NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rose Whyman

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Jacky Bratton
New Readings in Theatre History
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
250 p.
£40.00 (hbk); £ 16.95 (pbk).
ISBN: 0-521-79121-2 (hbk); 0-521-79463-3 (pbk).

Theatre historiography is the current buzzphrase – it is not so much a case of the materials we have, or even the new materials we have found, but more about what we choose to do with them, and how these choices impact on our readings of theatre history as we have known it. Partly inspired by new movements in history practice and partly, one might argue, inspired by the impact of new histories such as those of women in theatre and of popular and working-class performance, theatre historians have had to rethink not only the content of theatre histories but the ideologies through which those histories have been constructed.

Jacky Bratton's book places her at the forefront of this relatively new movement in theatre history practice, and it is a searching and erudite piece of scholarship. She is concerned not necessarily to rewrite past theatre history, but more: to examine the cultural determinants that have influenced the way it was written. There is for example, a canny examination of the histories of British theatre as written by collectors of theatrical ephemera and prompt copies of productions.

Bratton also points to the importance for the historian of an evaluation of the social processes – such as gossip and the passing on of theatrical anecdotes – as well as the political ones at play in the formulation of stage histories. And she rigorously deconstructs the segregationist binary oppositions of legitimate and 'illegitimate' theatre and performance in terms of the 'ideological conflict over entertainment', whilst pointing out that our dominant histories of nineteenth-century British theatre still do not encompass the vibrant and multifarious performance cultures at play outside text-based theatre.

For me the most exciting chapter is 'Claiming Kin: an Experiment in Genealogical Research', in which Bratton weaves together an analysis of the importance of familial relationships and connections in the theatre industry for the purpose of revealing 'important people and patterns which have been missed by the more orthodox tracing of dramatic links and literary precedents'. Here she discusses the importance to the industry of both the economic and the blood ties between theatre professionals. Of course this leads to an inevitable re-evaluation of womens' role in the nineteenth-century theatre and beyond, not only on the forestage but backstage as managers and producers.

This is a clever and thought-provoking chapter which brings *New Readings in Theatre History* to a close. The book is part of Tracy C. Davis's new series on 'Theatre and Performance Theory', and although I feel students and the general reader – at whom the series is aimed – will find the material difficult, it is nevertheless a rewarding read and a book that ought to be recommended to all students of theatre and performance studies as well as to more advanced scholars.

maggie b. gale

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Nancy Copeland
Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre: Women's Comedy and the Theatre
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. viii, 199 p. £40.00.
ISBN: 0-7546-3125-7.

Nancy Copeland is here concerned to explore and debate the representation and operation of gender in four plays by two of the most successful – that is, most frequently performed in the period, commanding significant production histories thereafter, and dramaturgically sophisticated – playwrights working in London theatre in the late Stuart period. This four-play case study encompasses a long period of social change and theatrical innovation, from Behn's *The Rover* in 1677 to Centlivre's *The Wonder* in 1714, and then beyond into the plays' subsequent production histories.

Copeland's approach achieves coherence as she draws important parallels across four decades of theatre-making: in particular, she focuses on the cultural position of the playwrights *qua* women playwrights working in what she reminds us was a commercially and politically complex theatre culture in which gender – of theatre-makers as well as in terms of onstage representation – was always a defining element. From this theatrical and cultural contextualization, Copeland goes on to study subsequent performances of these two plays – adding in Behn's *The Lucky Chance* (1686) and Centlivre's *The Busie Bodie* (1709). All four of these she identifies as generating 'complex cultural resonance'.

In addition to gender, the two structuring themes that run through the study are comedy

(and its tropes and conventions in the Restoration and Queen Anne periods) and 'intertheatricality' – Jacky Bratton's notion of reading plays both into and out of their theatrical context. It is an active and engaging response to theatre history that facilitates Copeland working 'diachronically' and 'synchronically' and thereby extends the relevance and ubiquity of the study beyond the (illuminating) close readings of the four case-study plays, and the charting of their sometimes fractured production histories, towards a useful critique of the 'Restoration paradigm'. This is well illustrated through reference to some key modern productions, including John Barton's well-known 1986 version of *The Rover* for the RSC.

I was particularly engaged by this wider questioning of the Restoration's legacy of cultural values, representations, and identities, which gives rise to one question of production and repertoire and one comment on taking Copeland's work forward. Firstly, how do modern productions of the Restoration and late Stuart repertoire negotiate a way through audience's expectations of the 'Restoration paradigms' and their catalogue of sexy rakes, saucy girls, and merry monarchs? Secondly, it is clear that linking the intertheatrical approach, clearly exemplified in this study, with what one might term cultural heritage debates and, of course, the construction of (British) national identities – so important in the immediate period and key markers in subsequent productions – can lead to an intriguing set of highly contemporary questions for the reader and viewer of Restoration drama.

adrienne scullion

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Jon Burrows
Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908–1918
Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2003. 288 p. £39.99.
ISBN: 0-85989-725-7.

Legitimate Cinema is a well researched, amply illustrated, and highly readable contribution to British film history and to the discussion of its relationship with congruent areas of cultural activity. Burrows intends his title to denote both cinema's efforts in the tens and teens to attain respectability by appropriations from the stage and its attempts to produce films which were worthy in their own right. He therefore challenges the received opinion that dependency on theatrical performers and productions was, of necessity, a regressive move for the new medium.

He discusses a variety of styles of stage acting and their critical appraisal by contemporary commentators, concluding that the period is marked by multiplicity and flux. He acknowledges reconciliations between the legitimate stage and the music hall which appear concurrently with adaptations to the screen (although I should suggest that the 'look to camera', which he ascribes to the halls, could as well be found in asides directed on the legitimate stage). A shift is discerned in the attitude of stage actors towards the propriety of film, which is adopted with enthusiasm with the advent of multi-reel productions after 1913, where previously it had more often been regarded with disdain. Case studies are devoted to Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson in *Hamlet* (1913) and the reception of the film by various audiences and critics; Edwardian character acting is represented by Seymour Hicks in *Scrooge* (1913), Beerbohm Tree in *Trilby* (1914), and Matheson Lang in *The Merchant of Venice* (1916); and the Ideal Company's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Fred Paul, 1916) is discussed as an example of appeal to a broadly middlebrow audience.

Acting style is sometimes discussed in relation to idiosyncratic and general trends in cinematography but, sadly, not in relation to set design, stagecraft, and actor training (equally hotly debated subjects in this period). More could be made, I think, of such texts as *Trelawny of 'The Wells'* and *Masks and Faces* as a commentary on changes in style and perceived national attributes. Given competition with American films for a British audience and attempts to figure in the international market, it might have proved worth mentioning the exportability of stars (including those already cited) whose transatlantic theatre tours enjoyed success.

On the other hand, given the lack of relevance of much secondary writing about the American situation to British stage / screen interactions (which Burrows himself admits), it is surprising that there is little recognition in the bibliography of the quantity of British scholarship which has addressed comparable intermedial concerns in this same area in the last ten years (I am thinking especially here of the work of Christine Gledhill). Furthermore, as Burrows indicates, these concerns are not unique to Britain. It is hoped that the work of Burrows and others will encourage further fruitful research in this and subsequent periods of cinema's national and international development.

amy sergeant

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Robert Smallwood, ed.
Players of Shakespeare 6
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
236 p. £35.00.
ISBN: 0-521-84088-0.

This latest volume in the series of essays by actors on their rehearsals and performances of various Shakespeare roles is, as the editor comments, the first to devote itself to a single group of his plays,

the histories. This collection constitutes a particularly resonant entry in the series for those engaged in analyzing not just Shakespeare's plays in production, but also actors' reflections on their varying practices and the position of major subsidized theatre in British society.

Robert Smallwood has edited or co-edited each volume since Philip Brockbank's first collection, and it is appropriate that he begins his Introduction by observing how 'the very nature of the historical source material that lies behind the plays . . . makes the question "What happened next?" askable.' This volume, even more than its valuable predecessors, gives answers and information, but asks more questions than any previous collection – questions of power, ends and means, historical parallels, the individual in relation to society, the once, current, and future government of Britain, and the politics of the RSC and of the National Theatre themselves. The resonances of the questions are particularly purposeful, moral, heartfelt, and poignant.

Most of the essays are provided by actors involved in the RSC's 'This England' millennium project, which began in 2001, presenting productions of all eight plays in the two Lancastrian tetralogies; there are also three essays based on the 2001 RSC production of *King John*, one on *Edward III*, and Adrian Lester's account of playing the title role in *Henry V* at the NT in 2003. Smallwood notes how the RSC 'This England' project, 'inconceivable outside the structures of a large and permanent theatre company, may be thought of as in many ways epitomizing the sort of ambitious work that the development throughout the twentieth century of publicly subsidized national theatre companies had made possible'; however, 'only a matter of weeks later, a massive reorganization of the RSC was announced . . . that would dismantle the ensemble company tradition so painstakingly built up over the forty years of the RSC's existence', and involving the closure of The Other Place.

These decisions had no visible reference to the values and purposes of art, as identified by Kelly Hunter: 'to prompt us, to change and teach us'. The recurrent question is that of David Rintoul: 'Is the king above the law, or is the law above the king?' Adrian Lester's work, like much of that recorded here, took place against 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, when Tony Blair appealed 'to history to be his judge', as does Henry V; and director Nicholas Hytner's Shakespeare debut production at the National presented 'both a national hero and an anti-war agenda' for the audience to 'see Henry in relation to the two extremes'.

Samuel West writes eloquently of the existential angst he identified at the centre of *Richard II*: 'All human structures and hierarchy were artificial and would ultimately fail, and the only search worth the effort was the search to become nothing.' Finally, Henry Goodman's essay on *Richard III* is as good as any essay the series has produced; he identifies 'the social and political muscle' of the play in how the audience's journey is 'from relaxed encouragement, to guilty complicity, to disgusted observation of the appalling events that they have unleashed'.

As Smallwood observes, *Henry V* and the other productions considered debate 'issues of nationhood and nationalism, of invasion and conquest (and their aftermath), of political leadership and political expediency' in ways which illuminate both the dramatic text and national concerns. This collection constitutes a substantial achievement, an aptly provocative parting shot from a masterful editor and commentator who may be making his last bow.

david ian rabey

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Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann
Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre: Performance and Liminality in Early Modern Drama
London; New York: Routledge, 2004. 189 p. £18.99.
ISBN: 0- 415-33443-8.

This book explores how Elizabethan prologues of the 1580s and 1590s articulated and negotiated a diverse range of thresholds – theatrical, cultural, social, and psychological. In noting the crises of authority that characterized the period, the authors argue that a professional theatre 'coming-into-consciousness of itself' (associated with the newly emerging playhouses) was uniquely placed to participate in these crises – reflecting the rapidly changing and socially mobile world outside of the play *and* participating in its construction. The authorizing, shifting, roles of the prologue in the theatre are described, the authors concluding that traditional adductions to an authority residing beyond the play (in morality or Christian truth, for example) gave way, in the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, to a new sense of intellectual possession – reflecting theatre's growing self-confidence in a marketplace economy.

The book begins by exploring three 'manifestations' of the prologue: prologues as script, as presented by an actor, as performance. This leads into a discussion on how the prologue evolved as a liminal site to bridge the gap between the world of the play and playing in the world. Its function is compared to that of an usher (whose job was to prepare a way, to act as a go-between), and is analyzed, anthropologically, as a rite of passage. In terms of the authority and authorizing role it could historically claim, a number of pre-Shakespearean examples are discussed. Prologues by Marlowe, Peele, Lyly, and Shakespeare are explored to demonstrate how the form developed in response to all the increasingly diverse and

contradictory demands made of it – enabling it to assert a new-found authority in its own power, and in the power of popular, commercial, theatre.

Though a joint endeavour overall, Bruster takes responsibility for the first three chapters, and Weimann the final four – a division marked by a significant linguistic gear-change: Bruster has a clarity and economy lacking in Weimann's lengthier, more complex, and denser style. While aimed principally at the academic researcher, the book offers stimulating insights into early modern theatre practice which deserve further exploration by those staging Shakespeare today. Emerging from this study is a reminder of theatre's contractual nature; and those involved in producing our theatrical present might be encouraged to explore more fully the contractual nature of their endeavours, discovering afresh the points of contact between stage and auditorium, the play and the world.

simon benson

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Robert Leach
Makers of Modern Theatre: an Introduction
London: Routledge, 2004. 216 p. £12.99.
ISBN: 0-415-31241-8.

One of the great cultural paradoxes of the past hundred years, which have been characterized by an avalanche of mass and electronic media industries (film, television, and digital), is that this era also witnessed an explosion of creativity in the theatre, a medium which is both old-fashioned and distinctly 'non-mass'. No other century can boast so many innovative playwrights, directors, and actors. And, despite the abundance of possible candidates, there is also very little doubt as to who the top makers of modern theatre are – few would dispute Robert Leach's choice of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Brecht, and Artaud.

Makers of Modern Theatre, Leach's introduction to the big four, is aimed at students, and gives an up-to-date summary of the men and their work in the context of their often troubled times. After a brief definition of modernism, Leach argues that 'the significance of these four men is to be found in their theatre practice. The starting point is to be found in their understanding that the theatre is always symbolic. It assumes that everything that happens on stage *stands for* something else.'

After admitting the inadequacy of such gnomic statements as Peter Brook's about how theatre for Artaud is fire and for Brecht clear vision, Leach proceeds with a chapter on each of his four subjects. Neat biographies include details of their theatre philosophies and how they put these into practice. There is good information about the problems of devising a theory from writings that have been either poorly translated, in Stanislavsky's case, or are so varied as to defy easy summary, in Meyerhold's. Finally, Leach provides a useful if much too brief note on the main legacy of these modernists, and an account of current critical perspectives on their work. The book ends idiosyncratically with 'some reflections and resonances' on each of the practitioners, inspired by Mark Rozovsky's *Triumphal Square*, which premiered in Moscow in 1991.

Although the material in the individual chapters is clearly presented and responsive to the latest research, the sections which offer critical perspectives on modernism's legacies sometimes include glib statements. Leach's understanding of global politics is undermined at one point by his ready acceptance of the Stalinist explanation of the post-war Berlin workers' uprising as due to their being infected by the Nazism of yesteryear. Such disagreements aside, this is a sound and useful introduction to the work of four key practitioners working in the modernist period.

aleks sierz

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Ric Knowles
Reading the Material Theatre
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
236 p.
£40.00 (hbk); £16.99 (pbk).
ISBN: 0-521-54331-7 (hbk); 0-521-64416-X (pbk).

In *Reading the Material Theatre* Ric Knowles offers and illustrates a material (as opposed to textual) method of performance analysis. This explains theatrical meaning in terms of the negotiation of three mutually constitutive elements: the coding of the performance event itself, its conditions of production,. and its conditions of reception.

Knowles structures the book in two parts; the first aims to develop a theoretical approach he calls 'materialist semiotics'; and the second seeks to apply this to specific case studies. The theoretical approach is one which combines cultural materialism and theatre semiotics and, while Knowles seems to imply that he is offering the reader something quite new, it is a way of discussing performance that many of us have been using in Britain for some time. As such, the book may be of use as supporting material in education contexts that place an emphasis on the interrelationship between theory and practice as well as the political implications of meaning-making in performance.

The long and rather unwieldy second chapter provides an excellent overview of the contextual conditions of production in western theatre practice (including issues of training, marketing, company structuring, funding, space, and location) and should in itself be highly recommended to undergraduate students at an early level of study.

However, very few explicit connections are made in it to the ideas of the theorists outlined previously; and nor are Gramsci, Sinfield, Dollimore, Barthes, Hall, *et al*. used in any purposeful way to inform or analyze the work of the Tarragon Theatre, the Wooster Group, the English Shakespeare Company, or international festivals (such as Stratford and Edinburgh) in the discussions that follow in the volume's second part.

But these case studies are lively, and feature informed engagements with specific theatrical events. Taken together, they lead to a clear – although possibly rather banal – conclusion: that theatre histories and performance analyses must take into account site-specific particularities in the moments of both production and reception.

roberta mock

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David Wiles
A Short History of Western Performance Space
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
316 p.
£16.95 (pbk); £45 (hbk).
ISBN: 0-521-01274-0 (pbk); 0-521-81324-7 (hbk).

Although he only uses the phrase when discussing the spatial organization of early Christian performance, David Wiles is arguably concerned with the 'symbolic topography' of performance space throughout *A Short History of Western Performance Space*. He contends that 'performance is first and foremost a relationship in space', and his analysis would not be out of place in the phenomenological and symbolic interactionist traditions of human geography: he consistently returns to the role of performance in spatially constituting social subjects, and spatially producing the symbolic orders that allow those subjects to make sense of their worlds.

Taking his cue from Richard Southern's *Seven Ages of the Theatre*, Wiles divides his analysis into seven main chapters: 'Sacred Space', 'Processional Space', 'Public Space', 'Sympotic Space', 'The Cosmic Circle', 'The Cave', and 'The Empty Space'. Wiles sees these headings as recurring spatial preoccupations of western performance, and uses them to establish connections between case studies that range from the City Dionysia of ancient Athens to the National Theatre of contemporary London.

This is an exceptionally learned book that displays the author's wide-ranging knowledge of western theatre history, and any reader interested in European theatre's spatio-temporality will benefit greatly from Wiles's discussion. His research is detailed and deep, and he is particularly sensitive to the ways in which the social efficacy of performance has often depended on the interplay between actual and ideational spaces. Wiles resists taking romantic or ahistorical conceptions of performance space (like Peter Brook's 'empty space') at face value; but, at the same time, he understands that such idealism often inflects the ways that participants in performance events negotiate the spaces they occupy, with material effects. Wiles's definition of what constitutes a performance space is also commendably broad—his grounding in ancient and medieval performance practices leads him to embrace more diverse modes of spatiality than we commonly find in contemporary theatre. Whether readers are ultimately persuaded by Wiles's analysis is likely to depend on their responses to the book's rhetorical structure and its historical method.

If Wiles's conception of performance is expansive, other elements of the book are more strictly bracketed. Most chapters invoke a range of case studies from ancient to contemporary, but (the final chapter, which focuses on the twentieth century, aside) pre- and relatively early modern performance spaces tend to predominate. Consequently, Wiles's consideration of modern performance spaces can seem supplementary, and his analysis of them rarely convinces to the same extent as does his analysis of, say, ancient Greek performance spaces. Furthermore, while the book is ostensibly a history of 'western' performance space, it almost exclusively defines this geography as European. Western practices that have migrated elsewhere due to imperialism (such as to the Americas or Antipodes) are largely elided.

Finally, Wiles's heuristic method will please some readers and frustrate others. He alights on an impressive, transhistorical variety of spatial practices, but these are not always marshalled into the service of a larger, or more systematic, argument. Like Southern before him, Wiles's historiography emphasizes, as he puts it, 'creative continuity rather than rupture', and performance space becomes another axis through which to write a consensual theatre history. One may agree or disagree with this approach, but there is no doubting the wealth of historical insight he provides into performance spaces along the way.

michael mckinnie

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Alexandra Carter, ed.
Rethinking Dance History: a Reader
London: Routledge, 2004. 196 p. £16.99.
ISBN: 0-415-28747-2.

This is a very welcome collection of essays, which together contribute to the recent definition of dance history as a broad field with appeal to many beyond the dance community. Alexandra Carter has chosen her contributors well and at least five out of the fourteen have excelled.

Dance history writing has developed and changed since Janet Adshead (now Lansdale) and

June Layson edited the pioneering *Dance History: a Methodology for Study* in 1983. The scope and range of dance history has broadened, reflecting changes in methodology and subjects in the other performance disciplines too. Thus Carter's reader includes essays on Indian Odissi, British, and North American modern dance, recent European dance, and classical ballet; but the approaches embodied therein offer perspectives that lend more interest to the subject.

Two introductory essays by the editor establish the tone and approach of the volume: a chapter headed 'Destabilizing the Discipline' indicates clearly what is to come in most of the contributions. Referencing Keith Jenkins's approach – in *Rethinking History* (1991) – signposts the approach that Carter and her colleagues will take: 'postmodern' for want of a better term. Whilst this recent approach is well accounted for, earlier ones are not. Thus Adshead and Layson's text, which remains key to the conduct of dance historical research (albeit of a traditional kind) is not referred to at all.

So what is history according to this collection? Marion Kant offers a methodological challenge in 'Don't Mention the Nazis', questioning an orthodoxy perpetuated by some who would prefer to ignore the evidence from recently discovered documents in German archives. Her approach, asking the reader to consider the way they deal with actual source material, is one that undergraduate theatre history students would find valuable too. Ananya Chatterjee reconsiders and challenges the conventional histories of dance in India, asking the reader to reconsider ideas of classicism and tradition. The western classical tradition is subjected to scrutiny, not least in Chris Roebuck's account of Louis XIV as a male dancer, 'Queering the King'. Contributions to the theoretical literature include Linda Tomko's excellent adaptation of Foucault's ideas on causation and agency to early twentieth-century modern dance. André Lepecki brings a sympathetic, indeed enthusiastic American perspective to recent continental European dance.

Ramsay Burt has written extensively about early modern dance in Europe and America, not least in *Alien Bodies* (1998). In Carter's collection he draws together many strands of his historical researches by focusing on Katherine Dunham in Paris in the late 1940s and 1950s. 'Katherine Dunham's Floating Island of Negritude' is a model essay, successfully locating Dunham as a dancer and intellectual in a milieu that, because of its difference, allowed her and her dance to flourish. The historical scholarship is exemplary. Burt draws on an extensive interview with Miss Dunham and a close reading of her career and writings. From this he draws a vivid picture of dance, race, and attitudes to dance that goes far beyond the Paris of the 1940s; he refers, for instance, to Maya Deren and film and to the arrival of SS *Empire Windrush* in England in 1948. The essay's title derives from Dunham's own description of her company as a 'floating island of negritude' and Burt gives Dunham the space to examine just what the term means.

This is a fine collection and a good addition to the literature available for undergraduate students. It includes many pieces that do for dance what Jenkins did for history. At its best, it engages with real history at a level that shows how far the discipline has developed.

michael huxley

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