saying it at all, but finding a gesture for it, putting it up for grabs in the exhaustive play of perception that, at some limit approaching meaning, always seems to escape, thus keeping meaning alive” (319). There’s nothing like this on the widening horizon of writing about performance, writing this speculative and close to the bone, writing, well, this “blooded.”

These strike me as the sharpest edges of The Dubious Spectacle, but I’ve hardly done justice to the whole; there are surprising chapters on American drama (there’s no better successor to Bentley’s “Trying to Like O’Neill” than Blau’s “The Pipe Dreams of Eugene O’Neill in the Age of Deconstruction”), and on photography, and the essays are studded with moving appreciations of several colleagues, notably Lee Breuer and Ruby Cohn. Blau finds the force of performance to arise from the scrupulous encounter with the words, words, words of scripted drama, from the “sounding of a text down to the last fugitive syllable, or phoneme, when the words seem to have left the page as if there had never been any words, dematerialized into the air” (118). This understanding of performance may be slightly unpalatable in the era of “performance studies,” but the results are indisputable: Blau thinks about performance by thinking through the plays of Yeats and Beckett and Brecht and Shakespeare and the work they can do when they do their thinking on the stage.

For many of us of a certain age, Blau’s intellectual rigor, to say nothing of his artistic, critical, and professional generosity, has been a constant, sometimes chastening landmark. Like all his work, The Dubious Spectacle enacts a kind of positive criticism: this is writing less concerned with enumerating others’ failures of taste, judgment, or critique than with pressing toward new and better possibilities, even if it’s only the chance to imagine an impossible theatre.

W. B. WORTHEN
University of California, Berkeley


In this superb examination of theatricality and its detractors, Martin Puchner takes a close look at the theories of Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, William Butler Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, and Samuel Beckett. According to Puchner, modernist anti-theatricalism was a reaction to a rise in theatrics, especially to anything indebted to Richard Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk. The subjects of his study decidedly rejected Wagnerian illusion as theatre’s “greatest liability” and believed that a modernist theatre in general “can arise only out of an attack” on theatricality (6). Wagner had polarized the cultural debate by foregrounding theatricality as a value; artists lined up either for or against it. The anti-theatricalists, Puchner says, thus created a unique theatre “at odds with the value of theatricality” (7); they wanted to remove the theatre from the control of star actors, greedy producers, and bourgeois audiences. As Puchner sees it, Mallarmé, Joyce, Stein, Yeats, Brecht, and Beckett critique theatricality’s susceptibility to error and misjudgment; its seductiveness obscures the goals these authors seek to convey. In order to circumvent theatricality, Puchner observes, these authors shared common strategies: the superimposition of stage directions, choral figures, narratives, and commentators on the action, and characters who observe their own actions—all designed to disrupt mimesis, illusion, and theatrical virtuosity.

Puchner first describes the distinction between modernist avant-garde and anti-theatrical modernism and then examines closet dramas (or book dramas) intended for reading, not staging. While the avant-garde celebrates theatricality’s energy, physicality, and spectacle, anti-theatrical modernism disdains the unpredictability of theatrical performance. According to Puchner, Mallarmé’s operator, Joyce’s dramatic narrator, Stein’s descriptive narratives, Yeats’s choral counterpoints, Brecht’s epic estrangement, and Beckett’s elaborate stage directions are related anti-theatrical devices intended to suppress the director’s theatricality and the actor’s spontaneity. Modern anti-theatricalists, for example, use the closet drama to block mimetic impersonation through “literariness, écriture, and writerliness” (18, italics in original) as well as by imposing elaborate and nearly impossible-to-perform stage directions. Techniques such as Yeats’s symbolism, Brecht’s political theatre, and Beckett’s staging instructions fundamentally constitute “three manifestations of a shared modernist resistance to the theater” (19). By contrast, Wagner’s “relentless illusionism” is a precursor to stage impresarios Max Reinhardt and Robert Wilson, whose spectacular successes “raise questions about the price extracted by an art that overwhelms the audience’s rationality by unleashing a theatricality that collapses critical distances and disables analytic responses” (45). Modern anti-theatrical distrust of mimetic acting creates what Puchner astutely terms Plato’s diegesis (25), a narrative overlay embedded...
in the text that disrupts actorial representations and directing pyrotechnics that typify theatricality.

The book divides primarily into two sections: the “modernist closet drama,” exemplified by Mallarmé, Joyce and Stein, and the “diegetic theatre” of Yeats, Brecht and Beckett. Mallarmé’s Hérodiade projected its anti-theatricality “in such a way that it forecloses whatever mimetic acts real actors might engage in” (60). The play’s protagonist resisted embodiment through abrupt physical transformations and narrative disjointedness. Mallarmé’s contentious relationship to theatricalization consumed his artistic life, culminating in his Le Livre, or “book-theater,” which was, Puchner states, “extraordinary in its scope and ambition but disappointing in its unfinished and fragmentary nature” (67–68). Joyce’s anti-theatricality, like Mallarmé’s, showed itself in its the use of extensive plot configurations, mixed genres (novel and drama), plays within plays, and sudden transformations of character, contributing to the “phantasmagoric or exuberant closet drama” (84). Stein differed from the others in that she utilized the theatrical form and has achieved moderate success onstage; however, her radical anti-theatricalism was closely aligned with closet drama’s “preference of reading text over viewing theater,” which yields “a program devoted to preserving the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere.” These solitary artists, says Puchner, were “utterly detached from the social reality” that earmarked popular culture (103).

In the next section, Puchner illuminates the “Diegetic Theater” of Yeats, Brecht, and Beckett. For Yeats, the ingrained distrust of actors energized his anti-theatricalism. Yeats, did, nonetheless, want a mimetic theatre, but one placing a tight rein on actors. Only through symbolism, Yeats believed, could his original vision be preserved. Brecht was also fearful of actorial virtuosity, leading to the “suspicion of impersonation and of seeing,” which was “part of a common modernist anti-theatricalism: the privilege of reading text over seeing theater” (148). Brecht turned his concept of gestus into a controlling mechanism; actors depict gestus by selectively isolating and manipulating their gestures. Beckett focused on scrupulous attention to detailed stage directions as an act of controlling the actor’s potential for expression. Finally, Puchner discusses the mediatized stage, whereby the a modernist anti-theatrical tradition is continued through technological means. Such theatre adds new devices “through which theatrical representation is estranged, controlled, framed, fragmented, and fundamentally questioned in its material integrity” (175).

Puchner overlooks a few significant bedfellows of anti-theatrical modernism, particularly Stanislav Ignacy Witkiewicz, who claimed that actors should cease to exist unless they fit into the theatrical scheme as the color red fits into a painting or the note C sharp fits into a musical composition. Moreover, the book is unclear as to how the animus towards Wagner’s theatricality translates into hostility toward acting. Directors certainly bear the brunt of anti-theatricalism; but for actors, it would seem that Stanislavsky, not Wagner, is the right target. Nevertheless, Puchner’s important study illuminates how anti-theatrical modernists reacted negatively to the rise of directors and the corporeality of actors. For critics of theatricalism, says Puchner, “there is no mimesis more vulgar than the mimesis of actors.” If there must be mimesis (since theatrical art without some mimesis is ultimately impossible), then “it should be one as far removed as possible from actors, who practice the most basic and mindless kind of mimesis with their hands and postures, grimaces and mannerisms” (32). The proponents of anti-theatricality reject actors, clowns, and mimes whose ape-like, Dionysian behavior must be sublated or diminished entirely. Nothing could be more antithetical to anti-theatrical modernists than actors, since, as Puchner has made clear, spontaneous gestures and inchoate desires displayed onstage are an anathema to obsessively controlling artists.

DAVID KRASNER
Yale University

The editors apologize for the following errors in Maria Ignatieva’s review of A History of Russian Theatre edited by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, which appeared in the March 2003 issue. Catrina Kelly should read Catriona Kelly; the word “tragedii” mistakenly appeared as “tradedii”; and Slivani should be Salvini.