

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Viv Gardner

Theatre History to 1900

Marc Baer

Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. 291 p. £37.50.
ISBN 0-19-811250-5.

This is an exhaustive examination of the last great riot – or series of riots – in English theatre history, which took place in 1809, provoked by Kemble's raising prices and reducing the number of cheaper seats in favour of private boxes in the rebuilt Covent Garden Theatre, burned down the previous year. Baer is a historian and is primarily interested in the social and political implications of the event, investigating it in the light of the social tensions, political structures, and historical developments of the period. He challenges, for instance, the accepted view that the riots were a demonstration of class conflict, but points instead to the remarkable social conservatism of the rioters and argues that the disorders were themselves a highly theatrical manifestation of social expression in an essentially ritualized society, and constituted a type of charivari. Baer argues for the substantial ideological importance of theatre in Georgian society, particularly in constructing a view of history which was significant in shaping English notions of identity and effectively defusing challenges to the political status quo. The book is of value not only to social historians but also to students of theatre history, in that it examines in considerable detail both the role of theatre in society and the social determinants of the popular consumption of theatre.

DARRYLL GRANTLEY

Philip C. Kolin

**Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism:
an Annotated Bibliography and Commentary**
New York: Garland, 1991. 420 p. £55.
ISBN 0-82240-87386-X.

This is not the first bibliography of Shakespeare and feminist criticism, but Kolin's introduction does claim that it is the first annotated bibliography, and therein lies the book's main attraction, particularly for researchers making their first foray into this area. The book is organized chronologically, starting in 1975, the year that saw the publication of Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, described as 'the

first full-length study of Renaissance drama in the mode of the new feminist criticism'. An extensive introduction outlines the main preoccupations and approaches to be found in feminist criticism of Shakespeare, and refers to the appropriate items in the book itself. Each book, article, or dissertation is summarized – some at considerable length – and cross-referred to other related works. References are also given for reviews of major works. Kolin does not confine himself to writings on Shakespeare but includes works on Elizabethan and Jacobean culture that 'shed light on Shakespeare's views on and representations of women, sex, and gender'. This thoroughness is impressive, and may tempt readers to use this as a 'Coles Notes' alternative to reading the originals, but there are limitations: firstly, no items are included on performance, and accounts of feminist mediations through practice or performance theory are also omitted; and secondly – as with any bibliography, but crucially in this field – the cut-off date (1988) makes it already out-of-date.

VIV GARDNER

Twentieth-Century Theatre

Christopher Innes

Modern British Drama 1890-1990
Cambridge University Press, 1992. 484 p.
£40 (hbk), £12.95 (pbk).
ISBN 0-521-30536-5 (hbk), 0-520-31555-7 (pbk).

Innes's survey of modern British drama opens with a chronology of the plays cited, but the study itself offers a refreshing approach to the period by looking for affinities between dramatists – their themes, techniques, and styles, etc. Consequently, playwrights are grouped under three major types of theatre: realism, comedy, and poetic drama. Crossing the boundaries of the Edwardian and the modern periods, which tend to be treated separately in surveys of this kind, makes the volume a good-value-for-money source of detailed background reading for courses which centre on modern British dramatic literature, though theatre historians and scholars would probably welcome more analysis of productions and less of plays. Headings within the three main sections deal with key male dramatists, presented with a checklist and an

analysis of their major plays, while current women writers are given a brief final chapter of their own. It is rather disappointing, however, to find the out-of-date claim that 'female playwrights have been conspicuous by their absence from British theatre up until the late 1950s', in an up-to-date 'report-in-process' volume of this kind.

ELAINE ASTON

Violet Godfrey Carr

From Portable Days

Stocksfield: Spredden Press, 1991. 56 p. £5.95.
ISBN 1-871739-23-3.

This delightful little book offers tantalizing insights into a hidden theatrical tradition. Violet Carr was a performer in Portable Theatre in the 1910s, in fit-up and rep in the 1920s, and in pierrot shows and concert parties into the 1930s. She represents a whole tribe of now-forgotten entertainers which flourished in the great depression. Dominant theatre history renders this tradition invisible, while alternative theatre history has ignored it in favour of right-on radical causes: and even popular theatre histories exclude it by using music hall as an end-stop. Yet Portable Theatre was a national phenomenon in Britain before Gémier's better-known decentralizing projects got properly under way in France, and pierrot troupes probably played to some fifteen million people a year between the wars.

The scale of this tradition was matched by ideological pertinence since (however ambivalently) it increasingly promoted the emancipation of women, particularly through its playful approach to gender and sexual identity. Such themes in the cultural politics of inter-war Britain are a sub-text in Violet Carr's book, which is simply a lucid exercise in personal reminiscence. However, it should be a most useful source-text for historians of popular performance, especially as her testament is so clearly typical. More fundamentally, her voice is a poignant reminder that the true resistant spirit of this particular people's theatre was rooted in the suffering of the communities which it so successfully entertained.

BAZ KERSHAW

John W. Purser

The Literary Works of Jack B. Yeats

Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1991. 224 p. (Princess Grace Irish Library, 5.)
ISBN 0-86140-327-4.

The writings of Jack B. Yeats have attracted less detailed attention than his paintings. Clearly one of the leading painters of the twentieth century, Jack Yeats's written work has been obscured by the literary achievements of his more celebrated

brother William. Their father predicted that 'Some day I shall be remembered as the father of a great poet, and the poet is Jack', and Purser goes a long way to justifying why this prophecy may yet be fulfilled. He provides a stimulating context for Jack Yeats's plays and novels – of particular interest to specialists in Irish theatre and of twentieth-century drama being the detailed and tantalizing insights into Yeats's 'Plays for the Larger Theatre'. Purser is clearly fronting a campaign to see Jack B. Yeats's writings back in print, and this volume should play an influential part in forcing the hand of publishers to meet what is likely to become an increasingly vigorous demand.

PADRAIG TOLAN

Jacqueline Genet and Richard Allen Cave, eds.

Perspectives of Irish Drama and Theatre

Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe 1991. 183 p. £19.50. (Irish Literary Studies, 33.)
ISBN 0-82140-309-6.

This is a selection of papers presented at the meeting of the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature held in Caen in the summer of 1987. The collection clearly focuses on drama and theatre, and, despite the four-year delay in bringing the papers to a wider public, it is a valuable addition to the Irish Literary Studies series. With as wide a range of writers under consideration as Beckett, Friel, MacNiece, and Kilroy, the book will clearly have a broad appeal. Add to this significant chapters on 'Ireland and the Caribbean' by Paul Botheroyd and 'The Image of Ireland in Nineteenth-Century Drama' by Heinz Kosek, and the value of the book as essential reference for the study of Irish theatre history and current practice is assured.

PADRAIG TOLAN

Ruby Cohn

Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama

Cambridge University Press, 1991. 213 p. £27.95.
ISBN 0-521-40363-4.

This study attempts the first comprehensive survey of the plethora of formal experimentation in English theatre since *Look Back in Anger*. It provides detailed histories and synopses of plays and productions, useful to the reader unaware of the range of performance and writing during this period. It also makes challenging comparisons between the works of playwrights whom many informed critics would prefer to place in opposing and thereby mutually exclusive camps.

What drives Ruby Cohn to explore this territory is the dilemma of definition – where to draw the line between text and performance, and their