

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

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Jon Venn

Madness in Contemporary British Theatre: Resistances and Representations

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 222 p. £47.99.
ISBN: 978-3-030-79782-9.

Madness, or 'mental illness', is a prominent theme in British cultural and political discourses today. Since the UK government declared a mental health 'crisis' in the early 2010s, we have seen a steady increase in reporting, commentary, and literature on madness and mental health. Beyond mainstream reporting, madness is also increasingly claimed as a political identity category by some service-user and psychiatric-survivor groups. In British theatre, the past decade has seen a renewed interest in performance explicitly thematizing pathologized mental distress and offering commentary on the adequacy of mental health services.

Venn's book offers a welcome survey of some of the most interesting representations of mental distress on the British stage in the last thirty years as it 'asks in what manner . . . theatre [can] act as a site of resistance against hegemonic understandings of madness'. Rather than offering a comprehensive history of madness on the twenty-first-century stage, Venn chooses examples that offer particular critiques of 'hegemonic understandings' of madness. The works are varied, and include such well-known plays as Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange*, Lucy Prebble's *The Effect*, and Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*. Alongside these are successful but perhaps less widely known performance works from individual artists Bryony Kimmins and James Leadbetter aka the vacuum cleaner, and companies such as Analogue and Ridelulusmus.

Dividing the book into five chapters, Venn positions these works as resistances to 'hegemonic understandings' of psychiatric institutions, suicide, hallucination, and autobiography. Of particular interest is Venn's reconsideration of psychiatric power in the context of decentralized, community care service delivery in Chapter 2. Theatre has a long-standing relationship with psychiatry. Nineteenth-century naturalism was shaped by the conceptualization of hysteria as an observable, performative malady located either in an asylum or a bourgeois home. The legacies of naturalism and the psychiatric asylum persist in theatrical representations of madness today.

Introducing the idea of a 'contemporary asylum' that exists beyond a single building, Venn demonstrates how theatre can reveal the power structures which remain inherent to psychiatry in the community care era. The 'contemporary asylum' exerts 'capillaries of power' which shape and limit the experiences of mental health service users. Theatre offers a practical critique of psychiatric power by revealing its structures from within, 'situating . . . the mad body as the object of competing power structures'. The dynamics of decentralized mental health service provision have received little attention within theatre studies and the medical humanities. Venn's analysis of the contemporary asylum is an important step in addressing this lack.

The other chapters offer thoughtful readings of plays and performance works which engage in themes of hallucination, suicide, depression, and breakdown. These chapters are more explicitly concerned with the ethics of representing madness. Pluralistic and fragmented forms of representation are favoured over attempts to fully represent an experience of madness. The book consistently warns of the dangers of essentialism and universalism, and concludes that the most ethical approach to staging madness is through an encounter with alterity which can be achieved through an ethics of non-representation. Due to its commitment to pluralism, the book lacks a sustained theory of representation throughout. At times, it suggests that direct representation of mental distress is inherently problematic without fully articulating what the problem with representation is. Venn asserts, for example, that debbie tucker green's *nut* exoticizes hallucination simply because the play makes clear which figures on stage are real, and which are figment. This is a bold claim, which would be better justified in the context of a rigorous theory of representation.

This book encompasses a wide range of performances, which will be useful to any reader approaching the themes of madness in contemporary theatre for the first time, and the readings are generous with scholarly attention to performance history and contexts. The inclusion of plays from the 1990s raises the question of when 'the contemporary' begins, and Venn helpfully locates the current mental health culture in a continuity with reforms introduced at the start of the community care era. There is more to be said about how these plays have influenced each other over the past thirty years, with the older plays providing a performance context for more recent performances.

Venn's book is the beginning of an overdue conversation in theatre and performance studies about the nature of madness and the stage, and opens up fruitful avenues for further investigation.

LEAH SIDI

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Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris, eds.

Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Plays by Women: The Early Twenty-First Century

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021.

316 p. \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-472-05435-0.

Capturing the hugely diverse body of contemporary plays by women across the globe is an ambitious undertaking, even if the aim is to cover as short a period of time as the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Editors Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris have approached this task with care, curating a cohesive volume which builds on their collaborative work as part of the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) and their previous publication on *Contemporary Women Playwrights: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave, 2013). Taking a consciously intersectional approach, this edited collection covers a range of themes such as environmental risk, indigenizing colonial narratives, race and protest, the mythic migrant, gender, and class-based violence, to mention a few. The geographical scope of the essays is wide-ranging as they bring together playwrights from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Italy, New Zealand (Aotearoa), South Africa, the US, and the UK. Although the majority of plays discussed refer to the UK and North America, the playwrights' cultural identities reveal the strong cultural heterogeneity of these particular contexts which reflects the volume's intersectional ethos.

The collection is comprised of twenty-eight short essays which are divided into seven sections: replaying the canon, representing histories, staging lives, re-imagining family, navigating communities, articulating intersections, and new world order(s). This curatorial choice sharpens the book's focus on distinct topics and the aesthetic approaches the playwrights adopt. The thematic frames bring the works discussed into dialogue with past feminist theatre legacies from women's loaded relationship with the theatrical canon to their exploration of issues of contemporary global importance such as Elfriede Jelinek's irreverent *Am Königsweg* [*On the Royal Road: The Burgher King*] (2017), as analyzed by Sue-Ellen Case. Each essay examines one key play-text with the aim of providing 'a resource for students at all levels'. This is one of the main strengths of the collection, as it can be readily integrated in undergraduate and post-graduate literature and theatre studies curricula.

The essays offer original close readings of the plays in question which have not yet received much scholarly attention, with some due consideration of staging choices.

The editors advocate for the creation of 'a level playing field' and for this, Ferris's 'Afterwords' section pays a brief tribute to women in theatre, from María Irene Fornés and Elyse Dodgson to Sahar Speaks, in order to conclude with a call to arms for persisting to improve women's representation in the theatre industry. The book certainly achieves its aim of creating an appetite for discovering hidden and emergent theatrical voices; in doing so, it provides a wealth of material for amplifying the canon of plays encountered in theatre scholarship. Although the term 'women' mostly appears as an uncontested identity category, the collection creates a fertile ground for further discussions around decolonization, equality, and diversity in the theatre and in the classroom.

MARISSIA FRAGKOU

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Antonio Bibbò

Irish Literature in Italy in the Era of the World Wars

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 304 p. £89.99.

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Antonio Bibbò's meticulous analysis of the reception of Irish literature and theatre in early twentieth-century Italy is an outstanding example of some of the newest directions in Irish studies and comparative literatures. Recent changes in scholarship demonstrate a growing concern with the after-life of literary texts and translation history. Since the early 2000s, the transnational approach has become a prevalent alternative to the traditional study of national literatures. Irish theatre studies, for instance, display an increasing interest in the circulation abroad of Irish theatre to stress its global potential and the topicality of modern Irish plays for various European and non-European contexts. Bibbò's study also embodies a growing concern with explorations of cultural mediators, publishers, and the literary archives of translators.

To nuance our understanding of the national aspects of modern Irish literature, Bibbò guides the reader through the relationship between Irish and Italian literatures of the early years of the twentieth century until the end of the Second World War, illustrating how various observers employed or reversed colonial images of Ireland, appropriating those stereotypes to Italian political and aesthetic contexts. However, *Irish Literature in Italy* is not merely an exploration of the binary influences between the two countries. Through detailed archival research, Bibbò examines the perception and diverse (often highly political) use in