

from the point of view of the women left behind, examining its tedium, economic consequences, and encouragement of male self-aggrandisement. Even Sarah Pogson Smith's 1807 *The Female Enthusiast*, about Charlotte Corday, manages to introduce America – as a place where, 'Each female who respects herself is safe', an alternative space where perhaps the uneasy dilemmas of imagining a heroine who takes political action through the ultimate transgression of murder can be resolved.

The discourse of nationalism and feminism is often problematic. The heroine of Susanna Rowson's *Slaves of Algiers* (1794) comes 'from that land where virtue in either sex is the only mark of superiority', but like other works of the period, while borrowing the imagery of slavery to describe women's subjugation and enacting a plot of women snatched by 'surly Orientals', it completely fails to acknowledge the existence of actual slavery in 'the land of the free'. The most interesting play in the volume is *Altorf* (1819), by Frances Wright, who emigrated from Scotland to join Robert Owen's New Harmony community: this opens with a preface celebrating republican liberty, and uses the story of the rebellion of the Swiss cantons against their overlords to explore radical revolt, but movingly examines the personal costs of political convictions and loyalties.

SUSAN CROFT

Twentieth-Century Theatre

Charlotte Canning

Feminist Theatres in the USA:

Staging Women's Experience

London; New York: Routledge, 1996. £12.99.

ISBN 0-415-09805-X.

The feminist student of theatre and the feminist theatre practitioner will find valuable material in Canning's study of the explosion of feminist theatre groups and theatre making in the USA from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s. Canning opens with overviews of early critical approaches to the feminist theatre movement – useful to the reader who is less familiar with the field of feminist theatre, or does not have access to these early studies – and moves to detailing the experiences of women working in experimental theatre groups, and how, in turn, this created a need for women to inaugurate their own companies.

Particular attention is paid to the work of four groups, chosen because they have received relatively little published recognition: the Women's Experimental Theater, Spiderwoman Theater,

Lilith, and Front Room Theater Guild. Two chapters devoted to productions are less convincing because they run into the difficulty of presenting descriptive accounts of past performance events which the reader is unlikely to have seen. 'The Community as Audience' as a feature of feminist practice is, however, a much more rewarding chapter, and a useful addition to the growing body of work which takes the spectator as its focus.

The study makes excellent use of interviews as oral history, which keeps the collective rather than the individual in focus, and allows the reader access to the tensions and behind-the-scenes arguments. Given that funding is crucial to the inception and life of any theatre company, as a British reader I would have found contextualization of the American funding system and more detail on the specific funding of women's theatre helpful. As issues of gender and performance are currently so important to the field of theatre studies, it would be good to see Routledge commissioning many more volumes in this valuable series.

ELAINE ASTON

Susan Painter

Edgar the Playwright

London: Methuen, 1996. xx, 202 p. £9.99.

ISBN 0-413-69960-9.

This, the latest in Methuen's somewhat intermittent series, is, surprisingly, only the second full-length study of David Edgar's work to be published. As such it sets itself the clear intention of dealing both chronologically and thematically with what it is argued are the most important works of his career to date, culminating with an account of one of the most impressive, *Pentecost* (1994). With her conscious decision not to deal, other than very generally – as with her account of Edgar's early work with General Will, for instance – with unpublished plays, Susan Painter is aiming at a general theatregoing audience as well as a student readership, for whom the accessibility of texts is everything.

Running through the thread of her always incisive analysis of the plays is an account of the changes and developments in the playwright's own political thinking, seen always as vitally connected with the changes and developments in his dramatic models. Indeed, Painter rightly allows Edgar to speak for himself all the way through her account, drawing from his vast catalogue of journalistic writings and from her own interviews.

Edgar is a playwright for whom the processes of research are all important, both in the creation of the text and, as Painter frequently makes clear, of the production. The play becomes a part of the process of education for writer, production team,