Book Reviews

Reviewed by Maria Doyle, University of West Georgia

To those familiar with the history of modern Irish theatre, ‘riotous performance’ most readily brings to mind audiences’ agitated responses to the Abbey Theatre productions of The Playboy of the Western World and The Plough and the Stars, disturbances that indicated a popular desire to claim the stage as an arena for the propagandistic construction of Irish identity while also indicating the centrality of the audience itself in the creation of theatrical meaning. Helen Burke’s new study is, in part, a response to the perception that the stage only became a forum for the interrogation of nationality with the founding of the Abbey, and as such, Riotous Performances: The Struggle for Hegemony in the Irish Theater, 1712–1784 opens up important territory in the understanding of the theatre’s contributions to the public construction of cultural identity.

Focusing primarily on the Theatre Royal in the years of Thomas Sheridan, Burke’s text offers an historically rich exploration of the relationship between playtext and surrounding culture, from the experiential value for a Dublin audience of local settings to the subversive potential of incorporated folk songs. Framing Sheridan’s own position in terms of postcolonial discourse, Burke points out that his efforts to ‘discipline’ (p. 7) the audience replicated the colonial project and its drive to impose ‘civilization’ on the barbarians of the periphery, a reading that transforms the Theatre Royal into a microcosm of much larger political processes. In fact, moving beyond the dramatic script is one of Burke’s primary goals, and the book thus examines the dynamic interactions of components of this politicized theatrical space, illuminating the efforts of various segments of the audience, from the viceroy to the occupants of the upper gallery, to exert, sometimes in subtle performances from the seats and sometimes in more overt disruptions of the stage itself, possession over the meaning generated by an evening’s entertainment. Events at the Theatre Royal are further astutely contextualized within a much larger frame of identity performance, an examination made particularly relevant by the ambiguous subject positions of the various ‘participants’ in the dramatic endeavour – Protestant patriots, Catholic gentry who converted to maintain some control over their holdings, even actors themselves – a complex play of social, political and economic frames that adds new depth to more traditional readings of documented riots at the
theatre. Chapters examining the role the stage played in promoting the wearing of locally manufactured clothing, the relationship between the tradition of ballad singing and the resurgence of the Catholic nation and counter-performances raised at smaller venues further reveal the Theatre Royal as a central node in a larger network of performative cultural practices. Overall, Burke’s study offers an important historical exploration that will prove illuminating both for those endeavouring to understand the politics of eighteenth-century Ireland or the history of the theatre as a cultural force.


Reviewed by Nelson O’Ceallaigh Ritschel, Massachusetts Maritime Academy

Revival is one of several recent texts that foregrounds the deeply political and collaborative nature of the Irish Dramatic Movement. P. J. Mathews reassesses the early years of the Irish revival by arguing that, rather than the product of ‘a number of highly motivated, quirky and egotistical creative geniuses’, the ‘revival was characterized by a rich and complex ferment of political and cultural thinking’ (p. 148). Focusing on events that provoked an abandonment of parliamentary politics in favour of self-help initiatives, Mathews explores in depth three self-help movements rising in 1899: the Gaelic League, the Co-operative Movement, and the Irish Literary Theatre. Revivals works to explain debates over certain plays – using W. B. Yeats’s The Countess Cathleen (1899) to J. M. Synge’s Shadow of the Glen (1903) as models.

Mathews traces not only how the self-help organizations intensified in 1899, but also how they contributed to the discussions within Irish nationalism – leading to the formations of Sinn Fein (1905), a political organization with cultural roots, and the Abbey Theatre (1904), an artistic endeavour ‘implicated in politics’ (p. 145). For example, he discusses how the Gaelic League’s defence of the nobility and purity of Irish language against Trinity dons who called it ‘immoral and worthless’ swelled their cultural/political popularity (p. 40). While Mathews over-emphasizes the language movement’s role in the push for morally pure images, he does set the stage for understanding future debates in Irish culture and theatre, as he remarks on the self-help movement’s shift to the conservative right, and the intermingling among organizations.

Revival reads important plays of the Irish Literary Theatre and Synge’s Shadow of the Glen, through the self-help movement’s response to their aesthetics and politics. While revealing J. M. Synge’s growing ‘weary of the Dublin intelligentsia’s relentless attempts to idealize the peasantry’ (p. 137), Mathews rejects the notions of Synge as a romantic idealist, and his interpretation of Synge’s first play shows the dramatist to be the social activist he was. But Matthews also demonstrates the power of the movement’s audience in making theatrical meaning. For example, The Shadow of the Glen’s premiere is revealed as the ‘breakdown’ between the self-help movements, demonstrating that debates over
certain revival plays were not between nationalists and artists, but were disputes among types of nationalists over how to re-configure Ireland.

*Revival* represents an important contribution, lacking only performative consideration, such as a tangible account of the unique acting style used in *Shadow of the Glen*.


Reviewed by John Stokes, King's College London

Given the wealth of material this might easily have become two ‘Companions’: one to the Victorian period and the other to the Edwardian. The decision to run the two together has meant that the emphasis is on the later nineteenth century, that famously ‘transitional phase’ – even if the term itself has become less common as historians resist the ‘progressive’ trajectory it implies. The mid nineteenth century deserves rather more attention than it gets.

At the same time the focus is not so much upon individual lives as upon the politics in and around theatrical production. (Indeed, the very notion of ‘biography’ has become problematized as Mary Jean Corbett’s essay on ‘Performing identities: actresses and autobiography’ here demonstrates.) These trends in theatre history will be immediately recognizable to other scholars but general readers, should they buy this book, may not appreciate that many of the contributors are offering condensed versions of the revisionism that has given them international renown. Tracy Davis stresses the importance of economic imperatives in determining cultural developments; David Mayer insists that melodrama is best understood not as an autonomous genre but as a series of responses to specific social situations; Michael Booth claims that the dividing lines between farce and other forms of comedy are to a large degree arbitrary; Jacky Bratton argues for the music-hall as a form of political intervention; Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow reprise the topographical surveys featured in their *Reflecting the Audience* (2001).

As an accompaniment to all this hard-headed critical materialism the downgrading of Dickens as a reliable witness continues. In an unexpectedly defensive introduction Nina Auerbach writes that Dickens felt ‘revulsion’ from the theatre, which is an odd thing to say about a man who ran his own amateur company and who wrote with such reverential wonder about favourite performers. The point is that Dickens discriminated according to his own lights, which may not be ours. There is a general unwillingness today to privilege one form of drama above another, even when that runs counter to the radical reformers of past times. It is also true, of course, that some Victorian conventions survived relatively untouched by ‘reform’: Joseph Donohue, for instance, is particularly good on how a ‘grand style’ of acting continued into the twentieth century.

Elsewhere the novelty lies less in theory than in detail: Sos Eltis writes on fallen women; Russell Jackson on stagecraft; Michael Pisani on music; Peter Raby on the
1890s; Susan Carlson and Kerry Powell on women playwrights. Cary Mazer’s account of the National Theatre movement, often starry-eyed and impracticable, can be usefully set against Davis’s show business model where the emphasis lies firmly on ‘business’. The East End of London (unlike either the provinces or Ireland) gets a chapter to itself.

All the contributions to this undeniably useful enterprise are sufficiently expert to ensure it a place on undergraduate and graduate reading-lists – but the problem of coverage does remain.


Reviewed by John Fletcher, University of Kent

Nearly four decades after the publication of Martin Esslin’s groundbreaking study *Theatre of the Absurd* comes this book by Michel Pruner. Its title invokes ‘theatres’ in the plural, but then so could Esslin’s have done – all the more so, in fact, because whereas *Theatre of the Absurd* was international in its coverage, Pruner’s book concentrates on drama written originally in French. There is, it is true, a short section on Harold Pinter, but Edward Albee comes in for only a passing reference here and there. One had hoped that this kind of ‘gallocentricity’ was a thing of the past in French critical writing. That Pruner’s book is aimed chiefly at university students is no excuse: comparative literature, under the guise of ‘lettres modernes’, is alive and well on French campuses. And as with so much French criticism, there is great play here with abstractions like ‘autodérision’ and ‘babelisme’ (sic), but little illuminating engagement with the dramatic texts themselves.

At the risk of being unfair – it is only a small part of the book – let us take the case of *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. Pruner is right to hail him as ‘the greatest contemporary British dramatist’, but then proceeds to misread the man’s finest play. ‘The tramp Davies’, he writes, ‘lies, invents and fantasizes before finally becoming what he claims to be’ (my translation) (p. 63). This, says Pruner, is an example of the way the power of words asserts itself in Pinter’s plays. But that is not what *The Caretaker* is about at all: it shows language breaking down under the threat of an explosion of hysteria set to blow the banalities of ordinary social discourse out of the water. Mick’s attack on Davies, ‘You’re a bloody imposter, mate!’ – is the culmination of a long bout of verbal shadow-boxing between the two. According to Pruner, what characterizes Pinter’s dialogue is ‘vapid chatter, contradictions, truisms, repetition and the spectacle of nobody paying attention to anyone else, interspersed with long silences’ (p. 63). That may be true of the lesser absurdists, but not of Pinter: the famous silences are not gratuitous, but rather moments of reckoning when words can no longer conceal the real thought or emotion behind platitudes of the ‘where’s-my-cheese-roll?’ sort. Similarly, there comes a point in this book when the impressive-sounding abstractions can no longer disguise a failure to get to grips with what these plays are actually about.
This account of the struggles and triumphs of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre contains a quite remarkable fact in its penultimate chapter. Having painstakingly taken us through the inevitable financial crises that have enveloped all British regional theatres of the past forty years, Claire Cochrane reveals that in September 1997 Arts Council England agreed a stabilization grant of £5,773,000 – the largest granted to any theatre – wiping out at a stroke the Rep’s accumulated deficit of £1,192,000. This quite staggering sum usefully reminded me of how significantly the prospect of regional theatres in England has changed over the last eight years. Lottery money, the Boyden Report, which recommended a huge cash injection for regional theatre and the Arts Council’s Theatre Review money – an extra £25 million granted – means that future theatre historians of the twenty-first century will have a much more positive story to report than those of the twentieth.

This book offers a great deal of similar contextual information which provides a useful background against which to read the history of this vital theatre – from the need to reposition itself following the death of the legendary Sir Barry Jackson to the desire to make its offerings more reflective of the multi-cultural communities it served in the 1990s. The author of an earlier book on the theatre, covering the years 1913 to 1929, Cochrane uses her intimate knowledge of the Rep to good effect. Twelve rigorously researched chapters make it quite clear how difficult it must be to be an artistic director answerable to Boards, self-serving local politicians, fractious casts and indifferent audiences, but she still manages to convey the excitement of successes and the absolute value of regional theatres steeped in their own communities.

This is a valuable book, not least because the reader may have very little knowledge of the theatre under the spotlight and yet still enjoy the history that Cochrane unfolds, and because it acts as a useful reminder that theatrical activity in the UK is so much more than just activity in the West End. Focused, informative and engaging, this is a very welcome addition to the historiography of post-war British theatre.

New Readings in American Drama: Something’s Happening Here, nineteen essays collected from the journal American Drama, is in some respects a difficult book for me to review, and not because it fails to achieve the goals Norma Jenckes announces in her introduction: first, an unwavering focus on the dramatic text, not its production; and, second, albeit less evenly realized, a demonstration of how ‘new theoretical approaches might illuminate’ it (p. xiv). Most contributors to New Readings in American Drama train their attention on plays, not on performances, and several mobilize theoretical insights in illuminating
and at times original ways. The most successful of this latter variety include Jennifer Gillan’s study of masculinity in John Guare’s *Six Degrees of Separation*, Granger Babcock’s treatment of Willy Loman as a Deleuzean desiring machine, and Marc Silverstein’s smart reading of George C. Wolfe’s institutional critique in *The Colored Museum*. My difficulties emerge from a more personal place. One of the more inventive theoretical essays, for instance, concerns Arthur Kopit’s representation in *Wings* of the often tortuous discourse of stroke victims; its author is James Hurt, my former dissertation director and friend. Yet another, on Clifford Odets’s *The Big Knife*, is contributed by Albert Wertheim, my colleague for nearly twenty years who recently lost a valiant struggle with cancer. Objectivity in such instances is impossible to summon.

That said, this book might be organized into several smaller sets of commentaries on varieties of twentieth-century American drama. In addition to Nancy L. Nester’s incisive reading of the madwoman in Susan Glaspell, Sophie Treadwell, and Wendy Kesselman’s *My Sister in This House*, for example, Marcia Noe makes a convincing case for the ideological significance of the unseen woman in Glaspell; and Penny Farfan submits Tina Howe to a tough-minded feminist examination. Similarly, a trio of essays by John Gruesser, Harry J. Elam, and Marc Silverstein contribute much to our understanding of African American works by Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, and George C. Wolfe. More orthodox critics will also be pleased that *a or the* core canon of American plays by Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee receive attention here, as do such playwrights from the early and middle decades as Odets, Elmer Rice and William Inge. So do Kopit, Jean-Claude van Itallie, David Mamet, Wallace Shawn and David Rabe from the contemporary stage. Notable among these chapters are David Radavich’s analysis of homosociality and arrested development in Rabe’s *Hurlyburly* and Philip J. Hanson’s contextualization of *The Emperor Jones* with the marine occupation of Haiti in 1915 (a pattern we seem doomed to repeat nearly a century later).

To be sure, even so substantial a volume as this cannot satisfy everyone, and perhaps it might have tried a little harder to expand the connotations of terms like ‘new’ or ‘American drama’. Some readers, attracted by the title, the subtitle (an allusion to the first line of Buffalo Springfield’s 1967 Vietnam protest song ‘For What It’s Worth’?), or the pictures of six diverse young people on the cover might expect at least some treatment of Asian American playwriting, Latino/a drama, or an increasingly vital gay and lesbian theatre. Such is not the case. Similarly, contemporary feminist plays receive scant attention. So, while *New Readings in American Drama* is an anthology students of the subject will want to read and add to their syllabi for courses in American drama, a vast corpus of ‘new’ plays and play writing remains unexamined.


Reviewed by Heather May, Indiana University

Andrew Sofer sets out to ‘argue that in the hands of skilled playwrights, the prop becomes a concrete vehicle for confronting dramatic convention and revitalizing theatrical practice’, in order to redress the lack of scholarship examining the ‘temporal and spatial dimensions
Sofer embarks on the tricky task of illuminating the ways in which props are read in performance by looking at five exemplary props from five respective periods (eucharistic wafers from the Medieval stage, the bloody handkerchief on the Elizabethan stage, the skull on the Jacobean stage, the fan on the Restoration stage, and the gun on the modern stage) and detailing the ways in which individual playwrights drew upon and challenged stage conventions through their incorporation of those props.

Sofer’s desire to study props within their likely production contexts is exciting to the theatre scholar. When he draws the reader’s attention to the power of props onstage, performing visualization that most readers omit, Sofer highlights the reason a study of props in performance is needed. Observations like ‘As Hamlet fleshes out Yorick’s attributes, he himself is exposed as a skeleton clothed in words. This irony only becomes apparent in performance because on paper the word dominates over the image’ (p. 99) bring the power of the prop in performance to the front of the reader’s mind.

The book’s physical emphasis, however, would be clearer if Sofer’s language was more direct and supplemented by illustrations. There are only five illustrations in the book, two of which are from contemporary productions at Boston College, and although Sofer relies on a reading of the painting The Ambassadors to illuminate the use of skulls onstage in the Jacobean period, no reproduction is provided. Furthermore, due to the lack of evidence regarding the handling of most props onstage, Sofer is forced to rely on textual examples much of the time, which results in an overvaluation of limited prop usages (such as the fan lesson in the unpopular Dissembled Wanton) as emblematic of their periods, as well as the sources of success or failure of individual productions.

This book takes an important first step in highlighting the role props play in establishing and challenging theatrical conventions. It is unfortunate that the image is frequently lost in the dense language of Sofer’s text, but his work will serve as a solid foundation for future production scholars.

Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama. By Martin Puchner.
Reviewed by Paige Reynolds, College of the Holy Cross

Martin Puchner insists that modernist ambivalence towards the theatre was one of the movement’s defining features, and he supports this claim with a theoretically sophisticated exploration of the relationship between theatricality and modernism.

Puchner asserts that modernism has defined itself in part through a resistance to theatrical values such as mimesis, a point made in his introduction through astute readings of attacks on the theatre lodged by Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Fried. He then assembles a provocative array of ‘anti-theatrical modernists’ to demonstrate exactly how this ambivalence towards theatre productively shaped their creative work. The book is divided into three sections. The first, ‘The Invention of Theatricality’, studies
Wagner and establishes his principles of insistent theatricality as the paradigm that anti-theatrical modernism resisted. The second, ‘The Modernist Closet Drama’, introduces adept readings of work from this neglected genre authored by Mallarmé, Joyce and Stein. According to Puchner, the modernist closet drama, which was intended to be read rather than staged, was a reaction against Wagner. Mallarmé’s and Stein’s modernist closet dramas, as well as Joyce’s chapter ‘Circe’ from *Ulysses*, allowed these artists to negotiate between avant-garde theatricalism and modernism’s privileging of the text. The third, ‘The Diegetic Theatre’, offers insightful readings of the drama of Yeats, Brecht and Beckett. He invokes Plato’s ‘diegesis’ to describe the endeavours of modernists to mediate or control the theatricality of the stage and performers, and he rereads Brecht’s *gestus* as a theatrical tool deployed, ironically, to resist the theatre.

Puchner makes use of criticism from various disciplines, without sacrificing close textual reading or ignoring *mise en scène*, and he successfully demonstrates how modernism’s attack on theatricality engendered better drama. While he wisely acknowledges the plurality of modernisms, Puchner seems reluctant to engage with recent challenges to the somewhat traditional version of modernism provided here. By defining modernist anti-theatricality in contradistinction to the avant-garde celebration of theatricality, his analysis sometimes seem at odds with a critical moment that accepts modernism as beneficially engaged with the popular. The book’s organization and analysis also endorse the modernist myth of the autonomous artist. Puchner beautifully elucidates Virgil Thomson’s influence on Stein’s *Four Saints*. Yet elsewhere, individuals and institutions that helped stage modernist theatre are neatly ignored. Where, for instance, in the account of Yeats’s diegetic drama are the Fays or Florence Farr? There quibbles should not detract from the fact that this book—with its thoughtful examination of difficult questions—is exceptionally smart and will usefully recalibrate discussions of modernism and modernist theatre.

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Sieg’s ambitious study of ethnic cross-dressing in German culture spans 224 years and a near-cacophony of theories of identity, theatre and performance. Beginning with an analysis of centuries of stagings of *Nathan the Wise*, Lessing’s 1779 dramatic poem, she considers ethnic impersonations that challenge and/or underline national boundaries, political movements, religious communities and intimate private identities. Her overarching goal is ‘to map performances of “race” in a country whose history embodies racism’s worst excesses and where, after the Holocaust, the very word *race* was excised from public language and political analysis’ (p. 2). Her topics range from theatrical and filmic impersonation of Jews, fascists and queer colonialist relationships to the popular pseudo-ethnographic performances of Native Americans in community clubs and spectacles. With such a wealth of material overlapping in paradoxical and
complementary ways, Sieg performs a remarkable – and often successful – theoretical sleight of hand, problematizing notions of mimesis, masquerade, surrogation, Brechtian alienation, simulacra, passing and drag. It is a somewhat breathless, but ultimately rewarding journey.

I found the discussion of Nathan’s multiple stagings particularly useful, as Sieg traces the performance styles and narrative adaptations of this famous play across generations of negotiation between anti-Semitic oppression and Jewish culture. Considering the character of Nathan as an icon of ethnic drag allows her to make some useful observations about the effects of both conscious and unintentional disjunctions between actor and role in politically charged productions. Her assertion of a philo-Semitic ‘economy of substitution’ sheds interesting light on the ways ethnic drag allows different masks/ideologies to be staged on specific actors at specific moments in German history. Indeed, she explicitly contrasts her work with the binaries shaping theories of racial performance in American minstrelsy, developing her argument with a critical Brechtian framework that recontextualizes mimesis, catharsis and masquerade as flexible codes of drag practice rather than rigid interpretive concepts.

These same concepts, supplemented by other theories and ethnographic thick description, make her analysis of the German hobbyists’ performance of Native American life another important touchstone for this wide-ranging study. In the end, though, Sieg raises more questions than she answers about the relationships between staged ethnicity and the cultural forces that frame those stagings in Germany. At the root of this dilemma is the breadth of media and theme of her case studies, and her often speculative assertions about reception and intentions of the performers. To be fair, it seems clear that the tensions she is mapping are innately unstable, like the culture of fascism that she suggests remains uprooted in the German construction of ethnic drag. And perhaps it is enough for this provocative first study to articulate a new scholarly territory, a widespread performance tradition that remaps ‘networks of affiliation and resistance beyond . . . old nationalist ontologies of blood and soil, and beyond the leftist antagonism of mass and popular cultural forms’ (p. 260). Despite its unsolved, sometimes cluttered puzzles of nationalism, identity and ethnic performance, Ethnic Drag is a rich and important scholarly work, clearing promising new territory for cultural historians and identity theorists.
of class consciousness. Savran brilliantly renders theatre as a site marked by ‘the unstable, unpredictable, anxious relationship between art and commerce’, where one can chart ‘the sometimes fierce, and often futile struggle for different forms of capital’ (p. 17). This class analysis is a standard of Savran’s approach, be it in his study of the avant-garde practices of the Wooster Group, or, as in this chapter, Broadway musicals. What sets Savran’s materialist analysis apart is his combination of class consciousness with his critique of heteronormativity and/or (white) masculinity. Indeed, chapter five identifies the ‘new white masculinity’ (p. 134) operating in the work of Sam Shepard. Savran terms Shepard’s characters a ‘brotherhood that – like the culture of which it is part – is both [sic] homoerotic and homophobic’ (p. 145). Yet he is also careful to situate Shepard’s plays within an era of reactions to the feminist and gay movements, the loss of the Vietnam War, and the steady decline in the income of white working and lower-middle-class men, locating gender/sexual codes within national and class processes (p. 149).

By the same token, Savran makes no claims for a gay movement as, in itself, subversive. In chapter two, ‘The Queerest Art’, he critiques the term ‘queer’, as proclaiming subversive ‘excess’ without a materialist base (see p. 58). An exception to the gay rule, Savran identifies the referents of ‘queer’ as basically white, urban, middle-class gay men. Savran then reveals how Kushner’s Angels In America and McNally’s Love! Valour! Compassion! partake in this politics as plays with ‘all the trappings, but little of the substance, of a transgressive project’ (p. 63).

This volume provides an essential reader for the student and scholar of theatre, who would seek to apply the leading critiques of contemporary criticism to the major authors and model plays of our time. Savran’s critical sophistication is matched only by his broad, thorough familiarity with the history of twentieth-century theatre.