NTQ Book Reviews
edited by Bella Merlin

Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart, ed.
The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson

Reviewing this book for a journal which focuses on theatre is something of a bizarre experience simply because The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson is not interested in theatre, theatre histories, or the many and diverse meanings which Jonson’s work has produced in a multitude of different theatres and cultures. Apart from the occasional passing comment such as Robert C. Evans’s mention of the fact that Garrick had some success in the role of Druggar and a brief discussion of possible original staging conditions by Martin Butler, theatre meanings and the insightful, creative, and exciting criticisms of Jonson offered by theatre workers have all been ignored in favour of plot summaries and pedestrian introductions to the non-theatrical aspects of Jonson’s work.

Indeed, this book is not a companion but more of a basic introduction to Jonson, with the proviso that it omits the most high-profile and arguably most significant aspect of Jonson’s work, its continuing production and reproduction in theatres over a period of four hundred years. Given this extraordinary imbalance in favour of the ‘English literature Jonson’ at the expense of ‘Jonson the theatre practitioner’, the cover illustration, featuring Fiona Shaw in the role of Drugger and a brief discussion of possible original staging conditions by Martin Butler, seems actually misleading. The book almost seeks to marginalize precisely the kind of contribution to Jonson studies offered by such productions. The use of American spelling is also a surprise in a book published by Cambridge University Press.

LIZ SHAFER

Glynn Wickham, Herbert Berry, William Ingram, ed.
English Professional Theatre, 1530-1660
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xlv, 714 p. £90.00

Key documents about the professional theatre in Shakespeare’s time have long been hard to obtain; some were never printed and others appeared in obscure places. For the period between the ‘revolutions’ of Henry VIII’s Act of Supremacy and the Restoration of Charles II, Wickham, Berry, and Ingram have placed in the researcher’s hands virtually all the textual evidence available on the topic. The documents are organized under 517 headings, each being a descriptive label (such as ‘The So-Called “Sharers’ Papers”, 1635’) or an historical assertion supported by documentary evidence (such as ‘A French Company with Women Plays at the Red Bull, 22 November 1629’). This intuitive organization ensures that many standard queries can be answered by simply scanning the table of contents.

Significant new interpretations are presented. The playhouse in Abram Booth’s ‘Utrecht’ picture, long thought to be the Theatre, is assigned back to the Curtain, as Leslie Hotson originally claimed in 1954. The playhouse depicted in the frontispiece to Francis Kirkman’s The Wits (1673) ‘should be the Red Bull in the 1650s’, so the caption to a reproduction of it omits the well-known doubt altogether. Item 347 shows the impact upon the Rose receipts once the Globe ‘was fully open’ in autumn 1599. (What, we might ask, was a ‘partially open’ Globe? Perhaps half an audience, half the actors, or half the play?)

Berry has discovered that the Boar’s Head on Whitechapel High Street was operating in 1599, yet oddly insists that only the Curtain was operating ‘near Bishopsgate’ that summer, and so it must have been Thomas Platter’s playgoing destination ‘not far from our inn in the suburb’. These are, of course, professional quibbles about tiny details. This monumental work will for a long time be the theatre historian’s standard reference for the documentary evidence about this period.

GABRIEL EGAN

Catherine M.S. Alexander and Stanley Wells, ed.
Shakespeare and Race

With the exception of two newly commissioned chapters, the essays in this collection are all reprinted from back issues of Shakespeare Survey between 1958 and 1999. As Margo Hendricks points out in an introduction which carefully places the second term of the book’s title in problematizing scare quotes, the impact of postcolonial theory, race studies, and cultural studies upon Shakespeare has been to make issues of race and ethnicity increasingly central to critical debate. However, there is an often unacknowledged legacy
of valuable earlier scholarship which indicates that ‘we are only the inheritors of an intellectual, critical, and political tradition’.

This tradition is equitably represented in the collection, although essays from the 1980s and 1990s predominate, covering topics ranging from connections between Garrick’s Stratford Jubilee celebrations and the Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753 to Caribbean appropriations of The Tempest. Two pieces deal less with ‘race’ than with national identity: one of these traces the role of Bowdler’s Shakespeare in the nineteenth-century construction of official Englishness, and the other analyzes the use of Shakespeare as a national icon in Germany during the First World War. Only one essay addresses contemporary performance: in this, Celia Daileader suggests that the apparently progressive policy of colour-blind casting at the RSC not only has to contend with the residual racism of the reviewers, but is framed by what she calls ‘Othellophilia’. That is, the black male actor is inevitably constructed in any Shakespearean role as (if he’s lucky) a prototype Othello.

But, as Ania Loomba argues in a fine closing essay, if we are now moving beyond the oppressive and restrictive categories of racial identity and difference which have shaped the reproduction of Shakespeare’s own representations of national, religious, and somatic otherness, the historical character of the texts themselves points the way forward. Originating in ‘the last period in history where ethnic identities could be understood as fluid’, the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries now serve to remind us that, for all its ideological and material force, ‘race’ remains ‘one of the most . . . fragile markers of social difference’. If the task of criticism and performance is now to work on the fragility of ‘race’, it is a task that has history on its side.

ROBERT SHAUGHNESSY

Virginia Scott
Molière: a Theatrical Life
iv, 333 p. £35.00 (hbk).

One of the most curious things about this book is that it should have been published by Cambridge University Press, since its author, in her opening paragraph, firmly situates her work in response to a perceived demand in the American market, describing her subject as being esteemed ‘from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon’. Both blurb and introduction inform us that this is the first biography of Molière to appear in English for seventy years. The question, of course, is still begged of whether we needed a new one, particularly as there is not a great deal that is new here.

The narrative follows the usual route, stopping at the usual staging posts (Les Halles, the Collège de Clermont, the provinces, Paris, and Versailles) and with the usual suspects, both ancient and modern, being cited as supporting evidence (La Grange, Grimarest, Mongrédien, Jürgens, and Maxfield-Miller). This is not to say that the scholarship is not sound, and the known facts are presented in a lively and engaging way. This, paradoxically, is both the book’s strength and its weakness, for the author has a habit of examining facts, putting forward a conjecture on the basis of those facts, and then treating the conjecture as if it were a fact, that would allow a determined critic to demolish the whole house of cards at a stroke. She is not unaware of this, admitting that she is proposing ‘an arrangement of facts, opinions, conjectures, and lies’.

Scott’s biography is essentially a personal interpretation of the dramatist’s life (the opening paragraphs almost embarrassingly describe her quest to commune with the spirits of Molière and Madeleine Béjart) that is no doubt as much a reflection of the character of its author as of its subjects. For example, writing of her decision to accept the argument that Armande Béjart was Madeleine Béjart’s daughter, Scott writes that she does so ‘because it stirs my imagination and produces a more imaginative narrative’. This is courageous stuff in the world of academic writing, but one wonders why she did not go the whole hog and simply write a novel.

It would have helped if she had ironed out the inconsistencies. Thus, Madeleine and Armande are referred to as mother and daughter and as sisters on a single page (p. 246). Given the attention paid to their kinship, it is curious then that Scott devotes comparatively little attention to Armande’s supposed infidelities, writing that ‘this is not the place to discuss in detail Armande’s behaviour after 1664’. There is, though, rather more supposition than some would find acceptable when it comes to Molière’s own relationship with the adolescent Baron.

The dramatist’s personality is, conventionally, illustrated almost exclusively by reference to his plays, and the book includes long translated passages and frequent plot summaries illuminated by only occasional flashes of perception. This is not the place for a student to seek insights into the plays. Moreover, the jokes and knowing style can sometimes be irritating (L’Impromptu de Versailles is referred to as ‘a mine (maybe a land mine) of information’). There is also a significant amount of what unfortunately appears like padding – almost the whole section on ‘Friends’, for example. And, without going into too much detail, some of the background information not immediately relating to Molière himself appears a little shaky. Thus, the author does not know that Racine and Du Parc had separated before the actress’s death.
Scott concludes her introduction by expressing the wish that her book will be useful to ‘the actors, the directors, and the dramaturgs who produce Molière’s plays and to the public that sees them and to all those who love the theatre and France’. It is an ambitious goal, but sadly one is forced to wonder whether this is the type of book that those people would have wanted.

Jan Clarke

Hans-Goran Ekman
Strindberg and the Five Senses

Strindberg and the Five Senses is an intimate and well-organized study of the four ‘Chamber Plays’ written in 1907: Storm, The Burned House, The Ghost Sonata, and The Pelican. Ekman’s book has been masterfully translated by Michael Steene, thanks to a grant from the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. No critical work available to us in English can boast of providing such a close and sustained analysis of these texts, treated by Ekman as a largely self-contained ‘unit’ in which the playwright’s lifelong preoccupation with the five senses – is scandalously rare. Scholarly works of this nature, along with more translations – not adaptations – of the plays themselves will lead to an abundant variety of interpretations of Strindberg that may at last reach theatre stages with some semblance of integrity.

Teresa Murjas

C. W. E. Bigsby
Modern American Drama, 1945–2000

This edition of Modern American Drama extends by ten years and 45,000 words Bigsby’s 1992 critical text of (roughly) the same name. It is organized around the same basic canonical authors – Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and David Mamet – and offers cogent analyses of their work and lives. This edition considers newer plays which were not available to the first edition, such as Albee’s Three Tall Women (which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994) and August Wilson’s Two Trains Running (1992), amongst others.

The chapters on Broadway and the ‘performing self’ remain virtually untouched, though an extra paragraph is added to the latter. The penultimate chapter, on politics, race, and gender, is extended more substantially, with some new voices added (including Suzan-Lori Parks) and additional plays are examined. This is particularly true of August Wilson, whose work receives an additional four pages. Marsha Norman, Wendy Wasserstein, and Emily Mann’s sections are also extended.

Finally, Bigsby adds a completely new chapter, ‘Beyond Broadway’. In it, he examines the phenomenon of Off-Broadway, reminding the reader that while it was once possible for new dramatists to find their work produced on Broadway, financial and cultural constraints now make this less likely. This chapter focuses on Terry McNally, Lanford Wilson, John Guare, David Rabe (who is also discussed in the previous chapter), A. R.
This collection brings together essays from Routledge’s ‘Casebooks on Modern Dramatists’ series, which has been running now for over twenty years. The scope of the collection is broad; the usual cast list – Beckett, Osborne, Pinter, Churchill, Hare, Shepard, Mamet, et al. – has been assembled, and the book also includes essays on dramatists who are usually considered either far too successful (Neil Simon, Alan Ayckbourn) or, for a British reader at least, too obscure (Horton Foote) to warrant serious attention. The collection attempts to provide both an overview of the breadth of writing for the theatre in the second half of the twentieth century and an accessible introduction for the undergraduate reader to some of the main themes and techniques in each writer’s work.

If compilations such as this run a collective risk, it is that the contributions, drawn as they are from a variety of collections, can vary widely in both tone and acuity. It would be nice to say that this volume avoids this risk successfully: it does not. The essays, in fact, tend towards the mediocre; only a few fulfil the purpose of the collection. It is not enough, for an undergraduate, that Pinter’s The Homecoming is described as ‘a baffling, unresolved, and unresolvable human situation’. That is where an analysis begins, not where it ends.

It is not enough that an essay on David Hare should ignore the political aspects of his work; not enough to learn that both versions of Jimmy Porter (in Look Back in Anger and Déjà Vu) represent, in some unclear way, an intrinsically postmodern response to the state of Britain. It is not enough that a chapter on Terence McNally should be, in essence, a straight retelling of Master Class. Only the essays on Mamet, Stephen Sondheim, and on Christopher Hampton’s reworking of Les Liaisons Dangereuses manage to provide much in the way of useful insights. The collection, whether as an introduction to the breadth of contemporary writing for the stage or as advertisement for the casebook series, is otherwise profoundly disappointing.

**Michelene Wandor**

**Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender**


*£25.00* (hbk), *£16.99* (pbk).


Post-War British Drama is a reworking and updating of Wandor’s earlier Look Back in Gender, and as such it covers much of the same material. Where the earlier work used an analytical framework of representations of sexuality and gender in British plays of the 1950s through to the 1980s, this updated book takes us through to the end of the 1990s. Wandor writes against what she sees as a background where the study of performance, as opposed to text, dominates. Thus she wants to treat text as ‘a discrete entity … discrete in a way in which performance can never be’.

Although this is a valid position, it poses problems when dealing with later plays where authors, moving towards using more challenging and poetic forms of playwriting, are far more overt in their exploitation of the theatrical possibilities of text in performance. Therefore, they create texts in which meaning is inextricably bound up with the physical actuality of performance. Thus the work on later plays is both rather superficial and thin on the ground (four plays receive attention and one further late-1990s play in the Coda section at the end of the book).

This would have been a great opportunity to look at the work of the ‘new wave’ of ‘cool Britannia’ playwrights in the contexts of the preceding generations. Similarly the contextual work in the earlier part of the book is far more detailed but overall there is little about cultural reception. Ultimately, although revamped and reinterpreted in some cases, Wandor has not risen to the challenge of a fifty-year, eagerly awaited analysis. Much of the work is overly descriptive, but the general coverage, despite the lack of work on the 1990s in particular, will make a useful reference/handbook for students and for those interested in British drama in general.

**Barnaby Short**

**Bella Merlin**

**Beyond Stanislavsky: the Psycho-Physical Approach to Actor Training**


Stanislavsky is one of the most influential – and often misunderstood – theorists of the twentieth
century, and his methods have been vulgarized into clichés wherever acting is taught. To find out what his ideas really mean in practice, Bella Merlin travelled to Moscow to take part in a ten-month actor-training programme at the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in 1993. Using the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis, she learnt the advanced approach to training labelled here as ‘psycho-physical acting’. Studying under three Russian teachers, one of whom had been taught by an assistant director of Stanislavsky, Merlin discovered some of the ways in which physical actions can induce emotions, as well as the other way round.

Her book is a lucid and detailed account which begins with a summary of Stanislavsky’s general approach and a description of psycho-physical workouts led by movement teacher, Vladimir Ananyev. Other chapters focus on working as an ensemble, developing a role in rehearsal, and using the psycho-physical techniques as an actor, director, or teacher. Although it never reads like a dry manual, the book gives plenty of examples of practical exercises. At all times, Merlin emphasizes the hard work involved, the problems to be expected, the temptations to take short cuts, and the very real gains the methods can yield.

Although those looking for theoretical insights may be disappointed, the book offers a clearly written and practical guide to its subject. Both teachers and students will benefit because Merlin’s approach is neither prescriptive nor dogmatic. At its best it is a sharing of experience, and offers crucial insights into what can be gained from understanding a rigorous programme of well-focused exercises. As Merlin is the first to admit, however, the success of such programmes varies from person to person – and success in one activity does not guarantee success in another. In the end, this is a provocative, inspiring, and engrossing account of one actor’s geographical, psychological, and professional voyage of discovery.

ALEKS SIERZ

Lorna Marshall
The Body Speaks: Performance and Expression

Marshall uses her extensive experience as a teacher and director to create this practical handbook for students, theatre practitioners, and teachers. The exercises stem from Marshall’s belief that the body is central to the communication processes with which performers engage. The book is divided into two sections: the first is on training, ‘discovery and preparation’, and the second on application – ‘putting it into practice’. Marshall’s close association with Yoshi Oida is felt throughout; the processes centre mainly on the importance of experiencing somatic and organic working methods. The material at times draws upon and develops the work of Lecoq, Laban, Cicely Berry, and eastern training forms such as Jo Ha Kyu, and there is an honesty about the way these practitioners are credited.

Marshall’s style is relaxed and this makes the material very accessible. Her description of exercises echoes that of the teacher’s voice within the rehearsal room. It is this very tone that urges you to try some of the exercises . . . and they do work. They have a feel of familiarity about them, awakening deep memories of workshops long gone, and this is very helpful.

There are some limitations. Marshall’s insights into performance issues are often illuminating, but her use of sociologically-based perspectives remains anecdotal and lacks any theoretical support. The section on applications contains useful approaches to working with text to illuminate the subtext, objectives, and status. But at times some other exercises appear sub-Stanislavskian, and sections such as those on ‘camera technique’ and ‘hints on style’ are very fragmentary. Marshall increasingly acknowledges that there is not scope within the book properly to investigate these strands. Despite these reservations, The Body Speaks is one of a handful of practical handbooks that I will actually use both within teaching and my own practice.

KATIE NORMINGTON

Helen Stoddart
Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation

Rings of Desire is an attempt to achieve a number of things within one book. It is an introduction to a cultural history – rather than an analysis of new materials – which details the origins of circus. Stoddart looks at the social and economic as well as the cultural structures within which mainly western circus has functioned, and its changing social status as ‘a long-standing celebration of the shocks of modernity and of the strength and supremacy of the human body to transcend all difficulties thrown at it’.

Stoddart points out not only the links with early circus and patriotism, but also the ways in which early circus played with ideas of populism and politics. Much in the early chapters will not be new to circus scholars, but Stoddart moves with ease from history to theory and back again and this will make the book a useful read for anyone interested in popular forms of entertainment.
The second half of the book is devoted to representation, and here Stoddart presents Dickens as someone who imagined circus as ‘not only commercially and culturally modern’, but also as an art form whose ‘language of performance constitutes a special challenge to formal modes of inscription’. The work on film focuses mainly on Fellini and Wenders, with a particular concentration on the female aerialist. It is a shame that these later chapters are not more extensive and developed, as they promise a real cross-fertilization of circus history, cultural theory, and theories of representation.

Much of Rings of Desire makes good use of secondary sources, but at times the use of theatre theory is a little superficial. Nevertheless, this is a very good and accessible introduction which students and those crossing over into performance studies will find extremely useful. The author briefly outlines current developments in contemporary circus – based on spectacular human physical skills, and often community-oriented – and it is the documentation and analysis of such ‘new circus’ which would make a viable development of the author’s research.

**MAGGIE B. GALE**

*Andrew Lamb*

*150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre*


Andrew Lamb’s trail across one hundred and fifty years of popular musical theatre starts out as a leisurely stroll through the early years of European operetta, with a stop-off in Spain for a detailed look at the zarzuela, but as his journey reaches post-war America it becomes little more than a hop, skip, and jump through the world of contemporary Broadway. Lamb’s heart seems to be in the ‘ravishing’ and ‘exquisite’ waltzes of a dead form rather than the living theatre of today. There is an entire chapter on the works of Offenbach, including detailed plot summaries and even cast lists, whereas Rodgers and Hammerstein, Broadway’s seminal composers, are allotted just a few pages; and their most daring musical in form and theme, *Allegro* (1947) – a show that greatly influenced the young Stephen Sondheim, who worked on it as a tea boy – is mentioned only in a throwaway remark.

Furthermore, Lamb’s concept of the ‘development of the musical’ is largely presented in terms of subject matter, with little space given to either form or social context, though to be fair he does rightly credit Kurt Weill as an innovative force on Broadway theatre. However, the main problem with this book, as has already been highlighted by a review in the American magazine *Show Music*, is its numerous errors, particularly in the Broadway sections. To add just two to their long list, I would point out that in the stage version of *The Sound of Music*, ‘My Favourite Things’ belongs to the Mother Abbess rather than Maria. On a more serious note, Jonathan Larson, the writer of the musical *Rent*, did not die of AIDS but of an aortic aneurysm.

**STEVE NALLON**

*Vincent McInerny*

*Writing for Radio*


There is certainly room for a well-researched book on the history of writing for radio, a sound academic study of the state of radio today, and a first-rate manual on how to write for this underestimated medium. McInerny’s book attempts to be all three, but while it carries some excellent advice for writers and some astute observations on the state of radio today, it fails to fulfil thoroughly all its aims.

Much of the book feels out of date. The chapter on drama-documentary, for example, offers a very limited definition of the genre, and overlooks recent ground-breaking work by producers such as Sara Conkey, Rosie Boulton, and Kate McAll with writers like Nicholas McInerny and Lucy Gough. There is the curiously old-fashioned suggestion that children are better played by young adults – bewildering in the light of Becky Simpson’s extraordinary and popular performance as *Spoonface Steinberg*. And the section on limericks is simply bizarre: is there a difference between the ‘radio limerick’ and any other sort? It seems odd in such a long book to expend so much space on this while not even mentioning one of the most enduring forms of radio writing – the long drama series. No analysis is offered on why *The Archers* has survived so long, nor what makes the twice-weekly soap *Westway* central to the BBC World Service.

For aspiring writers, the book is peppered with sound advice and excellent exercises. But the description of what happens to your script after you’ve sent it to the BBC should be read with caution. The ‘Script Unit’ that he describes disappeared several years ago – although, to be fair, it may be rising like a phoenix in the form of the recently invented New Writing Initiative. Radio – and radio drama in particular – is yet to be fully recognized as the culturally important medium it is. To that extent, McInerny’s book should be seen as a welcome addition to the library.

**PETER LESLIE WILD**
Following on from his excellent groundbreaking overview of Chicano/o drama published in 1982, Jorge Huerta’s newest publication traces trends, developments, and motifs in Chicano/o drama in the twenty years since Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* was seen on Broadway in 1979. From Valdez’s roots with the Teatro Campesino in the mid-1960s through to Guillermo Reyes’s generically eclectic *Deporting the Divas* (1998), Huerta delineates trajectories which have questioned established theatrical practices in the US. *Zoot Suit’s* importance may have been analyzed elsewhere, but the strength of Huerta’s study lies in locating its position as a pivot against which much subsequent Chicano/o drama has been measured. While Huerta justifies his approach of concentrating on playwrights and plays rather than companies or directors (or indeed performers), the study’s merits lie in framing the playwright’s role within the larger infrastructures in which the work is produced.

The scope of Huerta’s study is extensive, from the concentration on the domestic family unit to gay and lesbian themed dramaturgy. He structures his assessment of the period into four methodically organized chapters which explore (1) Chicano mythologies, (2) representations of the dead and the dismembered, (3) religious and spiritual topics and events, and (4) the representation of homo-sexualities in different generations of Chicana/o dramas. Obviously the terrain of each chapter spills into the other sections of the book, but the advantage of Huerta’s approach lies in covering a wide range of dramatists without being trapped into a reductively chronological approach. The fact that an increasing number of plays covered have appeared in print in recent years will facilitate the diffusion of work which has all too rarely penetrated theatrical or academic consciousness in the UK.

A number of writers covered by Huerta also feature in Ramírez’s exploration of Chicanas/Latinas in American theatre. Like Huerta, Ramírez is both practitioner and academic, and brings a discerning eye to the material she examines. Unlike Huerta, Ramírez favours a loosely chronological approach. She opens (in Chapter 1) by taking the reader from the pre-Columbian Mexican performance tradition and the *pastorela* folk drama to the early decades of the twentieth century. She provides a welcome description of Latina performers who worked both within Latino companies and within the wider structures of the North American theatre establishment.

The focus is refreshingly eclectic – from the impact of the Mexican revolution on the American stage (Chapter 2), to the socially conscious theatre which had its roots in the social activism that followed the widespread migration to the US in the mid-twentieth century (Chapter 3), to the emergence of a Chicana/Latina theatre movement from the 1970s onwards (Chapter 4). The final two chapters explore a range of contemporary writers who have moved away from the model established by Valdez, writing and staging what Ramírez refers to as a ‘dialectics of difference . . . actors of symbolic resistance’ who desire ‘to reclaim ethnicity both inside and outside themselves’.

As well as considering dramatists who have carved out careers around the repertory stages and alternative venues of the US, Ramírez gives space to those working on the borders of performance and theatre, such as Coco Fusco, Carmelita Tropicana, and Monica Palacios. There is less emphasis on performers in later chapters: Virginia Rimalb is a conspicuous omission, as also is the dramatist-scholar Caridad Svich, who edited the key Latina/o anthology *Out of the Fringe* (2000). These, however, are minor criticisms of a volume which confidently charts the evolution of Latina theatre through chequered times.

Maria M. Delgado