Steven Adler
Rough Magic: Making Theatre
at the Royal Shakespeare Company

Steven Adler spent six years in the 1990s investigating how and why the Royal Shakespeare Company makes theatre. An experienced stage manager and head of the graduate programme in stage management at the University of California, San Diego, he chose this subject because the RSC, in his words, has provided ‘an extravagant legacy of stellar productions featuring the most accomplished artists of the British stage’. He interviewed more than sixty people associated with the company and was given access to rehearsals and life ‘backstage’. The resulting book is a summary and summation of his endeavour. It offers an informed view of the inner workings of the RSC at a moment of critical development when artist director Adrian Noble changed up a gear in his drive to reinvent the company’s identity.

Adler wisely observes that the RSC is always evolving and embraces a variety of theatrical styles and methodologies. He provides only a cursory historical background to this observation; the burden of his story concerns the latter years of Noble’s reign. The previous regimes of Peter Hall, Trevor Nunn, and Terry Hands are but briefly mentioned as preludes to Noble’s swelling act. With an admirably practical approach and using extensive extracts from his interviews, Adler describes the company’s theatre, its administration, finances, touring, education work, and marketing. He explains how a season is cast and organized, how budgets are prepared, how the production process operates, and the roles played in this by the different categories of RSC employee working in the artistic, administrative, financial, and production fields.

Adler acts as the concerned reporter, allowing the subjects to speak for themselves. In the case of the chapter on acting, the whole section – bar a few linking comments – comprises the views of four actors: Simon Russell Beale, Kate Duchêne, David Troughton, and Robert Bowman. The various testimonies, which often add a welcome personal touch, supply the most stimulating material. Oddly, however, while the interviews cover an impressive range, there are two regrettable omissions. There is no interview with a composer or member of the music team, despite Adler writing that ‘live music is a critical component of the RSC experience’, nor any with the literary manager or playwright. New plays and adaptations are referred to as part of the RSC’s artistic output, but no detailed consideration is given, presumably because under Noble, as Adler points out, the emphasis was placed decisively on Shakespeare.

Even though history has overtaken the doubtful conclusion (that within the company, ‘evolution is accepted, even embraced, with enthusiasm’), those interested in the ‘how’ of theatre will find this a valuable snapshot of a company at work. However, an attempt at tackling the ideological dimension (e.g., Noble’s advocacy of a conservative populism) might have helped Adler explore the ‘why’ more convincingly.

Colin Chambers

Benjamin Griffin
Playing the Past: Approaches to English Historical Drama 1385–1600

Any scholar whose bibliography distinguishes ‘primary’ from ‘secondary’ works is boldly refuting recent literary theory which dissolves this distinction. Griffin finds recent work unpersuasive – he is particularly sceptical of claims of subversiveness – but he descends to vulgarity in collapsing the intellectual variety of poststructuralism into the single figure of Michel Foucault. Like Foucault, Griffin is concerned with classificatory habits. The Tudor view of history plays was shaped by what had already been classified, and Griffin argues that to understand the phenomenon of the English history play one should study not the prose narratives which the dramatists plundered for material, but rather the genealogy of the genre. We should ‘understand the history play by way of the history of plays’.

The history play genre was already forming when the Armada was defeated, and Griffin shows that despite terminological confusions (such as the 1600 quarto of The Most Excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice), there was by the 1590s a generic distinction which Heminges and Condell’s 1623 Folio categorization into ‘Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies’) merely sharpened. What makes the history play unlike other genres is ‘the fact of the plot’s immersion in a historical
continuum; this means that an aesthetic sense of either beginning or ending is frustrated’. Being so embedded, the history play requires an audience that knows its history, although, like Jonson’s Fitzdottrel in The Devil is an Ass, they might have got that from previous plays.

In part, Griffin’s book reads like a PhD thesis (which it formerly was), particularly in pulling its rhetorical punches: the concluding paragraphs meekly open, ‘I believe that the main quality I have emphasized . . .’. It is none the less deserving of attention from literary scholars for its meticulousness and its comprehensive surveying of one genre instanced in examples from three centuries.

GABRIEL EGAN

Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin
The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare’s England: a Collaborative Debate

In their ‘Afterword’, Dawson and Yachnin confess that their contradictory approaches go ‘too deep to be capable of easy resolution’. Made up of alternating chapters, rather than jointly written, the book discusses a variety of phenomena surrounding the culture of playgoing, such as acting and personation; properties; the conjunction of history and memory; the theatre’s relationship with news and gossip; and the differences between seeing and hearing. They cite ‘Shakespeare’s relentless dialogical way of making meaning’ as a pretext for their alterations, though to blame the playwright for their own domestic wrangling (at one point, they remark that they have been together too long to get a divorce) sounds like an excuse.

Their disagreements are occasionally intemperate – in a footnote to one of Yachnin’s chapters, Dawson gloats that ‘in this paragraph, Dawson’s voice seems to break through the normally unruffled surface of Yachnin’s prose.’ Dawson’s attempt to read performance against the conflicts over iconoclasm and religious ceremony arising out of the Reformation are jettisoned by Yachnin who prefers to direct his attentions to the ‘relations between the stage and the system of rank and the emerging entertainment market’. Generally, Yachnin takes the materialist line, talking, for instance, of the ‘social capital’ which accrues from the possession of news (in part promoted by the theatre). Dawson, on the other hand, reads the collaborative relationship between company and audience in terms of a participatory ethos that arises, he maintains, out of religious ritual.

For all – indeed because of – its internal dissections, this is an engrossing book, which illustrates just how plural and even antagonistic readings of the early modern theatre can be.

PETER J. SMITH

Dominic Shellard, ed.
British Theatre in the 1950s

Shellard’s book is a collection of essays which came out of the first conference – with the same title as the book – to be held in the re-vamped British Library in 1997. In his introduction, he points out that the book came out of a need to question the notion that Look Back in Anger ‘began’ post-war British drama, and a desire to question the dominance of the play in the making of historical narratives of theatre of the period.

As such, the collection is an interesting and necessary addition to a growing field of work in the area. Christopher Innes’s chapter on Rattigan as a playwright who somehow voiced the ‘dominant feelings of society as a whole . . . the split vision, the opposition between a sometimes clichéd external experience and an inner, secret life’, is particularly interesting, as is Kathryn Johnson’s chapter on what else, apart from the angry Osborne, was ‘troubling the Lord Chamberlain’s office in 1956’.

Steve Nicholson’s work on censorship and ‘foreign’ drama builds on his other work on censorship and foreign theatre during the inter-war years, and provides a worthy insight into the ways in which British theatre censors were still led by rather racist perceptions of the dangers of foreignness. John Bull’s work on Waiting for Godot as a key turning point in British theatre also makes good reading, especially his attempt to connect Beckett with Brecht at the end of the chapter. The inclusion of an interview with Harold Pinter about his early career was a canny move – he is articulate, witty, informative, and thought-provoking.

Although the book sets out on a revisionist mission, it fails really to take on board the work of other scholars whose published research would have added much to the project as a whole. I am thinking here of Duff, Lacey, and Rebellato. Duff and Lacey’s work is mentioned in passing, but Rebellato, whose 1956 and All That was published after the conference, does not get a look in. Two years to get the book into print could surely have allowed for some editorial intervention; an invitation for non-conference contributions from these scholars might have enriched the book tremendously, as would some revisioning of the work of the oft-overlooked women playwrights of the period, of whom there were many besides Shelagh Delaney and Enid Bagnold.

MAGGIE B. GALE
Graham Saunders

‘Love Me or Kill Me’:
Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes

Since her suicide at the age of twenty-eight in 1999, the reputation of Sarah Kane has grown in stature. Her work has been celebrated in a special season at the Royal Court theatre in 2001, references to her on the internet proliferate, and there are signs that a Kane industry will spring up among youthful enthusiasts and faddists.

Graham Saunders, a lecturer at the University of West England, is the first to complete a full-length study of her plays, and his book will be required reading for any academics or students wishing to understand 1990s British theatre. After an introduction that situates Kane in the context of new writing, and examines her stagecraft, morality, non-realist style, and the issue of gender in her work, we are offered chapter-length studies of her five full-length plays: Blasted (1995), Phaedra’s Love (1996), Cleansed (1998), Crave (1998), and 4.48 Psychosis (2000). Themes and influences are lucidly discussed, although the book assumes that readers have read the plays and are familiar with the outlines of their content. Saunders ends with a long and revealing section, in which he interviews theatre-makers who knew Kane – a resource of great value to all future researchers. The book ends with an afterword by Edward Bond, who, sadly, is mistaken about the exact circumstances of her death.

Saunders’s accounts of the plays are intelligent and warmly appreciative of Kane’s intentions. Using material from several interviews, as well as evidence from letters, he gives a convincing account of how Kane attempted to realize a theatre of extremes, with roots not only in the modernism of Artaud and Beckett but also in Shakespeare, Marlowe, Ford, and Jacobean drama. The notorious blinding in Blasted, for example, owes as much to King Lear as to an incident in Bill Buford’s Among the Thugs. However, by stressing Kane’s links to theatre traditions, Saunders underplays the influence of pop culture on her work, and he is uncritical of its shortcomings. More could have been said about Kane’s in-ver-y-face sensibility and her moral absolutism. Irritably, the book has been badly proof-read, and has a sloppy attitude to basic facts. Occasionally, a lack of clarity in the writing obscures the point being made. So although Saunders expertly makes the case for Kane’s genius, it is now up to others to produce a more rounded account of her achievements.

ALEKS SIERZ

Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer, ed.

Screen Acting

This collection of essays, focusing primarily on Hollywood practice, attempts to contribute towards the previously overlooked area of film history and theory. In their introduction, Lovell and Krämer volunteer various reasons for this neglect (for instance, early film theorists’ concern to establish cinema’s independence from theatrical adaptation, and later preoccupations with directors and mise-en-scène) and indicate approaches which further research might adopt.

A number of chapters are concerned with individual performances and performers, some famous, some less well known: Martin Shingler discusses Bette Davis (suggesting that stars act too, rather than merely figure), and refers her technique to her dance training with Martha Graham. Susan Knobloch discusses the television actress Helen Shaver; Roberta Pearson compares the performances of Fredric March and James Mason of the same role in the 1937 and 1954 versions of A Star Is Born. Alan Lovell discusses the development of Susan Sarandon’s career in a variety of roles, while Gianluca Sergi is concerned with the acting of Morgan Freeman and, more especially, his voice.

Lovell (citing the freedom granted to Susan Sarandon by Louis Malle to develop her performance in Atlantic City), Paul McDonald (discussing the improvisational methods of Mike Leigh), and Cynthia Baron (describing the crafting of performances under the studio system) convey different relationships between actor and director, and actor and script. Baron, concerned with the advent of sound and close-up, outlines a form of actor training which emphasized concentration and technical ability to co-ordinate various elements, amply illustrated in Shingler’s description of David in Of Human Bondage.

Sharon M. Carnicke compares the methods of Lee Strasberg with those of his supposed mentor, Stanislavsky. David Mayer sets out a range of problems which arise in the interpretation of silent screen acting and its complicated relationship with its theatrical predecessors. Baron, too, is interested in the appointment of theatrically trained actors with the coming of sound. She also recognizes the differences in performance required and anticipated by certain genres, although the book as a whole fails to expand upon this theme. Some chapters concentrate on the final screen product, others use anecdotal and interview material, as well as manuals, to explore the methods of preparation and development of a role.

AMY SARGEANT
Dymphna Callery
Through the Body: a Practical Guide to Physical Theatre

Books in this area are eagerly awaited, but this one frustratingly narrows the field. As Callery rightly states, this emergent area is difficult to map and the book does offer some ways in. (Numerous descriptions of exercises may certainly help pre-degree students with group work.) However, physical theatre need not be exclusively based on narrative or humour. At one point, Callery suggest that ‘this sounds very serious’, so an exercise (the ‘Ministry of Silly Walks’) is detailed to ‘lighten’ things up. I would argue that performing is a serious business, and don’t we all suffer because frequently it isn’t serious enough? The most exciting games are those with an edge of danger and of vulnerability.

Quotations serve mostly as aphorisms, contributing to the unwieldy endnote system that runs from 1 to 370, and is cluttered by the fact that we are told (unnecessarily) from whom she learnt certain exercises. Practitioners lack context, floating in a nebulous twentieth-century country called Europe, dominated by Paris and Lecoq. His work provides a base for this guide (that is not a guide) and its exercises, as it does for much British theatre. But playing without hunger creates only trifles and not meat for performance. This book is trapped between presenting ‘doing’ and the thinking that ‘doing’ generates.

The book notionally follows a student’s development, and only when the exercises discussed become more complex, in the chapters ‘The Sentient Body’ and ‘Devising’, do the games/exercises become fewer and the analysis richer. Modes of exploring the voice in the section called ‘Sound’ are challenging and move beyond the narrative-based parameters that elsewhere restrain. The pre-expressive is not the ‘pre-verbal’, though this can be one small aspect of it. This is a missed opportunity, but one that will provide certain foundations for future texts on how the performer can broaden his or her physical vocabulary.

Peter Mudford
Making Theatre: from Text to Performance
236 p. £45.00 (hbk), £15.99 (pbk).

In his ‘Foreword: a Personal Note’, Mudford tells his readers why his book is necessary. ‘Very few books of any kind have been written’, he says, ‘about the visual and physical languages of the theatre.’ This claim is rather grand. And indeed no such books appear in the bibliography. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t exist. Mudford then says that, ‘The analysis of plays often reads as though they are novels or tracts.’ Again, that depends to some degree on how up-to-date your reading matter is.

So, to counter this, his book will ‘illustrate’ how these visual and physical languages work – an intervention of not wholly uncontestable timelines. But the ‘illustration’ is generous – anecdote upon anecdote. These sprawl across four chapters: the first telling how live performance differs from other media, and the others dealing with ‘Words’, ‘Vision’, and ‘Music’ (which is also concerned with things like the ‘internal rhythm’ of words). What Brecht got wrong, we learn, is that he didn’t want his audience to empathize with the characters, but it is in ‘the nature of theatre itself’ that we do so!

Rigorous analysis and fresh thinking tend to be replaced by stories of the stars. And many of the insights are based on uninspected assumptions about ‘life’. Thus, for example, Olivier’s Captain in The Dance of Death had ‘all the assurance and insecurity which the non-promoted may often personify’. This sort of thing confirms the reputation for wisdom and authority shown by promoted folk such as professors. And leads, alongside a symptomatic toadyism to the ‘real’ world of professional production, to that dumbing down of drama that is currently pioneered.

SIMON SHEPHERD

Harry J. Elam, Jr., and David Krasner, ed.
African American Performance and Theatre History: a Critical Reader
367 p. £40.50 (hbk), £17.95 (pbk).

This exciting collection focuses on the historical intersection of race, theatre, and performance in African–American drama, with an emphasis on nineteenth- and twentieth-century performance. Though a history, the book is divided not along chronological lines, but into four key themes: how theatrical representations of blackness have impacted on the way black people view themselves and are viewed by others in American society; the impact of performance on the production of black cultural memories; constructions of race-gender identities; and the performativity of blackness.

The book contains sixteen essays, with an introduction that helpfully places them in context, plus an edited transcript of a round-table discussion on the general state of black theatre by leading critics in the field. There is no weak entry in the book, but I would point out as especially noteworthy William Sonnega’s contribution examining
white spectators' reactions to the politics of black theatre, and containing a useful summary of Sheldon Epps's radical reinscription of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, cast with black actors in the leading roles.

Also of particular interest is Henry Louis Gates's look at the under-explored subject of black popular theatre and the new slant on minstrelsy offered by Anne Marie Bean, who interrogates the performance of masculinity by black female minstrels. Bean argues that black female minstrelsy effects a double inversion of race and gender by challenging white minstrel performances of both black men and women – without, however, exploring the possible queer meanings generated by such performances. However, queer black performance is given space in Jay Plum’s piece on Pomo Afro Homos.

The accessibility of the writing and the wide range of topics covered by individual contributors make this collection a useful resource for undergraduates, while there is enough new and provocative material here to make worthwhile reading for those researching American theatre and race at a more advanced level. Overall, an important addition to the field of American theatre studies.

MARY BREWER

*Thomas S. Hischak*  
**American Theatre: a Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1969–2000**  

This comprehensive tome continues where Gerald Bordman’s three previous volumes of the series left off, and, in just over 500 pages, examines forty years of American theatre. Focused on Broadway, but including most Off-Broadway and some Off-Off-Broadway productions, the book examines plays season by season, excluding only musicals, puppet shows, magic shows, and multi-media events. Plays are examined chronologically, with details of actors, plot, and reception. Most plays receive about two paragraphs of synopsis and review, and a few individuals rate their own special entries, though the reason for including some actors and set designers and leaving others out is unclear.

Apart from a short preface and epilogue, the book is divided into four sections: ‘Act One, 1969–1975: Getting Through by the Skin of Our Teeth’; ‘Act Two, 1975–1984: Everything Old is New Again’; ‘Act Three, 1984–1994: Playacting During a Plague’; and ‘Act Four: a Modest Renaissance’. The titles of the individual ‘acts’ are based on various themes; Act Three’s ‘Plague’ refers, of course, to the AIDS epidemic that devastated the theatre in the decade in question. It would have been useful to have a more comprehensive introduction to each section, to explain why the particular year-breaks occurred where they do, but this is a minor quibble. There is a useful 13-page title index, as well as a 27-page people index. This is unlikely to be a book one reads through in its entirety, though doing so reveals an interesting historical review that allows one to see trends where one might not otherwise do so. It will be useful for students of theatre history who wish to examine particular seasons, or get a flavour – though no more than that – of critical reactions to individual plays.

HEIDI SLETTEDAHL MACPHERSON

*Andreasen and Kühlmann, ed.*  
**Odin Teatret 2000**  

**Eugenio Barba**  
**Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt**  

**Eugenio Barba**  
**Land of Ashes and Diamonds**  

Just when you think that everything has been said about Odin Theatre, they come up with three new books. There is a sense of rounding off or settling the past, but I’m sure further surprises, thoughts, and delights await us further in the future. *Odin Teatret 2000* is a collection of papers or addresses given from two sources, the gathering in Holstebro in 2000 and a seminar held by the Department of Dramaturgy in Aarhus University in the same year. Topics covered include the heritage of Odin, its history, and its practice. We have had Barba’s views of how the productions are assembled: now we have the actors’ accounts and experiences. There are further thoughts from one of those friends of Odin drawing on their experiences of observing the company through many years, and a section which includes insights into the life of Odin and its work; essays on the administration; photography; acceptance speeches at award ceremonies; and an important essay by the sociologist, Kirsten Hastrup, who has been so influential in the anthropological aspects of Odin’s work.

Barba’s *Solitude, Craft, Revolt* returns to the Floating Islands and beyond, and in doing so, it
complements Barba’s earlier book *The Paper Canoe*, which dealt with his thoughts on the work of the actor. Here he returns to thoughts on the nature of theatre. There is some sense that Barba’s writings do not progress in straight lines, but constantly re-examine the basic concerns, deepening them, and making them more complex. Some of the material in the book is a reworking of earlier pieces, other areas are included straight to make up the total vision.

Overall, the book reflects the thoughts of the major philosopher of the theatre which Barba is. It is not an easy read. It has taken me over a year to complete, necessitating pauses for reflection, re-reading of essays, and – often – rests from the intensity of concentration needed to keep up with the power of the argument. At the end of the twentieth century, a work is produced which pulls together a great deal of thought about the theatre that has developed during the century, and points the way forward.

*Land of Ashes and Diamonds* is pure delight, for which Judy Barba’s elegant translation must take some credit. It includes a long autobiographical essay in which Barba speaks of his early time in Poland and his period in Opole with Grotowski and company. There are charming and eloquent accounts of conversations between the two men in the buffet at Opole railway station, as they both stumble towards formulating their ideas of theatre. What is clear is that if Barba acknowledges a deep debt to Grotowski in his work, then Grotowski owes a similar debt to Barba. The book illuminates the help that they gave each other.

The second half of the book continues this theme of character and vulnerability, publishing 26 letters from Grotowski to Barba over the period of their friendship. There is much charm, which the translation captures and enhances, and which adds new insights to our understanding of Grotowski and his journey. Work your way through *Solitude, Craft, Revolt* and then reward yourself with the delights of *Land of Ashes and Diamonds*.

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*Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi, ed.*

*Siting the Other: Re-visions of Marginality in Australian and English–Canadian Drama*


This book provides 23 essays and one interview on mostly recent Australian and English–Canadian drama and theatre that is by and/or represents marginal subjects. The overwhelming majority of these essays is detailed, intelligent, and critically suggestive, making *Siting the Other* a welcome addition to a growing library on post-colonial drama and theatre. Positioned first are articles addressing Aboriginal and First Nations’ drama and performance, but also included are essays on women’s theatre (including Australian suffragette theatre), queer performance, theatre by and about racial minorities, the representation of marginal groups in mainstream drama, and several critiques of Australia’s and Canada’s shared myth of multiculturalism. As the list indicates, the book is not just about drama as its title suggests. It also addresses a number of aspects of performance, including its making in cross-cultural collaboration; its staging in site-specific contexts; and the hybrid medium of circus.

*Siting the Other* provides fairly extensive coverage of its subject; nevertheless, it might usefully have gone further in a number of directions. Welcome, for example, would have been illustrations, an analysis of theatre industries and economies (which surely do a lot to produce and reinforce marginality), and a further developed comparative analysis. That said, the book does provide several suggestions regarding comparison, and enough material for the reader to build her own comparative analyses – both within the examples of Australian and Canadian drama explored here and with other drama. The book will be useful for scholars and students in drama, theatre, performance and cultural studies. And with ‘local’ references carefully explained, it is accessible to and aimed at an international readership.

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CLIVE BARKER

JEN HARVIE