
Even though the editor of *Contemporary British Theatre*, Vicky Angelaki, defines the subtitle of the volume, *Breaking New Ground*, as referring to “contemporary plays that have redefined dramatic representation, breaking new ground through form, content and the ways these interact with one another—not necessarily harmoniously” (3), I believe that the subtitle also applies to both the essays’ theoretical position on the category of the dramatic, and to their choice of plays, which, with two exceptions (the essays by Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Elizabeth Sakellaridou), were all performed in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The general theoretical frame, within which all contributors seem to work, even though they also follow their own specific theoretical interests, is laid down by Liz Tomlin in her Preface to the volume. Having put the category of in-yr-face theatre to rest with only one sentence, Tomlin then directs her critical scalpel at a theoretical category which has recently been generously, and perhaps sometimes even indiscriminately, applied to define twenty-first century theatre practise in the British context. The category is, of course, Hans-Thies Lehmann’s concept of postdramatic theatre, which Tomlin criticises rather mercilessly, though perhaps not entirely undeservedly so. Linking the concept of the dramatic to notions such as totality, wholeness, and closure (ix), Lehmann considers dramatic theatre to be “ideologically regressive” (ix) and lacking any subversive potential. For Tomlin, Lehmann’s conclusion is totally “unpalatable” (ix), as it creates a situation in which scholars “attempting to circumvent the conflation of logocentric ideology and dramatic form in Lehmann’s own analysis, . . . extradit[e] playwrights from the dramatic to the postdramatic” (ix-x). Such “extradition,” however, is only possible with regard to the work of a few selected playwrights, such as Martin Crimp or Sarah Kane, leaving other playwrights’ drama such as that by Roy Williams or Kwame Kwei-Armah “narrowly conceived and ideologically stigmatized” (x). And yet, as Tomlin passionately argues, even though their work does not perhaps exhibit the same high level of formal experimentation as Crimp’s or Kane’s, it nevertheless has the potential to undermine and question the dominant perception of minority communities in Britain and, therefore, hardly deserves the label of being “ideologically regressive” (xi). “Realist drama,” as Tomlin convincingly puts forward, “might well retain the capacity for progressive ideological impact when seeking to re-vision, from a minority or liminal perspective, representational worlds on the stage that have not historically been permitted to establish a cultural authority or spectacle, on their own terms, that is yet in need of deconstruction” (xi).
What Tomlin’s and, taking their cue from her position, all the contributions to the volume thus set out to do is to “rescue” dramatic work “from Lehmann’s ideological prosecution” (x) in what Tomlin refers to as a process of “re-configuring the dramatic” (x). What this reconfiguration entails, according to Tomlin, is, for example, the acknowledgement that contemporary drama is a “much richer and more diverse field than the singular, logocentric and ultimately strategic ‘other’ to the ever-burgeoning field of the postdramatic” (xii). Setting an example for the essays in the volume and insisting that drama can and does engage in what Lehmann expects of postdramatic theatre, namely “self-reflection, decomposition and separation of the elements of dramatic theatre” (x), Tomlin immediately begins with the process of reconfiguration by offering a diachronic analysis of the self-reflexive capacity in drama and how it has been progressively developed in various plays and playwrights (xiii-xxii), beginning with August Strindberg and ending with Martin Crimp and Caryl Churchill.

Although perhaps less programmatically so, the other essays in the volume continue Tomlin’s “mission” of re-defining the category of drama, picking up where she left off in chronological terms by predominantly focusing on the dramatic output produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and distancing themselves from Lehmann’s restrictive approach to theatre. As Vicky Angelaki asserts in her “Introduction” to the volume, “[t]he resulting narrative relies on discourse that strives to develop a model for the understanding of complex stage dynamics rather than a resignation to the inefficacy of the dramatic” (3).

For example the first contribution, Dan Rebellato’s “Exit the Author,” restores the dead author to life—albeit a rather precarious one, convincingly arguing against positions that see the author as a domineering instance that looms over the text and limits the scope of its interpretations. With references to three plays from the beginning (Sarah Kane’s 4.48 Psychosis, 2000), middle (David Greig’s San Diego, 2005), and end of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Tim Crouch’s The Author, 2009), Rebellato shows how staging the authorial absence in each paradoxically asserts the author’s intention, “multiplying and destabilizing the experience of the play(s) in performance.” And he adds, “the apparent withdrawal or death of an author makes the text more elusive and less fully established in performance” (27).

A reconfiguration of the dramatic cannot happen without a new approach to the notion of spectatorship, and as Angelaki asserts in her “Introduction” and later consistently puts into practice in her own contribution on “Politics for the Middle Classes: Contemporary Audiences and the Violence of Now,” the “volume is defined by the need to establish the spectator as the equally stable and mutable component for and with whom the performance must take place and without whom the text remains suspended, a potentiality on the verge, never fully materializing” (4). For this purpose, Angelaki draws on Ranciere’s theory of the emancipated spectator and, focusing mainly on Dennis Kelly’s Love and Money (2006), discusses how plays may lead audiences to such a state and considers the ethical and emotional cost at which such emancipation is attained (76).
The question of spectatorship is also prominent in other essays, such as Marissia Fargkou and Lynette Goddard’s “Acting In/Action: Staging Human Rights in debbie tucker green’s Royal Court Plays,” or, most clearly, in Mireia Aragay and Enric Monforte’s remarkable contribution on “Racial Violence, Witnessing and Emancipated Spectatorship in The Colour of Justice, Fallout and random,” in which Ranciere’s category is coupled with Jenny Spencer’s notion of the “racialized spectator” to discuss compellingly the ethics of spectating by considering how theatre may “enable spectators to challenge established discourses and ways of seeing” (96).

Focusing on the most recent dramatic output, this volume is a significant contribution to the scholarly discourse on contemporary British drama. It not only provides readers with an interesting, reliable, and expertly structured account of the most relevant theatrical work of the last decade, but is also a study of the most up-to-date drama which keeps an open mind towards and includes theatrical practice that does not always conveniently fit in Lehmann’s category. This hospitable approach allows for greater appreciation of the heterogeneity of voices operating within British theatre without treating them with the “postdramatic prejudice.”

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