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Drama/Theatre/Performance (review)

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drama develops in performance when Gaylord and Magnolia in *Showboat* sing the same melody, or in *West Side Story* when the Jets dance beautifully but violently in their near-rape of Anita? In his concluding chapter, he examines more radical musicals such as *Follies*, *Cabaret*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Pacific Overtures*, investigating their aesthetics and “their penchant for getting to the roots of the musical and dramatizing the conventions of the form. . . . They make the genre aware of itself, forming an attitude of aesthetic radicalism that refuses to be controlled by the established conventions even when the established conventions are the source of inspiration” (208). These aesthetics, McMillin hopes, are what will carry the musical forward to claiming its inherent political seriousness.

Refreshingly, he points out that despite recent scholarship, it is not only gay teenagers who had been swept away by musicals and then, later, reflected on the experience as adult scholars. Young people—gay or straight—seek the release of living vicariously through characters able to perform second, more expressive versions of themselves in repetitive numbers. Anyone who has ever bought a ticket for a musical anticipates the convention of suspending disbelief when singing and dancing occurs onstage, yet McMillin disappointingly remains stunned when a change of expressive modes takes place. Andrea Most has acknowledged the role of the audience in flagging the difference between number and book with their pleasure-induced applause, and Marvin Carlson has noted the ripeness for an investigation into the contributions audiences make in reading the performances they attend. A consideration of audience expectations, assumptions, and strategies in consuming the differences offered by musicals might have further enriched McMillin’s discussion. While the dramatic achievements he explores do occur on stages behind closed theatre doors, an audience’s exposure to them begins outside the theatre through reviews, advertising, and commercially available recordings. He rightly notes, however, the excitement implicit in a musical’s transformation of its source material. The musical can dislocate a play, a novel, a film, or even a painting and surprise audiences with the choices its composer, writers, and choreographer make to tell the story in musical theatre terms. How will they empower their characters with language or oppress them with dance?

Along with current musical theatre and opera scholarship, McMillin engages effectively with Brecht, Wagner, and Kierkegaard. But it is his dissection of obvious conventions that drives the study along. McMillin’s reassessment of landmark musicals, sharply outlining the frisson of difference between modes of expression in contrast to the implied

smoothness of musicals’ integration, will certainly have a major impact on deepening and broadening scholarly discussions of the form.

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DRAMA/THEATRE/PERFORMANCE. By Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis. New Critical Idiom Series. London: Routledge, 2004; pp. 262. \$90.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

This book provides a timely intervention into the growing number of studies moving away from prior and arguably monolithic notions of “theatre studies” to the more heterogeneous notion of “performance.” The authors are clearly engaged with the current challenges and opportunities that face the teaching of drama, theatre, and performance within higher education. In such a climate, it is not surprising there is no attempt to posit any kind of overarching theory of the areas in question, and the preferred approach is to survey the various debates and terminologies that have arisen—particularly over the last four decades of the twentieth century—leading, arguably, to the dissolution of the boundaries among the three key terms. In light of the challenges raised by these debates, this is a book that appears to take into account the needs of undergraduate and postgraduate students studying not only drama, but contemporary visual arts—especially those from a sociohistorical and/or cultural studies perspective. The authors’ construction of a comprehensive genealogical survey is thus both warranted and appreciated, in that it leads to a detailed focus upon where boundary lines have previously been reified or variably contested and where contemporary gaps, in both understanding and performative opportunities, arise.

The book’s approach is in two parts, which are clearly defined in the introduction. The first is titled “A Genealogy,” spanning two-thirds of the book and providing a succinct thematic summary of significant areas of debate. It opens with a short yet necessary exposition on the debate surrounding drama as an academic subject, then proceeds to track “the successive emergence of Drama, Theatre and Performance as academic paradigms” (2), from Dryden’s dramatic criticism to postmodernism and performance. This first part can be divided into two sections again, with the first four chapters providing a historic basis for the ones that follow. These first four chapters will also provide a useful supplement to standard introductions to subject, such as Mark Fortier’s *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, also published by Routledge.

The turning point in this section of the book comes at chapter 5, which is suggested by the authors as a "turn to our present situation" (2). This chapter however, which is given significant prominence in the introduction and deals with "Women, Theatre and the Ethics of the Academy," seems rather meagre at only ten pages. Chapter 6, concerning "Performance, Art and the Avant-Garde," is especially useful; while chapter 7, "The Rise of Performance Studies," is extremely stimulating. Concluding this section, chapter 8, "Performance Studies: Some Basic Concepts," provides an excellent introduction to undergraduates embarking on any medium in the creative arts and leads the reader from the basics of ritual and play into the more complex issues of the nature of performativity associated with the postmodern condition and present-day debates surrounding the cultural process. Most pertinent and what the first section does extremely well is provide an extensive, well-chosen bibliography that directs readers to the major "players" in the theoretical arena, while abstracting their major points in a concise way without unduly distorting them through oversimplification.

The second part, "Keywords," is comprised of thirteen entries in eighty pages ranging through "Action" and "Defamiliarization and Alienation" to "Semiotics and Phenomenology" and is perhaps the section that is of particular use to undergraduates. It pays homage to the cultural-materialist approach of Raymond Williams's *Keywords* and *Culture and Society* and sets out to offer some clearer definitions of the associated vocabulary surrounding the terms "drama," "theatre," and "performance" and the unfixed nature of their meanings in any given social, historical, or cultural debate.

However, as with all such genealogical studies, there are inevitable gaps within the authors' own perspective that become particularly noticeable when examining the areas they have elected to focus upon in greater depth, compared with those that elicit a more generalized treatment. For instance, the opening paragraph of the book takes the familiar Lakoffian *Metaphors We Live By* approach to the authors chosen terms such as "make a drama out of a crisis" and "theatres of war" (1) and so on, but chooses not to pursue this further by bringing in terms within the same set of semantic fields such as "audience," "play," and "stage" that would complicate the issues still further. Indeed, while "play" receives six pages of discussion, this is far from comprehensive and misses key socio-psychological discussions of this issue by eminent theorists. Whether the reader is likely to find such factors controversial or provocative of further debate largely depends upon how, in spite of the authors' specious claims that "they do not take a juridical overview" (3), they find the clear cultural-materialist bias congenial.

It is the twofold nature of this book that is its chief problematic and that possibly creates a conflict with regard to its target audience, in that the dual focus risks alienating certain sections of the readership. As stated, some key chapters in parts 1 and 2 are ideal for undergraduates; however, much of the book seems to be aimed at the demarcation between third-year undergraduate and postgraduate research and is definitely more advanced than most volumes in the New Critical Idiom Series. In many respects this is no bad thing, but if instructors are considering this as a key undergraduate text, they will need to be selective when it comes to assigning certain chapters and taking up the authors' invitation of a book "to dip in and out of" (3).

It is clear that this is an eclectic volume, expansive in scope and rigorous in both scholarship and detail. At times refreshing and provocative, at others frustrating, Shepherd and Wallis succeed in dismantling many recent claims regarding what drama/theatre/performance are all about and provide an excellent, if not easily navigable, guidebook to the contemporary critical landscape and the cultural vocabulary.

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STAGE FRIGHT, ANIMALS, AND OTHER THEATRICAL PROBLEMS. By Nicholas Ridout. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; pp. 206. \$75.00 cloth, \$32.99 paper.

Nicholas Ridout sets out to address seemingly marginal theatrical occurrences, such as stage fright, embarrassment, animal performance, and actor failure in rehearsal and onstage. He claims that the failure and discomfort experienced by actors and audience members in these events are actually essential components of the theatre's political role in the modern bourgeois economy: these negative affects expose and offer a means of resistance to the economy of exploitation in the modern entertainment industry.

Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems (originally to have been titled *Face to Face: The Actor and the Audience in the Modern Theatre*) is divided into four sections, each of which deals with one type of uncomfortable encounter between audience members and actors. In chapter 1, Ridout discusses "Stage Fright: The Predicament of the Actor," which he contrasts in chapter 2 with "Embarrassment: The Predicament of the Audience." Stanislavskii, in *An Actor Prepares*, recalled the terrifying experience of being onstage for the first time, faced with an "awful