Barbarous Play: Race on the Renaissance Stage **by Lara Bovilsky**
Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 218 pp. (paperback)

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In this extraordinarily rich and impressive book, Bovilsky attentively considers representations and understandings of race in early modern English drama. Her purpose, as stated in the introduction, is to argue that 'early modern racial logics have much in common with modern and contemporary ones, including most of all those elements that make racial identities unstable and incoherent, elements long believed specific to the earlier period' (3). Utilising as case studies plays by Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster and Middleton, she demonstrates how racial meanings are informed by 'narratives of fluidity and boundary crossing,' especially miscegenation, religious conversion, class transgression, 'troubled national boundaries,' and moral and physical degeneracy (3). Bovilsky's aim is to reveal the ways in which the interrelation of race with 'proximate, identity-forming categories' may be used to unravel racial content in the period (8).

The book begins with an intelligent introduction that outlines the critical history of race studies within early modern literary criticism. It then highlights the English Renaissance period's inconsistent terminology, especially focusing on the various usages of the word 'black.' Here Bovilsky makes a compelling case for allowing for 'broader definitions of blackness and of race' and for recognising the 'repeated shifts in English and non-English and partially English racial identities and identifications' (19). The author goes on to remind her reader that race is a social construct and that racial classifications and hierarchies – both early modern and modern - are informed by numerous discourses, not just scientific ones. She concludes

her introduction by foregrounding fluidity as a characteristic feature of racial signification.

The chapters that follow are organised around the interrelation of race with the other categories that underpin racial identities and tensions in early modern drama. Chapter 1, 'Desdemona's Blackness,' offers a stimulating discussion of the way in which male characters in *Othello* refer to Desdemona in a racially charged language as a result of the agency that she experiences in defying her father and marrying Othello. Emphasising the English Renaissance association of female unchastity with blackness and tracing the trajectory of the play's racialisation of Desdemona, Bovilsky reveals how the character's transition from 'fair' daughter to 'begrimed and black' wife is indicative of how discourses and ideologies of race and gender intersect in the period. The second chapter, 'Exemplary Jews and the Logic of Gentility,' focuses on the racial and class components of religious identity. Paying particular attention to *The Merchant of Venice*, it examines the way in which fantasies of familial negation and disowning manifest themselves within narratives of Jewish conversion and transformation. Particularly striking is the analysis of how Jewishness is differently and variably racialised in the dramatic constructions of different Jewish characters: here Shylock's role in signifying Jewishness is considered in relation to other characters, principally Marlowe's Barabas and Shakespeare's Jessica.

Chapter 3, 'The English Italian,' considers Jacobean ideas about Italians and the implications of Italian identification for English subjects. It begins by discussing Italianness as a determinant in Portia's identity in *The Merchant of Venice* and goes on to explore the physical and moral blackness structuring Webster's representations of Italians in *The White Devil*. Central to this chapter, then, is the racial component of nationality; the cross-racial figurations of Portia and Vittoria signal the way in which

English Italianate dramas reflect experiences of diversity and promote fluid transnational and transracial identifications. Bovilsky's final foray into the period's dramatic constructions of difference draws on Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* in order to think through the racialisation of other Mediterranean nations. This chapter, entitled 'Race, Science, and Aversion,' considers expressions of desire and aversion that result from individual humoral physiology and generate racially inflected tensions.

Running through all the chapters is a concern with the 'blackening' of unruly women - with the racial language that is used to police the bodies of female characters experiencing agency. Each chapter is convincingly argued and set against a wider socio-historical context. Throughout this authoritative work, Bovilsky provides ingenious insights and excellent local observations about her chosen play-texts, teasing out the manifold implications of entrenched words and constructions. The close textual analysis of the plays, combined with the wealth of lucid and insightful contextual information, enables Bovilsky to yield exciting and fruitful readings.

My main quibble with *Barbarous Play* is that it seems curious to me that, in a book featuring the subtitle 'Race on the Renaissance Stage,' no attention has been given to the early modern masquing stage. I am thinking here primarily of Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* which is central to a consideration of representations of race on the early modern stage. The absence of any discussion of race on the masquing stage is especially surprising given the image selected for the cover of the book: Inigo Jones' costume design for a female masquer performing the role of a "Daughter of Niger" in Jonson's *Blackness*. Throughout her study Bovilsky adopts a predominantly literary approach, and in several places a more in-depth consideration of performance factors would have further drawn out the complexities of the figurations of race

contained in her selected plays. Nevertheless, Bovilsky does make up for this oversight in the book's overall accomplishments and felicities.

Barbarous Play is a critical work of a high order. Bovilsky provides a fascinating, if sometimes densely written, account of the conceptions of racial alterity articulated in English Renaissance drama. In emphasising the parallels between early modern and contemporary racial logics, the author is able to point to how 'the conflation of natural and social kinds in our own culture has grown so extreme as to blind us to the centrality of the imprecision, illogic, and inconsistency in our own views and narratives about race' (160). As she astutely comments, 'we have unwisely given modern science pride of place as the origin and engine of racism' (161). This book not only constitutes an interesting and valuable addition to the existing body of scholarship on race in early modern English literature, but also provides its reader with a meaningful and memorable read.

City Stages: Theatre and Urban Space in a Global City **by Michael McKinnie**

Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 178 pp. (Hardback)

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> [Individual plays and individual people] are always a part of greater political, economic, and cultural processes. (McKinnie 134)
>
> Given that we cannot escape the [context] problem, can we provide innovative solutions to it? (Davis 209)

If the theatrical event is the product of a variety of processes at work within a given context, how can one reconstruct this context in order to inform the interpretation of the (ephemeral) theatrical event? How do we identify the gaps in (theatre) historiography and how do we respond to them? These questions reflect the 'context

problem' as it is described by Tracy Davis. Davis calls for innovative solutions, and Michael McKinnie's *City Stages* provides one by offering a fragmented account of the theatrical developments in Toronto from the late 1960s until the 1990s. The work's scope is defined by the relationship between the urban and the theatrical space; between the political economy and the geography of the city.

McKinnie does not limit his study to the discussion of Canadian theatre as a product of the nation; he rather argues that theatre is a product of the specific economy and geography of Toronto as a global city. While delineating the transition of the political economy of Toronto from Fordism to Post-Fordism, he examines the ways in which theatre and the city adapted to it. McKinnie offers a convincing interpretation of the change of theatre and the city by using a primarily materialist critical apparatus, which seeks to investigate theatre history through its intersection with urban geography and political economy. In his introduction, the author clarifies that *City Stages* is not a historical survey of venues and companies, but looks into the ways in which specific examples map discourses and 'elaborate key concerns' (16).

City Stages is divided into two parts that focus on specific aspects of the relationship between theatre, geography and the political economy of Toronto. The first part discusses the 'Civic Development' of the city, and the ways in which civic ideology has been made manifest in the relationship between theatre and the gentrification of the urban environment of Toronto in the last four decades.

In chapter one, McKinnie explicates the link between cultural institution-building and the shift from national to transnational urban political economies. He focuses on the buildings of the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts (SLC) and the Ford Centre as examples of the transformations of the civic imagining of Toronto. In chapter two he describes how theatre has been used in discourses supporting a 'new

urbanism' in the Post-Fordist era, which promoted a new image of the city in the transformation of the Central Industrial District (the old and 'desolate' image of the urban environment) into the Entertainment District (the new, clean and safe image of the city). McKinnie suggests that this transformation implies a shift in the fundamental aspects of the political economy of Toronto and a parallel shift in the streetscapes and their use by the consumers.

The second part discusses 'The Edifice Complex' and its consequences on small and medium sized theatre companies in Toronto. Here, the author discusses the relationship of selected theatre companies (the Theatre Passe Muraille, the Toronto Workshop Productions, Necessary Angel and Buddies in Bad Times) with their owned spaces, or their relationship with the idea of space ownership.

Chapters three and four closely examine how Theatre Passe Muraille and Toronto Workshop Productions (TWP) negotiate the issue of ownership of theatrical space and discuss how theatre buildings embody each company's identity. Theatre Passe Muraille used its 'building to relocate spatial concerns from an artistic ideal to the administration of its labour process' (90) and ownership came to imply stability and connected the building's history with that of the company. Owned property was the marker of the company's legitimacy and provided the 'spatial means by which the theatre event blurred histories, and invented and reproduced cultural tradition' (90). TWP developed a similar relationship with its building and was eventually trapped in a contradictory discourse that led the company in decline: 'in order to attempt to preserve itself from the market economy, TWP was forced to enter the market through private property and ownership' (115). McKinnie suggests that the bond between the building and the company was undermined by its membership in the real estate economy.

Chapter five focuses on a different understanding of the relationship between companies and theatre spaces/urban geography. The two examples used (Necessary Angel and Buddies in Bad Times) illustrate how cultural legitimacy can be achieved in terms of urban geography rather than property ownership. Necessary Angel claimed temporary monopoly over specific spaces, manifesting a different connection to the built environment – 'linking dramaturgy with geography' (132). Buddies occupied a property formerly used and owned by TWP and claimed this space as their home not in terms of the property itself, but in terms of its position within the urban geography of Toronto. The two examples in this chapter illustrate a different understanding and connection with the city and its geography: rather than using ownership as a calculus for cultural legitimacy, these two companies employed the geographical particularities of the city in order to establish themselves through 'inventive uses of space and, at the same time, sophisticated modes of geographical self-fashioning' (132).

Overall, *City Stages* provides an extremely useful and interesting analysis of the interaction between theatre and the city in Toronto after 1967. It sheds light on the developments that shaped the image of the city and the identity of its stages. McKinnie admits his privileging of a specific type of critical instruments over others, thus acknowledging his conscious methodological choices. The book's structure guides the reader through a clear application of the methodological solutions devised for the narration of the theatrical history of Toronto. In his conclusion, the author argues that this analytical model can be further used to examine 'city stages in other times and spaces' and invites the reader to work in a similar way with other case studies, in order to establish a 'wider geography of theatre in urban space' (135). This book offers not only interesting conclusions about the theatre in Toronto, but also a

solid methodological solution to Davis' 'context problem' – a methodology that can be applied in other cases and generate a wider understanding of the processes that govern the relationships between theatres and cities.

References

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Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing: 1995-2005 **by Amelia Howe Kritzer**

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 239 pp. (hardback)

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In 2001, Aleks Sierz cemented the phrase 'in-yer-face' as a descriptor of the 'dominant theatrical style' of the 1990s (4), and since then, the decade and its theatre have been ripe for further consideration, reappraisal, and sustained critical reflection. Unsurprisingly, the number of books published in this area has seen a marked increase over the past couple of years: Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders' edited collection, *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (2008); monographs on Sarah Kane and Martin Crimp by, respectively, Saunders and Sierz; and Mireia Aragay et al's *British Theatre of the 1990s* (2008), to name just a couple of the more prominent. Amelia Howe Kritzer's addition to the Palgrave 'Performance Interventions' series, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing: 1995-2005*, initially looks like an interesting contribution to this body of work, both

because of its apparent focus on the political in terms of content and context, and because its time-frame moves out of the '90s, making it more current.

Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain surveys, and provides useful overview of, a broad range of contemporary plays. Over the course of its seven chapters, Kritzer discusses nearly eighty works by over fifty writers, a considerable number of which have so far received little or no other critical attention. Kritzer's aim is to demonstrate the resurgence of the 'political' within British theatre. The opening chapter provides a sweeping consideration of politics, British theatre, and political theatre, which should provide an unfamiliar reader with a range of ideas and contexts for consideration and further study. Defining political plays as 'those which attempt to create political meaning by making visible and/or interpreting particular social phenomena as public problems or issues' (10), *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain* provides a summary of recent works which could be categorised as containing issue-based material.

Chapter 2, 'Generational Politics: The In-Yer-Face Plays,' looks at works by Kane, Ravenhill, Penhall, Upton, McDonagh, et al, but doesn't particularly extend or deepen the analysis given to them by Sierz. Eliding the fact that many of these writers can only be partially subsumed into the 'in-yer-face' category, Kritzer problematically describes the playwrights as a 'cohort' conditioned by a range of '[t]raumatic events' (29). Chapter 3, 'Intergenerational Dialogue,' (which starts with a discussion of the recent work of the protean, influential Caryl Churchill) broadens the scope. In a section on the theatrical representation of race and ethnicity, Kritzner looks at plays by Roy Williams, Ayub Khan-Din, Tanika Gupta, Doňa Daley and Kwame Kwei-Armah, before turning to a cluster of works which address the 'post-Thatcher working class' (96). In the following three chapters, Kritzer moves away from a generational

historiography, explicitly focusing on the particular issues and concerns which dog contemporary Britain, and these chapters are stronger for their clearer thematic underpinning. Using her content-led approach, Kritzer finds examples of plays which have dealt with a wide range of current social and political issues, from those of gender, race, class and religion, to those of political leadership, individualism, collective identity; from the broad issues of history and globalisation, to specifics such as the situation in Northern Ireland, privatization, and the war in Iraq. Kritzer explores the ways in which such current concerns have appeared in various ways and forms on the British stage, including discussions of verbatim plays, mainstream successes (Bennett's *The History Boys*; Frayn's *Copenhagen*) and the more recent works of both established 'political' playwrights (Hare; Brenton) and some of the 'in-yer-face' "generation" (McDonagh; Ravenhill).

Concluding with the short chapter, 'Political Theatre in an Era of Disengagement,' Kritzer argues that recent 'political' plays on the British stage often 'begin with a rejection of idealism' and frequently replace this with a 'pragmatic humanism' which locates meaning in a 'connection to others in family or community' (219). Less persuasive is Kritzer's assertion that '[p]olitical plays have helped to define post-Thatcher politics through the issues and themes they have brought to visibility,' (218) a statement which is not sufficiently substantiated. Kritzer demonstrates that new writing in contemporary Britain engages with current events and issues, but, apart from in the examples of the Tribunal plays (which she discusses in the book's strongest chapter, 'Issues for Post-Thatcher Britain'), there is little evidence to substantiate the idea that theatre's bringing-to-visibility is demonstrably responsible for any consequential shift. Theatre's efficacy is, once again, hard to prove.

There are a number of major problems with this book: of context, content, and approach. In terms of the work's context, Kritzer's choice of the term 'post-Thatcher' is misleading. It seems more that she's chosen this phrase because it's the neatest descriptor for her time-frame (which does, after all, start two years before Britain became 'Blairite'), than because she wants to shed light on the term. Any discussion about what makes British society 'post-Thatcher,' or how contemporary political theatre might be meaningfully labelled like this is cursory and generalized. Kritzer quotes some famously Thatcherite statements, but provides little specific or detailed context which might help the reader to understand what she understands Thatcherism, or its political (and theatrical) descendents, to be. This might sound like a request for stating the obvious, but current undergraduates (who this book is clearly geared towards) were born as late as 1990: post-Thatcher, indeed – but it seems, in the light of this, not unreasonable to suggest that some of these contexts might benefit from more thorough explanation.

In terms of its content, despite this book's scope, and its cover-claims of comprehensiveness, there are some noteworthy omissions. Martin Crimp is name-dropped but none of his works are discussed, though there's a strong case for considering his work as some of the most interestingly politically engaged of recent years. David Harrower, David Greig and Dennis Kelly, three prominent 'new writing' voices, whose works might easily fit Kritzer's definition of 'political theatre,' are nowhere to be seen. Kritzer clearly had to put limitations on her material somewhere, and her subtitle 'New Writing' demarks where this containing boundary lies, but she writes as though the pieces which she is discussing are the only 'political' pieces of performance on the British scene. In *Staging the UK* (2005), Jen Harvie argues that attention could usefully be moved away from the 'wave' of new writing in the 1990s,

pointing to the limitations and prejudices that 'British theatre's dominant literary narrative [….] produces and naturalises' (119). Kritzer's decision to focus solely on new writing is not sufficiently articulated or critically positioned to be able to avoid the pitfalls which Harvie points to.

Kritzer's range and scope are broad, and this is the book's strength, but her treatment consistently skims the surface of this content, so that this simultaneously constitutes its most significant flaw. Her approach, in almost every instance, is to offer a short plot-synopsis, and although these descriptions provide adequate glosses of the plays, there's little room for detailed critical discussion of or sustained engagement with the works in question. Kritzer only occasionally supports her narrative with textual or performative examples, and where she does, there is often insufficient distinction between a textual given and a directorial decision. There's also only limited consideration of the reception contexts of the pieces, which is surprising, given Kritzer's assertions that political plays might somehow be conditioning the world outside the theatre and 'making an impact on current understandings of society and politics' (26).

There is certainly currently the space and interest for fresh analyses and discussions of the theatrical output of the 1990s and early 2000s, and a thorough investigation of its major playwrights and practitioners would be welcome. *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain* in some senses begins this task. Although its critical and theoretical analysis is not especially rigorous, there is little doubt that, given this book's title and premise, it will make it into libraries and onto reading lists. And, as a survey of much of the new writing landscape of the past decade, and as a first consideration of some of the plays of the early 2000s, this book contains useful material for further and future consideration.

References

Harvey, Jen. *Staging the UK*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005.

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