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Review of: Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing 1995-2005 by Amelia Howe Kritzer

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Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing, 1995-2005 (review)

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enactment. His chapters explore the contours of this project in case studies drawn from his several areas of expertise, including Renaissance English theatre history (chapters 1 and 6), the historical avant-garde (chapter 2), and the production of Ibsen's plays in England (chapters 4 and 7). Although Postlewait is a perspicacious researcher, these topics do not in and of themselves supply the animating questions of his study; rather, he considers how scholarly trends have shaped the interpretation of these topics. Unexamined historiographic habits, he demonstrates, have often led to erroneous conclusions. Self-conscious attention to relevant historiographic principles, by contrast, can fend off misreading and suggest more persuasive ways of constellating the data into a compelling historical analysis.

Each chapter focuses on a common approach and unfolds some of its pitfalls. Chapters 1 and 2 establish two poles of the field, exemplifying the purportedly agonistic modes of "documentary" and "cultural" history. Chapter 1 assays the practice of reconstructing performance conditions via archival documentation, the tradition of *Theatrewissenschaft*. Postlewait synthesizes the bountiful scholarship about the production of Shakespeare's plays in the Globe Theatre. He does not so much arrive at a definitive account of Shakespearean theatrical practice as show how damnably difficult it is to assemble the existing evidence into a single coherent description. He wonders, too, about the ultimate importance of such work taken in isolation from wider ranging questions of social value. Chapter 2 turns to theoretically inflected cultural histories. Postlewait commends the quest to establish the impact of theatrical events, but counsels that commonplace narratives easily supplant thorough research. His case study here is the premiere of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. Through a scrupulous examination of the documents, Postlewait demonstrates that the reputation of this production as an obstreperous founding gesture of the anti-establishment avant-garde owes more to a familiar modernist trope of artistic rebellion than it does to scrutiny of the evidence. Jarry, he argues, was in fact an effective organizer, highly skilled in the managerial and marketing arts of the bourgeoisie.

Having begun with two opposing examples of interpretation gone awry, Postlewait promotes a middle course. Chapters 3 and 4 focus at length on "event" as a central term of historical inquiry. Chapter 3 summarizes the contested literature on this keyword. His discussion ranges from the Annales school (e.g., Braudel), which often disdained the study of events, to more recent micro-historians (e.g., Ginzburg), who see in apparently minor events revealing exemplars of sweeping historical changes. Chapter 4 narrows the focus to consider

how theatrical events are illuminated by these (and other) historiographic paradigms. Chapters 5 and 6 look, respectively, at issues of periodization and at the prominence of the political as a determinate context for theatre historians. Chapter 7 concludes with what Postlewait calls "Twelve Cruxes" (225), a frank listing of common forms of theatre historical analysis illustrated with examples from the English premiere of *A Doll's House*. This chapter has the pragmatic, "how-to" character Postlewait promises in the introduction and should become a standard resource for emerging scholars. Some sections of the book have been published previously as journal articles or book chapters, but much here is new and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Although I find this book impressive, I wish Postlewait had more fully engaged current debates about the nature of historical evidence. He acknowledges that historians draw upon sources other than written documents, but for the most part, he presumes a traditional, paper-bound understanding of the archive. He thus forecloses extended consideration of the ways that theater and performance studies are pressuring the epistemological presuppositions of the discipline of history itself. Diana Taylor, Joseph Roach, Daphne Brooks, and others have shown that performances transmit memory, and that such enacted traces of the past often provide access to histories that, for reasons of culture and power, did not generate an extensive written archive. I would be interested to see Postlewait configure this principled challenge to the discipline of history (and to the standard canon of Western theatre history) more prominently in his otherwise thorough introduction to the contemporary flash-points of theatre historiography.

This is an excellent book, both copious and frisky. Thomas Postlewait has again issued an impassioned call for rigor in the research and interpretation of the theatrical past.

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POLITICAL THEATRE IN POST-THATCHER BRITAIN: NEW WRITING, 1995–2005.

By Amelia Howe Kritzer. Performance Interventions Series. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; pp. 239. \$80.00 cloth.

Amelia Howe Kritzer's timely book on recent British political theatre deploys its periodization with strategy—its title references multiple historical frames on either side of the colon. Although it is debatable whether the term "Post-Thatcher" means

post-1990 (when Britain's first female prime minister stepped down from office) or post-1997 (when Labour leader Tony Blair unseated Thatcher's designated successor, John Major), the label itself proves evocative. It reflects the belated yet resurgent cultural experience of the 1990s, extending that feeling across the turn of the century by using Britain's most recognizable political figure to explain the events and sociological processes for which she metonymically stands. The book's starting date, 1995, alludes to the premiere of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* at the Royal Court Theatre, but the title's reference to Thatcher insists that Kane's work be viewed in a sociopolitical context. This approach departs from that of Aleks Sierz and of Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders, who write about 1990s drama under the rubrics of, respectively, "in-yer-face" and "cool Britannia," labels that emphasize the energy and attitude of the plays and their artists rather than their historical context.

Kritzer's study also takes wider aim than Sierz or D'Monté and Saunders, who focus only on the decade of the 1990s. Sierz's 2001 *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* breathlessly reported from the frontlines while the new wave was breaking and depends very much on the visceral sense of having "been there." D'Monté and Saunders's 2008 collection of essays includes the voices of British theatre scholars starting to put the 1990s into a critical framework. By picking a ten-year period that bridges the millennium, Kritzer allows herself to write in an entirely retrospective way about the rocky years between 1985 and 1995, when changes to arts funding and cultural changes in aesthetics and activism utterly altered the trajectory of Britain's new writing scene. As a result of this periodization, Kritzer groups modes and attitudes of the late 1980s with 1970s theatre practice, eliding the profound differences between artists' experiences and aims in those eras.

Kritzer is an American scholar of British theatre and her book's distanced voice results in something like a textbook about British theatre and its social contexts at the turn of the twentieth century, illuminated by an extensive survey and analysis of play texts (over eighty plays receive coverage). This textbook-like quality is not necessarily a failing, but it follows that Kritzer does not take the opportunity to critique ideas or follow up on certain threads. (There is more to explore about how Hans-Thies Lieberman's ideas on postdramatic theatre really help or hinder an argument about political theatre, for instance.) Her first chapter, however, fully demonstrates one benefit of this approach: it provides a sophisticated definition of and approach to political theatre in a patient, sequential, and thorough way that will make the chapter useful not only for teach-

ing British theatre but for addressing wider topics in theatre and politics.

In her first two chapters, Kritzer defines political theatre and sets up a continuum of activism and disengagement through which she makes her overall argument that political theatre is not dead in post-Thatcher Britain. In chapter sections titled "Generational Politics" (which treats the generation of writers who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s and are still writing today) and "Intergenerational Dialogue" (about writers from the 1990s onward), she ably defines millennial political theatre, in contrast to that of the 1970s. Kritzer argues that in the 1970s, activism held high appeal for young theatre artists, but that current political theatre works differently, because its writers must address a world where disengagement has become the norm.

Following the twin ideas of generational difference and disengagement, Kritzer aims to answer Sierz's query about whether in-yer-face plays succeed in not only waking up the audience and re-empowering the writer in British drama, but in *doing something* in the world. Kritzer intriguingly argues that, because of the excitement that in-yer-face plays generated, audiences came to watch those shows with an "intensity and intention" that made attending them a generational statement akin to attending a political demonstration (65–66). This bold claim echoes Sierz's notion that what happened in the 1990s had parallels with the "angry young" wave of the late 1950s, where *Look Back in Anger* similarly became a generational touchpoint. (Unfortunately, an error in the date of *Anger's* premiere survived copyediting.)

Chapter 3 argues that millennial plays efficaciously reposition love as a political statement. Despite the appeal of this argument, the rest of the book does not truly prove it; instead, it becomes a compendium of dramatists negotiating social and political issues in their content. Kritzer moves at a mad dash, and even then she does not discuss David Greig or Martin Crimp. Still, her text analysis is insightful, and she is especially strong on playwrights Caryl Churchill, Tanika Gupta, Michael Frayn, Mark Ravenhill, and Kwame Kwei-Arme, who are discussed in depth.

In chapters 4 and 5, Kritzer uses vocabulary and concepts introduced in chapter 1 to chart the way that black British writers continue to weave representations of race into the public sphere through drama. In addition to race, tragedy is another interesting sub-theme in her discussions; the public aspect of theatre presentation and spectatorship yokes tragic structures to political processes, as Kritzer demonstrates in her strong sections on Tricycle

Theatre Company and the emergence of the tribunal play as a political genre of particular service.

Kritzer captures and explains many elements of millennial British theatre, and her periodization strategy is utterly fair: theatre in the 1990s broke with the 1970s, and in 1995 (with Sarah Kane and others), it became clear that a new model had emerged. But in this frame, Kritzer cannot do justice to how we get from “there” to “here” across the 1980s: the companies that provided spaces for new writing, the people mentoring new writers, the theatrical processes that adapted as the social climate changed from activism to disengagement. With the playwrights so richly documented, that is the next story to be told.

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DIRECTORS AND THE NEW MUSICAL DRAMA: BRITISH AND AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE IN THE 1980s AND '90s. By Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen. Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; pp. x + 231. \$80.00 cloth.

Directors and the New Musical Drama addresses the evolution of musical theatre in the 1980s and 1990s by examining the cultural differences between British and American musicals and the role of the director. Through these two critical lenses, Lundskaer-Nielsen argues that certain musicals in the late twentieth century changed the very definition of the form, making it more inclusive and exploratory. To support this argument, she examines commercially successful productions of the “British Invasion” from London’s West End, recent inventive Broadway revivals, and the rise of the American nonprofit theatre.

The first chapter provides a brief history of both American and British musical theatre, leading to the cultural and artistic tensions that emerged when West End imports dominated the Broadway landscape during the 1980s and 1990s. Lundskaer-Nielsen also develops her definition of “musical drama”: a hybrid form of musical theatre combining the essential traditions of Golden Age Broadway musicals (e.g., using song to further the story or investigate an idea) with staging styles and dramaturgy from nonmusical drama. She offers *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon* as foundational examples of this new genre, since these shows approach song and plot construction with dramaturgical methods from outside the American musical theatre legacy.

Musical drama, then, is the book’s primary focus, filtered through discussion of the director’s contribution. Lundskaer-Nielsen notes that musical theatre historians have rightly credited director-choreographers like Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett for their influence, but have ignored director-dramaturges and director-writers, who rose to prominence in the late twentieth century. Seeing a need for such a contribution, the author examines British and American directors who, she claims, moved musicals toward more pluralistic and experimental expression.

Lundskaer-Nielsen argues that the father of such director-dramaturges is Harold Prince, whose contributions to musical theatre are the subject of chapter 2. She contends that Prince broke from Golden Age—musical song structure with the concept musical *Company*, and reconfigured traditional musical plot structure by incorporating Brechtian techniques into *Cabaret*. While many scholars have addressed Prince’s significance in musical theatre history, Lundskaer-Nielsen emphasizes his dramaturgical sensibility as a director and his staging innovations. Prince, then, serves as the model for the author’s subsequent discussion of musical drama directors. Moving to an examination of musicals during the 1980s and 1990s, Lundskaer-Nielsen takes on musical theatre historiography that depicts British productions in this era as commercial and technological successes, but aesthetic failures. She offers a reconsideration of several seminal British musicals of the 1980s that, like Prince’s work, expanded the form beyond early—entirely American—musical theatre construction and themes.

While the author claims to concentrate on influential directors, the British Invasion discussion blurs the text’s focus in the first half of the book. The latter half of the book, however, becomes more systematically focused as Lundskaer-Nielsen discusses several directors who made creative leaps in the nonprofit theatre or in significant Broadway revivals. Taking account of the increasingly important relationship between nonprofit and commercial theatre, the chapters on nonprofit theatre briefly outline its history and detail the work of directors who emerged from that sector. The author also devotes several chapters to directors of selected revivals, and the chapter “Staging the Canon” is a particular strength in the book. Here, the author investigates recent revivals of *Nine*, *Follies*, *Cabaret*, and *Oklahoma!* to demonstrate her thesis that all of these revivals incorporate thematic and dramaturgical elements from various kinds of nonmusical drama.

The final sixty pages of the book consist of transcripts from interviews Lundskaer-Nielsen conducted with notable musical theatre figures which served