

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Maggie Gale

Theatre History to 1900

David Wiles

Tragedy in Athens

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

230 p. £35.00.

ISBN 0-521-6268-1.

This book is concerned with 'spatial practice' and the performance of tragedy in fifth-century Athens. Combining a structuralist approach with insights drawn from Henri Lefebvre's work on the materiality and historicity of space, David Wiles explores how tragedies as performances were 'created within and in response to a network of pre-existent spatial relationships'. Throughout, he criticizes the aesthetic and ideological assumptions that he discerns in Oliver Taplin's work (in particular in *Greek Tragedy in Action*) and that he sees as representing 'a normative position within the academic community *vis-à-vis* Greek tragic performance'. Through this critique he is able to articulate a very different viewpoint, continually 'opening up a gap between "Do I see it?" and "Did they see it?"'.

In Chapter One, he explores some attitudes and approaches to space, and argues that the concept of performance can help to connect the tragedies with the Athenian specifics of time and place. Chapter Two, the longest in the book, reviews the evidence for spatial dynamics in the fifth-century Theatre of Dionysos. The next three chapters build on this evidence to examine the actions, dynamics, and theatrical meaning of the chorus, while Chapters Six to Eight explore some important spatial oppositions (left/right, east/west, inside/outside, and upper/lower). Two final chapters investigate, on the one hand, visual icons and sacred versus accessible space, and, on the other, the spatial polarity of performers in the *orchestra* and spectators in the *theatron*.

While rooted in the specifics of fifth-century Athenian culture, Wiles's argument is constantly illuminated by references to twentieth-century productions, from Max Reinhardt to Peter Stein and Nancy Meckler to Ariane Mnouchkine. In its insistence on the concrete and social nature of 'performance space and theatrical meaning', this book should have a broad appeal. David Wiles's enquiries are securely based on past and current scholarly research, towards which the reader is directed by full and judicious footnotes. This is a study which deserves a prominent place on

reading lists for all students interested in drama and theatre.

LESLIE DU S. READ

Faye E. Dudden

Women in the American Theatre:

Actresses and Audiences, 1790–1870

New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1997.

£11.00.

ISBN 0-300-07058-6.

This is a well-illustrated, scholarly, and accessible account of women on the (mostly) nineteenth-century American stage and likely, therefore, to appeal to specialist and non-specialist readers. A major strand of the study is concerned with charting the shift from the actress as 'aural' text to the actress as objectified, 'visual' text. Early nineteenth-century American actresses, Dudden argues, had careers which relied not on physical appearances but on vocal skills. However, she notes a move towards the visual in the 1830s. Her case study of 'Thomas Hamblin and His Women' at the Bowery Theatre in New York offers a detailed analysis of Hamblin's exploitation, both economic and sexual, of his manufactured female stars.

The century's increasing commercialization of theatre and of the female body are signalled in the title of the final chapter: 'The Rise of the Leg Show'. Dudden makes extensive use of theatre biography to trace these capitalist and sexist developments. She has chapters on the actresses Fanny Kemble and Charlotte Cushman, and on the actress-manager Laura Keene.

Dudden looks at Kemble's strategies of self-representation, both on and off the stage, to account for the popularity of this English performer in the American theatre and to understand how she was able to 'cleanse' the reputation of the actress. The chapter on Cushman looks at her appeal to women spectators, while the study of Keene highlights the gender-bias against women in management. Dudden weaves the star biographies back into her study by highlighting the ambiguities and contradictions of their success stories – especially as the stars were unable or unwilling to challenge and to change the conditions for ordinary actresses who had relatively little (or rather no) choice about the commodification of their bodies.

Moreover, citing the segmentation of American theatre in the 1840s and the rise of the 'model

artist' shows, Dudden is also able to bring the gradual disempowerment of women spectators into her narrative frame. The case-study style of the volume offers the reader the choice of a cover-to-cover or single chapter read. Theatre historians in quest of additional scholarly detail will not be disappointed by the further research contained in the extensive endnotes.

ELAINE ASTON

Twentieth-Century Theatre

Laurence Senelick

**The Chekhov Theatre:
a Century of the Plays in Performance,**
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
£55.00.
ISBN 0-521-44075-0.

J. Douglas Clayton, ed.

**Chekhov Then and Now:
the Reception of Chekhov in World Culture**
New York: Peter Lang, 1997. £33.00.
ISBN 0-8204-3085-4.

Chekhov never thought that his work would succeed outside Russia. In England and elsewhere, his plays were, at first, rejected like some strange foreign virus, a peculiarly Russian disease. And yet, as Laurence Senelick observes, a funny thing has happened: Chekhov has become an international phenomenon, an icon passed from culture to culture.

The Chekhov Theatre charts the history of the plays in performance, covering almost every key production in Europe and the United States, and especially in Russia. The shadow of Stanislavsky is still hovering over Chekhov – the Moscow Art Theatre productions became for many years the model to follow, surrounding the plays with a plethora of conventions and plunging them into a suffocating fog of *nastroenie* or 'mood'. In Russia today, conversely, every director seems to feel the need to break the Art Theatre mould. At times this seems like directorial egoism, but it also reflects a desire to disrupt the dominant aesthetic and release new meanings from the plays.

As Senelick notes, the English-speaking world has generally been more resistant to radical forms of interpretation; but here, too, in recent productions such as the Wooster Group's *Brace Up!* (variations on *Three Sisters*), the 'Stanislavsky simulacrum' has been challenged, and the cultural baggage that surrounds Chekhov's name has been shaken, stirred, and rearranged in intriguing postmodernist forms.

Senelick's book is more than a simple slice of theatre history: it also reflects more than a

hundred years of social, political, and cultural change, inscribed in different productions, and mirrored through the prism of the plays. In each country the story is different, yet the benefit of a cross-cultural study like this is that it makes clear the connections, the reciprocal influences and exchanges, through time and across continents. Senelick's is an ambitious undertaking and an exhaustive piece of research. Inevitably the coverage of some productions is sketchy but the book will act as a very useful guide, a rich resource, and a stimulus to further investigations.

Chekhov Then and Now, edited by J. Douglas Clayton, shares a similar theme. It is a collection of articles based on an international conference held in Ottawa in 1994 to examine ways in which Chekhov has been received and interpreted in different countries and contexts. The book begins with essays on theatre productions, including Nick Worrall's persuasive reassessment of Robert Sturua's *Three Sisters* and John Tulloch, Tom Burvill, and Andrew Hood's intriguing decoding of Trevor Griffiths's version of *The Cherry Orchard*. Other topics include Chekhov's influence on writers such as Edward Bond and the transformation of Chekhov into different media such as ballet and film. Inevitably, this makes for a smorgasbord of a book, an entertaining mixture of methodologies and viewpoints, reflecting the continuing intercultural debate about a writer who – as Senelick concludes – has never ceased being our contemporary.

DAVID ALLEN

Fiora A. Bassanese

Understanding Luigi Pirandello
Columbia, South Carolina: University of South
Carolina Press, 1997. £28.50.
ISBN 1-157-003-081-2.

This book is a contribution to the series 'Understanding Modern European and Latin American Literature'. Its purpose, the editor James Hardin states, 'is to provide information and judicious literary assessment of the major works in the most competent, readable form'. *Understanding Luigi Pirandello* fulfils this brief. It begins with a succinct biographical-historical introduction to Pirandello and proceeds to analyze his output in the following chapters.

The works are grouped thematically: some of the early novels and essays are presented in 'The Late *Mattia Pascal* and the Goddess Luck'; early plays in 'Right you Are (If You Think So) and the Crisis of Reality'; later fiction in 'Moscarda's Nose, or the Disintegration of the Individual'; the plays *Henry IV*, *Diana and Tuda*, *When One is Somebody*, and *Naked* in 'Henry IV's Sane Madness'; the theatre trilogy in 'The Theater Plays'; *The New Colony*, *Lazarus*, and *The Mountain Giants*