections on the British punk movement and, to a lesser extent, in early cinema’s slapstick, are ones that try to expose or break through cracks in our institutional molds. Bailes reads these specific forms of representation as, thanks to their “making and becoming,” unable to arrive at the culturally demanded normative outcome (39). This paradoxical process of making images of failure is, she writes, a *poetics* of failure—a poesis and a becoming of something against the grain of dominant cultural expectations.³ The specific examples that Bailes considers of these poetic becomings vary. While I admit the one I will discuss here is a bit simplistic, it’s one of the clearest expressions of Bailes’s approach to putting the above theoretical framework into practice.

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In the performance *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, by the now disbanded Chicago group Goat Island, Bailes describes a moment in which actor Lito Walkey “performs” standing on one leg. Walkey’s stillness, writes Bailes, “is at the same time difficult to endure (keeping one leg raised)” and the integrity of the action “is threatened by bodily movements she cannot control—her foot quivers as does her thigh, her fingers tremble as she tries to hold her arms rigidly by her side” (124). Bailes reads this section of the performance through the reflections of Frankfurt School thinker Ernst Bloch on the impossible and hope. For Bloch, Bailes writes, “the realm of the possible is enlarged by the inclusion of the notion of the impossible” (116). Bloch, according to Bailes, understands the impossible to be a “different approach to *possibilization*”; it is not “nonsense” but always in the position of a “countersense” due to its ability to be conceptualized (117). In Walkey’s performance, Bailes finds the “non-performing body” struggling to uphold its task of remaining absolutely still (124). With Bloch’s concepts in mind, Bailes asserts: “It is precisely the perseverance of an event in the face of difficulty [such as Walkey’s] that turns impossibility from a category of negation [a nonsense] into a strategy of hope [a countersense] in Goat Island’s performance theatre” (125). In other words, Walkey’s performance draws attention to the possibility of the impossible.

Bailes’s other investigations, especially those of work by Forced Entertainment, focus much more on the aesthetics of a broken theatre (fragmented identities and fragmented narratives, etcetera) and the line between representations of failure and failures of representation. However, all of these investigations stay committed to the same logic of inspiring other ways of seeing and realizing the impossible or utopic through the cracks (failures) of aesthetic process and production. In this sense, I think it is fair to say that Bailes understands these works to be attempting to “teach” the viewer about these political possibilities through form.⁴

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What is troubling about these analyses, however, is that they are subtended by a surprising distinction within the concept of failure. Bailes subtly suggests that planned representations, or “performances *of failure*” on stage, such as that of Walkey described above, can hold more significance than “performances *that fail*” (2011, 62). In other words, Bailes is concerned with a performance *of failure* that is built into the performance at a structural level—not a pretend failure (such as a choreographed pratfall), but a moment in which the performers set themselves up to try to accomplish something they cannot.⁵

For Bailes, this distinction between a performance of failure and a performance that fails relies heavily upon a limited conception of representation. Despite setting representation as the scene of action, Bailes leaves a detailed interrogation of this concept outside the scope of her work. It would seem that, to her, a performance *that fails* does not also participate in some kind of category of a representation *of failure*. She separates a domain of “doing” from the representation of that doing. With such a limited reflection on representation, her conclusion flies in the face of much poststructuralist thought from the last 60 years and its various theories of signification. While we need not hold up poststructuralism as a standard, the very extent and range of discussion of signification and representation (and their being doomed to fail), from Roland Barthes to Jacques Derrida or Luce Irigaray to Gilles Deleuze (whom Bailes does briefly acknowledge), makes the absence of this kind of thinking in Bailes’s book, let alone a justification for bracketing it, strikingly noticeable.

This division between representational failure and non-representational failure is twinned with, and co-determined by, a similar division between intentional and unintentional failures. The failures of those pursuing failure intentionally seem to have, for Bailes, more political affect than those who fail in ignorance or who fail but would really rather have succeeded. These intended failures, she claims, are more likely to bring about changes we desire consciously: “When failure is inscribed into the conceptualization of the work, the work’s ontology alters and a different economy is established. What new economies are activated here that might topple aesthetic power structures, or cause the theatre event to hierarchically realign?” (99). This ontological alteration suggests a number of things. First, *the very concept of failure* appears to Bailes to be understood as an *(im)material component* of the performance event. A distinction is thus being made here between a failure that is an unavoidable possibility for the work and a failure that is able to be *consciously* included into the work—or consciously excluded. Finally, Bailes suggests a fundamental politicization and aestheticization of theatre. In other words, if failure is “inscribed,” we are talking about a different kind of theatre, one that may or may not be limited to or synonymous with her notion of performance theatre.

To be fair, Bailes does consider one, and only one, example in which an unintended failure has the same political clout as an intended failure (34). In discussing Walter Benjamin’s reflections on a production of *Le Cid*, Bailes comments on Benjamin’s interest in the amateur performer playing the role of the king. “In this amateur production, [Benjamin] observes the actor himself playing at being a king whilst at the same time failing to do so properly because his crown has slipped. . . . In this moment, Benjamin observes the failure of representation made visible to him through the unconscious ineptitude of the non-professional” (33–4). In this section alone, Bailes appears to suggest that both accidental performance errors (unconscious ineptitudes) and the “willful deployment of error” can participate in the same process of political and cultural destabilization and image (re)making (34). She writes:

Intention plays an intrinsic part in the distinction between amateur and professional as opposing categories of proficiency. Yet amateur and professional, intended or otherwise, the slip that evidences the moment of breakdown creates the possibility of showing more than one thing at a time, revealing more than itself as it illuminates the duplicitous system entangled in its operations. The slip indexes a break in the integrity of an action or object, and in doing so reveals the contingencies that surround it. (34)

Her point here reiterates the political logic I have already discussed. But, unfortunately, Bailes does not explain how these “intended or otherwise” acts could both share the same function or indexical quality while also being split over a border between the representational and the non-representational, between the performance *of failure* and the performance *that fails*. Nor does she share any nuanced position on how intention is fully present to the artists.

I understand Bailes’s reference to Benjamin’s viewing of *Le Cid* as something of a mild concession at the outset of her project. It is the kind of exception that might remind a Performance Studies reader of a similar one made by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. In this foundational study, Austin rigorously taxonomizes performative speech acts into various categories, all of which might be said to be reducible to whether or not the performatives can be deemed “happy” or “unhappy.” For Austin, this distinction judges whether or not a speech act, such as “I promise to help,” is successful. A happy performative brings about the intended effect: i.e., the proffered help is realized. An unhappy performative—or what Austin predominantly calls an “infelicitous” one—is a speech

act that misses its mark or “muffs” the execution: i.e., the promise is broken (Austin 1975, 14). And yet, despite this distinction, Austin does concede that every performative utterance can be infected by infelicity and fail. “As *utterances*,” Austin writes, “our performatives are also heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect *all* utterances” (21).

Bailes segues into theorizing about failure in performance through this very moment in Austin’s lecture and his own concept of infelicity. She writes: “The description of the muffed ‘execution of the ritual’ [quoted from Austin] where the *procedure* is nevertheless right (which is key to its performance) is of particular interest here and in a discussion of failure and representation as a framework through which acts of subversion and reinvention in performance theatre can be identified” (Bailes 2011, 4–5). Though Austin plays a minor role in Bailes’s book, one does not have to work too hard to see an affinity between the two thinkers’ logic. In the same way that Austin famously brackets theatrical speech acts as the unhappiest of infelicities, Bailes brackets unintentional failures.⁶ In other words, while the performances Bailes analyzes may all be infelicities in that they are “failures” to normative expectations, they are quite clearly in her eyes *happy* performatives of infelicitous acts. She herself might as well have written: “As events, our performances of failure are also heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect all events—namely *unintended failures*.” And despite her hope for the “theatre event to hierarchically realign” both itself and a greater politics, Bailes’s casual distinction between types of failure would seem to propagate, even propagandize for, the opposite.

Moreover, the passing acknowledgement of Benjamin’s example of an “error of presentation” in the 200-page book seems another testament to her ultimate devaluing of the unintentional as a sphere with any real political potential, excluding it from the *poetics* at the root of her project (34). I wonder: in all of her time spent with these three well funded and frequently touring companies, did no performance have any unintended failure worthy of comment? Or are only the performative failures that these companies have already incorporated and ironed out deemed worthy of playing a role?

I don’t mean to suggest that a theatre of accidental catastrophes should flourish for political inspiration’s sake. I am suggesting that Bailes’s emphasis on intention: 1) assumes intention to be fully understandable; and 2) assumes that the intention to (successfully) resist the demands of certain kinds of successful representational conformity (i.e., fail) *determines* political potency. These assumptions need to be unpacked, for if the performance of (intended) failure is to create an image after which to fashion the world, what of this world? In what way, for example, is the category of the unintentional performance *that fails* comprised of all the agents that cannot “consciously engage” with failure on terms of their own choosing (13)? Even if the companies Bailes discusses use intentional “failure” as a concept in their processes to emphasize a certain lack of mastery over the world, or to point to an ever-changing flux, this wouldn’t make Bailes’s conceptualization of intention and representation any less problematic.

To summarize, the political value Bailes’s concept of failure creates is dependent upon a certain reshaping, if not limiting, of representation itself. Bailes’s reconfiguration of the representational plane results in her defining a certain aesthetic territory in which any misstep is understood to be politically more “successful,” or charged, on the basis of a self-conscious and fully present intention.

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Bailes's concept of intentional failure, hiding behind the signifier "failure," is having a subtle trickle down effect in theatre criticism and practice. In the process, her admirers perpetuate Bailes's unquestioned assumptions about intention. In his book *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, playwright Jordan Tannahill borrows much from Bailes and even upgrades her concept of failure to the capital "F" Theatre of Failure. Like Bailes, Tannahill regards failure as a "profoundly optimistic and human proposal" (2015, 123). And even though he is much more willing to write of failures of the "that fail" variety, he still holds Bailes's conceptual party line: "Sometimes things fuck up and do not yield an exciting or electric liveness ... Such shortcomings [failures?] demonstrate that effective failure often requires an exacting hand to frame and implement it to full effect" (141–2).⁷ While failure is here being used to subvert starchy old methods of theatre making and storytelling with, as Tannahill writes, a "#Nofilter," it seems to also have an idealized form—with a capital "F," no less (124). A failure shaped by "exacting hands" is better—more effective?—than one shaped by a surprise fire alarm going off again and again mid-performance. Here again we see failure being managed according to the distribution of value across those various events that do not meet a normative standard. And yet despite placing different values upon different failures, our discourse seldom pauses to elucidate what those failures and values are, or at least confront the fragility of our valuations.

Before concluding, I would be remiss were I not to at least mention Samuel Beckett's infamous line, "Fail again. Fail better," from *Worstward Ho* ([1983] 2009, 81). The line has a special place in the visions of lovers of failure—and Bailes in particular, since "Fail again, Fail better" was the original title of her book in its earlier version as her dissertation (2005). "Perhaps no singular artist of the twentieth century," Bailes writes, "has so precisely articulated failure as an existential human predicament than Samuel Beckett." In light of her understanding of this "predicament," she claims: "We cannot 'do' without failure, in both senses of that expression (we cannot make, nor can we manage without)" (2011, 25).

Despite Bailes's affinity for Beckett, *Worstward Ho* has little significance in her book beyond supplying the infamous line. Bailes isolates the line from the story it comes from and uses it to stand in for Beckett's general worldview. But the line is so disconnected from a critical attempt to understand Beckett's work itself that it is even misquoted in Bailes's original title—she replaces the period with a comma. And while that might be a small, technical, unintended error, such a change allows the reader to entertain the idea that "again" and "better" are part of a more coherent progression, as opposed to two ideas in fully separated clauses.

As I read it, Beckett's text (including the infamous line) is much less self-evident with regards to failure than Bailes would have us believe. It is full of puns and paradoxical language that try to trouble the very idea of progress and thinking "better." It makes us suspicious of our very concept of value. Here is the full paragraph immediately following "Fail again. Fail better":

First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other. Sick of the either try the other. Sick of it back sick of the either. So on. Somehow on. Till sick of both. Throw up and go. Where neither. Till sick of there. Throw up and back. The body again. Where none. The place again. Where none. Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all. (Beckett [1983] 2009, 81)

The ambiguity of “better” here (“Or better worse”), I think, makes it fair to at least read Beckett’s infamous line two ways. For some, a better failure might be the one that—surprise, surprise—is actually a success and allows one to live, pay the rent, and fail again another day. In this case, despite being a “failure,” some value is still created and gained. But for others, the better failure might be the one that doesn’t allow you to fail again, the failure in which the possible value gained from the experience isn’t actually valued by the context in question as something contributing to any kind of progress. And yet, “Somehow on.” With regards to performance more broadly, these latter failures could bloom from any number of things. I would consider, for example, snowstorms, blackouts, and heart attacks as possible catalysts.

Again, I do not mean to suggest that valuing intention, whether to “establish new economies” or to inspire a “better” political world, is parasitic to our discourse. As a student in an art school, I am well aware of the importance of articulating intention within an artistic work. I am also aware that institutional pedagogues are not in positions to encourage a kind of failure from which nothing can be gained with regards to education. However, while the above breakdown of Bailes’s thought might seem particular to her, the principles and assumptions at work in her thought regarding intention and representation are the same as those that support the classroom studio or rehearsal hall claim, “failure is okay.” The difference is that Bailes’s assumptions are articulated in such a way that we can see them for what they are, while “failure is okay,” thanks to its more general rhetoric, obscures the possibility of there being failures that are *not okay*, even when we say otherwise. If Bailes and those who find inspiration in her work are any indication, the failure that fails at being a failure is unintentional failure—the failure that has no roots, that can’t be tracked, that doesn’t conform to any logic of progress and development (for which, ironically, Marxism, like capitalism, is guilty).

I have no doubt that, for some artists, all of this may be far too pedantic—or perhaps just too semantic. The openness to failure by many artists is likely grounded in something more pragmatic. Maybe it gets them in a certain mood in the rehearsal studio, a mindset for experimenting—feeling *like* they can do anything. So if that’s you, and chanting to yourself “Fail again. Fail better” (or “Fail again, Fail better”) helps you make whatever you make, then chant away. However, for those who are eager to champion a certain kind of failure as an idealized aesthetic, let alone politicized concept, we might at least consider provisionally (this being the key term) granting intended and unintended failings their own conceptual categories. A linguist might propose writing them failure₁ and failure₂, but we could also say faylure and feilure. For, like Bailes, I too believe that representations are key to helping us shape the world otherwise. But I would argue to include words in that sphere of representations as much as any other signifier. Any promotion of “failure” that does not attempt to nuance, and hopefully also trouble, this distinction between intended and unintended events, or recognize the implied hierarchies being set up in any “failure”-friendly context, seems an example of lazy discourse and lazy pedagogy—two qualities, I imagine, most of us would want to change if we could make a new image for the world.

Notes

1. Performance theatre is Bailes’s term. She uses it to distinguish the practices of the experimental theatre artists she is interested in from theatrical practices that do not, from her view, have questions of performativity at the heart of their work.

2. While it would be difficult to connect the English language to the problems here discussed, we should not be oblivious to the Anglocentric historical moment out of which concern for failure has emerged. Failure, as

discussed in Bailes book in both denotation and connotation, is not necessarily a universal concept shared by all languages.

3. Bailes borrows the terms poeisis from Heidegger (1971) and becoming from Deleuze and Guattari (1983).
4. It's possible that a strong influence on Bailes's thought here is Walter Benjamin's notion that "An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one" ([1934] 2008, 89). For Benjamin, formal innovation is a way to remind a society that change is possible. In other words, if art forms can change, so can the structures of our institutions. A writer who teaches other writers is a writer thinking at the level of form.
5. Further research could be done here on the relationship these performative styles have with clowning methods, such as those of Jacques Lecoq or Philippe Gaulier.
6. I am surprised that Bailes does not even footnote Jacques Derrida's lengthy critique of Austin's thought in "Signature, Event, Context" (1988). Derrida's text is a direct response to Austin's devaluing of speech acts in theatre as merely citational. His argument has two main tenants. For any speech act to be understandable (happy or unhappy), Derrida believes it must already have been part of a repetition and, thus, in some way, be a citation of a previous speech act in a new context. This is what Derrida calls iterability. On the basis of this claim, and in conjunction with Austin's claim that any performative is by definition subject to infelicity—that is, the possibility of infelicity is part of the definition of even happy speech acts—Austin should not be able to assert a difference between these acts to the extent that he does. Their separation is completely constructed. Derrida's interpretation of Austin embraces failure just as much as Bailes's, but Derrida goes a step further to tear down the separation between all speech acts.
7. Tannahill wants liveness or vitality more than explicitly just political images, though he clearly understands the former to be part of a fight for the latter.

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