Against Theatre: Creative Destrucitons on the Modernist Stage (review)

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into the present. Ironically and very sadly, Gottlieb died shortly after completing this memoir, while it was in production. One might think of this book as her threnody. (LINDA WARLEY)

Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner, editors. Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage Palgrave Macmillan 2006. xii, 260. US$85.00

A volume of essays edited by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner, Against Theatre demonstrates how influential European and American modernists critiqued and refigured the theatrical presentation and reception practices they had inherited. By seeking to destroy the theatre, this volume asserts, modernists were constructive, producing new forms of drama, performance, and stagecraft. Jonas Barish’s 1981 study The Antitheatrical Prejudice, which examines anxieties and hostilities directed at spectacle from classical times to the twentieth century, provides a useful touchstone for this argument and is considered in the introduction, as well as in many essays. In her study of Conrad’s theatrical adaptation of his novel The Secret Agent, Rebecca Walkowitz provides a particularly incisive reading of Barish’s work that identifies his ‘confusion’ between forms of theatricality and between discourses of authenticity; Walkowitz deftly untangles these ‘confusions’ as she makes the case that Conrad understood ‘cosmopolitan theatricality’ – the performance of identity integral to the production of national culture – as a condition of Englishness.

The essays are arranged into three thematic sections, which would have benefited from introductory explanations elucidating the logic of each organizing concept. The first section, ‘Frames,’ opens with an essay by Arnold Aronson exploring how the modernist and postmodernist destruction of the theatrical frame, the proscenium, has served as an ‘anti-theatrical gesture’ seeking to unite the performance and spectator. Elinor Fuchs examines meta-theatre, which she rechristens ‘the theatricalist play’ and ties to Plato’s epistemology, while Herbert Lindenberger turns to opera and Charlie Keil to film to examine each form’s quest to reform and reinvent theatricality.

The second section, ‘Materials,’ not surprisingly focuses on the materiality of the stage. In his essay, Kirk Williams sees naturalism as ‘a profoundly ethical genre’ that problematizes theatricality by neither celebrating nor dismissing it entirely. Elin Diamond juxtaposes excellent readings of Zora Neale Hurston’s Color Struck and Brecht’s Drums in the Night to demonstrate how these modernists ‘deployed and destroyed’ the primitivist body, and Marjorie Perloff unfolds the theatricality and anti-theatricality at play in John Cage’s James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet. Finally, Patrick McGuinness reveals how
Mallarmé, by appearing to reject the theatre, in fact affirms the centrality of theatricality in art and life.

The third and final section, ‘Values,’ tackles modernist concerns, including adaptation, legitimacy, censorship, and, in Herbert Blau’s concluding essay, the notion that ‘the theatre is essentially, in every nuance, the site of anti-theatre.’ Walkowitz’s essay on Conrad is followed by David Savran’s account of how modernists disdained the legitimate theatre and thereby helped to marginalize the stage; this essay offers a strong study of Gilbert Seldes’s influential tome on high-, low-, and middle-brow culture, The Seven Lively Arts. Julie Stone Peters asserts that censorship, rather than repressing and distorting theatre, in fact shaped modern performance culture. And Blau ends the collection with his own anti-theatrical gesture, asking, ‘Why theatre at all?’

Theatre and performance frequently receive short shrift in modernist studies, so Against Theatre offers a much-needed examination of the relationship between theatre and modernism. It usefully centres on one aspect of modernism’s engagement with drama, anti-theatricality – a tight focus that does not inhibit but rather usefully links the collection’s individual essays. Against Theatre is to be commended for its aggressively diverse exploration of the relationship between modernism and anti-theatricality. Essays invoke authors and artists from a wide range of national and ethnic traditions, and explore work produced from classical times to the present. The collection ranges usefully among genres and forms, examining film, opera, dance, music, poetry, novels, folklore, critical writing, and, of course, drama and theatrical performance. The diversity of topics in and among essays – readers encounter, for instance, a leap from the Renaissance to Richard Foreman, and from nineteenth-century American sex entertainments to Wedekind – generates fertile new thinking about modernist anti-theatricality, theatricality, and the rich space between those extremes. (PAIGE REYNOLDS)

J.A. Sokalski. Pictorial Illusionism: The Theatre of Steele MacKaye
McGill-Queen’s University Press 2007. xvi, 316. $55.00

Steele MacKaye (1842–94) – actor, director, playwright, producer, technical innovator – was one of the towering figures of American theatre, yet he remains relatively unknown. Part of the problem, of course, is that nineteenth-century American theatre as a whole, a theatre dominated largely by melodrama, spectacle, and popular entertainments, is seldom given the attention it deserves. But it was a dynamic and vibrant theatre at the heart of social and cultural discourse. If one is looking for a serious examination of that theatre, however, this book will be disappointing, but it does provide a wealth of detail about MacKaye and his role as a driving force in the development of modern theatre practice.