

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Bella Merlin

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William Tydeman, ed.

The Medieval European Stage 500–1550

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

720 p. £90.

ISBN: 0-521-24609-1.

Eureka! This is a much needed sourcebook of primary evidence of European medieval drama, now translated into English. It will be greatly welcomed by postgraduates and researchers, and should be an excellent teaching tool for undergraduate classes. The collection builds upon the work undertaken by the REED project and Meredith and Tailby's *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages*.

The aims of the book are formidable: a historical span covering the inheritance of the classical tradition to the Renaissance, and a geographical coverage of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Low Countries, and the Iberian Peninsula. In the preface, the editor reveals that this reference work was originally to have spanned two introductory commentaries; it is often difficult to ascertain the context of the extract.

There are some very welcome decisions: the inclusion of folk drama signals the importance of such cultural studies to recent academic research (this could go further to include other performative acts such as cross-dressing, public punishment, etc.). In addition, the texts are clearly laid out and easy to find, and the indexing is comprehensive. There are, however, inconsistencies in terms of how the sources are presented within each section. Some of these are inevitable, because the documents are so wide-ranging, but it might have been possible to achieve a more homogenous style. Despite these minor quibbles, this is an invaluable sourcebook, and extremely worthy of publication.

KATIE NORMINGTON

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X02220096

Andy Lavender

Hamlet in Pieces

London: Nick Hern Books, 2001. £14.00.

ISBN: 1-85459-618-7.

This book is a response to a remarkable theatrical coincidence: during the mid-1990s, the three leading lights of the institutionalized avant-garde (Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage, and Peter Brook)

all staged their own characteristically provocative and uniquely idiosyncratic versions of Shakespeare's most performed play. An observer of the rehearsal processes of Lepage's *Elsinore* and backstage reporter at Wilson's *Hamlet: a Monologue*, Lavender provides a valuable record of the making of these events.

His accounts of these and Brook's *Qui Est Lâ* in performance are exemplary in their thoughtfulness and eye for telling detail. Lavender is an engagingly enthusiastic but judicious witness; the work emerges from his assessment as a potent antidote to the conservatism of the Shakespearean theatrical mainstream; he concludes with some rueful reflections upon the trade in postmodern 'art-entertainment' within the global theatrical market. Set alongside that other great *fin-de-siècle* venture in Shakespearean theatrical postmodernism, the experiment in fabricated nostalgia that is the *Bankside Globe*, the technology-heavy interventions of Lepage and Wilson are emphatically auteurist, bardolatrous, and anti-essentialist. As such, they point to a healthier and livelier future for Shakespeare than any that the cult of authenticity might hope to realize.

The only uncertain element is an overlong first chapter, which introduces the play and offers a potted summary of its textual and performance history, although it usefully defines a context for Wilson's and Lepage's treatments by positioning them alongside Edward Gordon Craig's vision of the play as a Hamlet-centric monodrama.

ROBERT SHAUGHNESSY

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X02230092

Michael Taylor

Shakespeare Criticism in the Twentieth Century

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 278 p.

£30.00 (hbk), £12.99 (pbk).

ISBN: 0-19-871185-9 (hbk), 0-19-871184-0 (pbk).

It has been estimated that roughly six billion words of criticism have been written in response to the plays and poems of Shakespeare. In this admirable book, Michael Taylor surveys responses to Shakespeare in the last century, a period during which the Shakespeare critical industry reached such a level of hyper-productivity that we now need other people to read for us in order to keep up with scholarly advances. Fortunately for us, Taylor is an authoritative, witty, and lively guide to this dense, treacherous terrain. He

breaks Shakespearean criticism down into five thematic clusters: Character, Formalism, Performance, History, and 'Shakespeare from the Margins' (under which umbrella he shelters feminism, ethnicity, and Christianity).

Balancing the Oxford Shakespeare Topics series remit of accessibility and depth, the book will be invaluable to students and teachers. Perhaps of most interest to readers of this journal is the fourth chapter, 'Shakespeare in the Theatre (and the Theatre in Shakespeare)': here, Taylor traces twentieth-century developments in our understanding of the materiality and sociology of the early modern stage, as well as surveying the ever-increasing output on production history, directors, and actors. In a sense, the narrative of the whole book is familiar: a movement from positivism to postmodern scepticism; from bardolatry to bardicide. However, Taylor also proposes less obvious circularities of thought that link the beginning and end of the century.

Throughout, he is constantly aware of how critical constructions of Shakespeare are 'labile, vulnerable, and culture specific', of how today's cranks foster tomorrow's orthodoxies. There are some minor gaffes and shortcomings: one producer is bifurcated in the phrase 'the opulent scenography of Beerbohm and Tree', and the three illustrations are not especially illustrative. But on the whole, this is an excellent book, balanced and entertaining, and saturated with Shakespearean quotation – as if to remind us of the course and inspiration for so much throwing about of critical brains.

PAUL PRESCOTT

DOI: 50266464X02240099

Sarah Werner

Shakespeare and Feminist Performance: Ideology on Stage

London; New York: Routledge, 2001. 132 p. £16.99. ISBN: 0-415-22730-5.

In this short study, Werner attempts both an exploration of the sexism which resides within the theatre industry and an examination of the ways forward for 'dissident [here, feminist] readings of the plays'. She is much more successful in the former than the latter, giving a sprightly and incisive history of the RSC Women's Group (set up in 1985), which aimed to challenge the company's masculinist bias, noting that women 'had been almost completely absent from directorial posts since the formation of the RSC in 1961'. The account details the reluctance of Terry Hands to respond positively to the Group's aspirations and charts its eventual collapse, due as much to 'internal divisions' as a triumph of patriarchy.

There is a revealing analysis of the 'fetishized notion of primitivism' and the naturalizing assum-

ption of psychological authenticity in the voice work of Cicely Berry and Patsy Rodenburg, which attempts to submerge interpretations 'grounded in an historicist or materialist framework'. In an exposition of Gale Edwards's 1995 RSC *Taming of the Shrew* and the reviews it prompted, Werner interrogates the supremacy of the notion of fixed or consistent characterization, which, she alleges, militates against 'a political engagement with the play'.

Too frequently, however, Werner indulges in the kind of theatrical vagueness which she is attacking: 'We discover that we are Shakespeare', and 'The role of the personal is crucial when working with performed Shakespeare'. Her praise for Cary Mazer's 1999 *Verona*, in which 'water bottles represented letters, and drinking from the bottle meant reading', forces one to question her outright rejection of the RSC's 'transparent theatrical language' – patriarchal it may be, but it is, at least, comprehensible.

PETER J. SMITH

DOI: 50266464X02250095

Cecil Davies

The Adelphi Players

London: Routledge Harwood, 2002. 72 p. ISBN: 0-415-27026-x.

Peter Billingham

Theatres of Conscience, 1939–53

London: Routledge Harwood, 2002. 163 p. ISBN: 0-415-27028-6.

The exciting events which followed 1956 have tended to create an illusion that everything that went before it in the British theatre was of little value. These two small books add to other recent publications which have drawn attention to the need to undertake some re-evaluation of the preceding period, to sort the wheat from the chaff.

Both these books examine companies which toured Britain in the period from 1939 to 1953. Cecil Davies restricts his examination to one single but important company. Peter Billingham has undertaken to edit and link the work of the Adelphi Players to other companies, including the Pilgrim Players, Compass, and Century Theatre. Put together, the two books greatly extend what has previously been available on these companies. In eschewing anecdotal evidence, Billingham tells us much of the shared idealism of the companies, but gives little communication of the experience of living and working in this form. Pamela Deller in *Plays without Theatres*, which is largely based on anecdotal evidence, manages to communicate a great deal of the excitement of working in these small groups at this time.

Read together, these books provide the reader with an entrance into something of the energy

and tensions of being in such pioneer groups. Where Billingham scores heavily is in locating the work of Theatre of Conscience in two contexts. The first is in pointing to the historical survival embodied in the companies. Not only do they represent the age-old traditions of the strolling players (moving from place to place, performing in whichever buildings offered themselves to whoever was willing to see their offerings), but they are also shown to be keeping alive the traditions of Poel, Granville Barker, and others who worked to simplify the production and the accessibility of Shakespeare.

The second context arises because Billingham is scrupulously concerned to set the existence of the companies within the theatrical and social history of their time. Sometimes this reveals false starts and failed bets, such as the commitment to religious poetry, however successful Eliot's trend-setting might have been. At other times, Billingham is able to point to nascent reforms and developments which came to fruition in later years. Among the forerunners of later theatre features which can be traced to the work of these companies would be the members' sharing a sense of responsibility towards the social needs of their audience. This looks forward to the development of community and political theatres, even when the shared sense of responsibility incorporates a wide range of political views from anarchist and Marxist through to liberal religious theology and even more orthodox forms of religion.

In fact, the one factor that seems to unite the work of these companies is anti-militarism. Within the Adelphi, one can find the seeds of what was later to reappear as theatre-in-education. At the same time, the existence and work of these companies contributed materially to the re-establishment of the regional repertory network. There is much in these two books to help redress the views that prior to *Look Back in Anger* there existed a theatrical desert. There is also much to inspire admiration and respect for those people, who – working with minimal resources – helped to sustain and entertain those living in the appalling conditions of the London Blitz or enduring the other privations of the Second World War.

CLIVE BARKER

DOI: 50266464X02260091

Paul Allen

Alan Ayckbourn: Grinning at the Edge

London: Methuen, 2001. 337 p. £19.99.

ISBN: 0-413-73120-0.

There are some interesting contradictions in Alan Ayckbourn's career: a popular playwright who relentlessly experiments with form; a writer with an extraordinary talent for efficient comedy, whose

main subjects are unhappiness and failing relationships; and a millionaire, whose theatrical base (Scarborough's Stephen Joseph Theatre) regularly experiences financial difficulties. Paul Allen's biography draws out such contradictions in an impressively comprehensive account of Alan Ayckbourn's career, written in a lively prose style which betrays Allen's long career as a presenter of radio arts programmes.

All of Ayckbourn's plays are included, from such obscure early works as *The Square Cat* and *Standing Room Only*, to the recent success of *House and Garden* at the Royal National Theatre. Although the book is aimed at a general readership, each play is covered with a thoroughness that will make it useful to academics. As well as synopses, there are details of the original productions and West End transfers, which are often illustrated with quotations from cast members. There is also some interesting material on Ayckbourn's early career as an actor with Donald Wolfit's company, his relationship with Stephen Joseph, and the important differences between the Scarborough and London productions.

Less useful are Allen's attempts at analysis of the plays, most of which involve rather clumsy attempts to find the roots of characters and plot lines in Ayckbourn's life history. This is rather odd, as beyond the first three chapters (covering his early life) biographical details are scant and tend to be rather hurriedly inserted between accounts of the plays. Allen is close enough to Ayckbourn to refer to him habitually as 'Alan', but the emphasis is on the work and not the man, who at the end of this biography still remains a rather shadowy figure.

OLIVER DOUBLE

DOI: 50266464X02270098

Alan Ayckbourn

The Crafty Art of Playmaking

London: Faber and Faber, 2002. 173 p. £14.99.

ISBN: 0-571-21509-2.

When someone as well known as Sir Alan Ayckbourn writes a book about the art of theatre-making – based on his forty years' experience of writing more than sixty plays and directing more than two hundred – the reader's reaction is likely to be based on what he or she thinks about his work. Is he a trivial boulevardier, peddling light comedies to the suburban masses, or is he a master of darkness, an experimenter with form, and an explorer of a particularly English form of angst?

Unsurprisingly, this slim volume is no theory-heavy treatise, but a light, entertaining, and practical guide to the rough and tumble of writing and directing. As Ayckbourn says in the introduction, both activities 'rely ultimately on a sponta-

neity and instinct that defies theory'. At the same time, his take on these activities is spiced with a dash of provocation: literal facts 'often get in the way of a good story', and the only essential truth in theatre is 'truth of character'. So, 'by all means believe some of this book, but never all of it'.

Divided into two parts, the first about writing and the second about directing, the book is notably sympathetic to actors, but rather waspish about other theatre technicians, such as designers. In the opening pages, Ayckbourn shares his sound if simple ideas about comedy and tragedy, gives some valuable advice about construction, time, and location, before exploring dialogue by using several examples from his own plays. Perhaps inevitably, the book tells you more about Ayckbourn's own style of writing, with its subtext and experiments with genres such as farce, than about new writing in general. You look in vain for advice about individual tone of voice, or exercises to improve specificity of setting, never mind about writing a large political drama or even a history play.

As a collection of anecdotes, the book takes off in the second half, with Ayckbourn's amusing accounts of directing a play in the teeth of vain authors, sulky stars, and pushy producers, during the typical roller-coaster ride of rehearsals. Beginners will find it a simple introduction – humane, modest, and occasionally inspiring. For old hands, it will be familiar enough to raise the odd chortle or weary smile. His detractors, however, will be infuriated by his facile superficiality and will doubtless see this book as further evidence that English theatre is in terminal decline.

ALEKS SIERZ

DOI: 50266464x02280094

David Bradby

Beckett: Waiting for Godot

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

247 p. £14.95.

ISBN: 0-521-59510-X.

Although the 1956 opening of *Look Back in Anger* is central to the history of new wave British drama, the myths that surround it have tended to overshadow other, arguably more important, cultural turning points. With its two different debuts in Paris (1953) and London (1955), *Waiting for Godot* is one of these, a play that not only introduced a new dramatic voice, but also challenged conventional theatrical forms.

In this lucid and stimulating book, David Bradby explores this endlessly fascinating play. He starts with an account, which will be useful mostly to students, of the role of the director in modern theatre, before introducing Beckett in a short biographical chapter. After a clear analysis

of the play, Bradby gives accounts of the first production at the Théâtre de Babylone, Peter Hall's Arts Theatre version, and early productions in the United States by Alan Schneider and Herbert Blau. Another chapter examines Beckett's own 1975 production at the Schiller Theatre, and then the book broadens out, covering European and Japanese versions, plus political interpretations from Palestine to South Africa.

The historic visit of Blau's production to San Quentin prison, an account of which opens the late Martin Esslin's classic *Theatre of the Absurd*, is illuminated by a letter written by Rick Cluchey, a 'lifer' who became a theatre professional. Bradby rises to the challenge of writing about one of drama's most iconic plays by situating Beckett's seasoned experimentalism firmly in its French context, and showing how Dada, Surrealism, and the avant-garde all influenced Beckett's vision.

His description of Hall's callow hit-and-miss production is wonderfully detailed, and he brings out the contrast between European traditions and more makeshift British attitudes. Using sources such as the 1961 radio interview with the original British cast, he reveals how the origins of the Pinter pause can be found in Hall's *Godot*, and how the actors struggled to control the 'sulky dog', the vociferous 1950s audience.

Not everyone will agree with Bradby's assertion that '*Waiting for Godot* carries its own production within it, waiting to be activated', especially since he is unsympathetic to many forms of experiment, such as the use of all-female casts. Still, the book covers a lot of ground, focusing on productions by Ninagawa, Bondy, and Susan Sontag. Bradby also savours the interpretations of actors such as Bert Lahr, Barry McGovern, and Ben Kingsley. In general, his style is direct, detailed, and authoritative, especially good at conveying what productions looked like on stage and how their meanings were understood. With its numerous asides about cultural politics, the book is warmly recommended for all those with an interest in post-war theatre.

ALEKS SIERZ

DOI: 50266464x02290090

Kelly McEvenue

The Alexander Technique for Actors

London: Methuen, 2001. 148 p. £12.99.

ISBN: 0-413-71010-6.

McEvenue is an Alexander teacher working with actors at the Stratford Festival Theatre, Canada. The book (with a foreword by Patsy Rodenburg), is intended for anyone interested in actor training. It is written in an anecdotal, entertaining way, including accounts by actors of their experiences. Part I offers an introduction, a summary of the

Alexander Technique's principles, basic anatomy, and a section on 'warming up'. Part II purports to describe the application of the Alexander Technique to voice work, characterization, and the various demands placed on an actor, such as wearing period costume or masks.

There is a disclaimer: the book is 'not a purist study of the Alexander Technique'. However, my reading of it leaves me asking where the Technique is in it at all. The section on 'principles' leaves out the crucial concept of 'use' (the way we put ourselves into activity, which always involves body and brain working as one) and 'misuse' (Alexander's contention that, by and large, people habitually use either too much or an inappropriate effort in activity). This makes balance and movement more difficult, and can result in all sorts of problems. McEvenue's definitions are a distortion of the principles of the Technique as defined in F. M. Alexander's four books. For example, she continually writes as though mind and body are separate entities, and discusses 'habit' as though habit itself is a problem rather than habitual misuse. It seems that all that the Alexander Technique has to offer the actor is that when s/he becomes aware of a movement or speech habit (with the help of an Alexander teacher), s/he pauses and carries out the activity non-habitually.

The sections on exercises (e.g., partner work and spatial awareness) are standard drama exercises, where the actor is encouraged to be more conscious of what s/he is doing and thereby to check faults. But surely any good drama teacher or director can get actors to do this? The actor needs maximum freedom and versatility in movement, in vocalization, and in the expression of emotion. Actor trainers such as Stanislavsky dedicated their lives to finding methods to make this possible. McEvenue's book ignores the crucial questions that he and others have asked about how truth can be achieved in performance, or how depth can be sustained in a role played time and time again. The reader can gain little insight from this book into the real and exciting ways that the Alexander Technique, if properly taught, can enable the performer to achieve her/his full potential as Stanislavsky and others envisaged.

ROSE WHYMAN

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Jacques Lecoq, with Jean-Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Claude Lallias, trans. David Bradby

The Moving Body (Le Corps poétique): Teaching Creative Theatre

London: Methuen, 2000. 169 p.

ISBN: 0-413-7719-4.

This is the long-awaited translation into English of Lecoq's *Le Corps poétique*, originally published in French in 1997. The bulk of the book is devoted to Lecoq's pedagogical approach, developed over forty years of teaching in his famous school in Paris. It maps a progressional route through improvisation and movement techniques taught in the first year, to second-year explorations of what Lecoq terms 'dramatic territories': melodrama, commedia, bouffons, tragedy, and clowns.

The name of Lecoq – an inspired teacher whose primary aim was to inspire creative autonomy in his students – has become synonymous with physical theatre, perhaps because his school has spawned companies who have been instrumental in changing the direction of theatre away from text-based interpretations to physically-orientated performance. Prominent alumni include Steven Berkoff, Theatre de Complicité, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Julie Taymor. At the heart of Lecoq's teaching lies the principle that 'everything moves': and here are full explanations of his movement analysis and techniques, exercises developed during his life-long observation and experiments into the human body in space. These, together with his remarks on theatre history, provide an invaluable resource for teachers, scholars, and students.

The book contains a useful glossary of key terms used by Lecoq, which are asterisked in the text. Rather than being an instruction manual, *The Moving Body* offers some fascinating insights into Lecoq's philosophy of life and the artist in society. His call for a new theatre recalls Copeau's, and his training for revitalizing theatre reminds us that we are inexorably connected to the real work where movement is life. For Lecoq aficionados, this is a key text; for the curious and those unfamiliar with his work, whatever discipline they practise, it is an essential insight into the mind of one of the most influential teacher-practitioners of the twentieth century.

DYMPHNA CALLERY