

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Maggie Gale

Theatre History to 1900

Claude Schumacher, ed.

Naturalism and Symbolism

in European Theatre, 1850-1918

Cambridge University Press, 1997. £70.00.
ISBN 0-521-23014-4.

This is the fourth volume to be published in Cambridge's documentary history of the European theatre, and it maintains the high standard of its predecessors in presenting a comprehensive and finely judged selection from among the extant material. This is a considerable achievement because a period that continues to impinge in many respects upon our own theatrical practice retains the possibility of partisanship and at the very least is so rich in documentation that selection is necessarily difficult and sometimes invidious.

In tracing the growth of naturalism throughout Europe and its gradual and almost contemporaneous rejection and replacement by symbolism and expressionism, the volume records the birth and development of the modern theatre in France, Germany, Russia, England, Italy, Scandinavia, and Spain, with special attention to the search for more professional ways of staging plays in an integrated *mise en scène*, and with a greater focus on the role of the director, or *metteur en scène*, and technically trained performers and designers in a context defined (then as now) by economic constraints as much as by developing technologies. The volume is splendidly edited overall with helpful introductions to the different sections (more, however, would have been useful in the cases of Russia and Italy), excellent translations where these are required, and appropriate annotation. The text is also accompanied by a range of photographs, drawings, and cartoons – which are often in themselves invaluable documents.

Inevitably there are lacunae. In the section on France one misses something on the cabaret – and why not the pantomime as well as Quillard and Jarry? One looks in vain under either France or Russia for the Ballet Russe (however narrowly theatre is defined in respect of this series, the contribution made by Diaghilev's troupe in terms of staging and design is surely relevant), and there is nothing by Appia. On the other hand, the extracts on Futurism and Dada, although their early stages do just fall within the period under review, are somewhat perfunctory – a foretaste of

what is to come rather than of a piece with what has past. But this is to carp. As a whole, the volume is a fine achievement and a major addition to an important series. Anyone concerned with the period will find themselves in its debt.

MICHAEL ROBINSON

Michael R. Booth, John Stokes, and Susan Bassnett

Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori

Cambridge University Press, 1996. 200p. £30.00.
ISBN 0-521-41115-7.

Like its predecessor *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: the Actress in Her Time* (1988), this study of three actresses makes a significant and invaluable contribution to the field of gender politics, performance, and theatre history. Siddons, in Booth's analysis of her reputation as one of if not the greatest of all English actresses, is re-figured as a working mother supporting her family. Her off-stage image of the 'perfect wife and mother' is examined in relation to her on-stage maternal roles. Locating Siddons's work in a cultural and social context enables Booth to account for the devastating emotional responses of the women in her audiences, who were reacting to stage roles in which female suffering was mainly authored by men.

Stokes, working from contemporary reviewing sources – and mainly foreign (English) ones, because of the attention which these reviewers paid to the (less familiar) body-image and gestures of the French actress – sets out to examine 'what exactly Rachel did on stage'. In meticulous, scholarly reconstruction of her roles, he demonstrates how Rachel subverted the dominant, masculine presence of the French classical stage with her woman-centred playing of tragedy.

In Bassnett's contribution, the sexual politics of Ristori's 'picture-acting' style are analyzed alongside the role she played in Italian politics. Ristori's international success made her, Bassnett argues, the 'Madonna of her age', and she frames the Italian star as an adept manipulator of sign-systems, adjusting her image for different cultures, and, moreover, dominating the stage in a way which made it difficult for her to find leading men to 'partner' her.

In brief, all three contributions are concerned with an analysis of the sexual politics of tragic acting. There is much in the volume which will be of specific interest and use to the theatre historian:

detail on acting techniques, salaries, audiences, and theatre venues, not to mention a select bibliography of further reading and a good range of illustrative material. However, it is the gender focus which makes this an outstanding study and essential reading for researchers both in the field of theatre and gender studies.

ELAINE ASTON

Twentieth-Century Theatre

Nick Worrall

The Moscow Art Theatre

London: Routledge, 1996. 243 p.
ISBN 0-415-05598-9.

Routledge's 'Theatre Production Studies' series is unequivocally enhanced by Nick Worrall's book. Part One is devoted to the historical background and confluence of circumstances that led to the founding of the theatre. Part Two provides first-rate accounts of the productions staged in its repertoire during the theatre's twenty seasons between 1889 and 1917, drawing on an impressive and extensive range of sources, including playtexts, playbills, production scores, financial records, correspondence, printed criticism, and biographical material, much of which is taken from the Moscow Art Theatre archives.

Worrall selects four productions for detailed treatment in order to give an overview of the theatre's repertoire through this period. While some may quibble about the relative importance of the emphases that result from his selection, the strategy is fully justified given the range of material on which it would have been possible to draw. Four of Russia's greatest writers are represented in the selection, though more pragmatic justifications are also offered for the choices.

Tolstoy's hugely popular *Tsar Fedor Ioannovich* is particularly crucial in that it allows Worrall to explain the significant innovation of the emergence of the director as a key figure in the theatre: a move that was to change Russian audiences' term for the theatrical event from 'performance' to 'production'. Worrall also selects Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (1902) from the theatre's fifth season as a central work from the canon of socialist realism in both text and stage interpretation. A welcome addition to the documentation of the original production of *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) is provided in the discussion of the sixth season. The final choice of *A Month in The Country* provides an opportunity for Worrall to consider the development of Stanislavsky's system post-Ribot.

This is a meticulously researched, carefully structured, and fluently written volume, in which Worrall succeeds in bringing the personalities

and productions of the Moscow Art Theatre to life with an enthusiasm for the material that can make even a discussion of the actors' salaries fascinating.

CHRIS BANFIELD

Maggie B. Gale

West End Women:

Women and the London Stage, 1918-1962

London: Routledge, 1996. £13.99.
ISBN 0-415-08496-2.

Until recently there has been a black hole in women's theatre history between the outbreak of the First World War and Littlewood's production of *A Taste of Honey*. In 1994 Virago produced a rather strange anthology of plays, *The Years Between: Plays by Women on the London Stage 1900-1950*, which whetted the appetite by referring to 'scores of women playwrights [working] during this period', but consisted largely of review sketches. Maggie Gale's book triumphantly explores that black hole, and challenges the view that women dramatists were either invisible during this period or only of interest if 'working outside the mainstream' – writing banal 'Woman's Hour' plays, as one contemporary critic described them.

West End Women demonstrates that not only were women present in significant numbers in the commercial theatre, but that these dramatists were addressing a largely female agenda in writing about the conflicts within and between work, motherhood, and marriage, as well as 'searching for national heroines' in their reworkings of history. Gale locates the women's work within its social, political, and theatrical context before anatomizing the plays themselves.

This is not simply a women's theatre history book; in its retrieval of women's writing for the commercial stage, Gale has also challenged the dominance of 'art theatre' in the histories of the theatre of this period. There is clearly a need for a new history of the popular stage between the wars. Now we know what the women were doing. What were the men up to?

VIV GARDNER

Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage, eds.

In Contact with the Gods?

Directors Talk Theatre

Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1996. 342 p. £11.99.
ISBN 0-719-04763-3.

In 1994, as part of an Arts Council of Great Britain millennium initiative, Manchester, England, was nominated the 'City of Drama'. The aim of this year-long event was to develop and promote the