

## **Book Reviews**



On occasion the Book Review section of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* will present two or more reviews of the same book. The idea is to inspire dialogue, and within limits of space and reason, to provide readers with an opportunity to encounter more than one opinion of the same work. The Book Review editor would like to encourage contributors to consider similar encounters over important new theatre-related books. Following are two reviews of *Shakespeare the Movie*, an important new work on issues related to the filming of Shakespeare's plays.

*Shakespeare the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*. Edited by Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. ISBN 0-415-16584-9.

No author in history has had more works adapted to film and television than William Shakespeare. From the recently discovered 1912 silent version of *Richard III*—the oldest surviving American feature film—to the soon-to-be-released Touchstone Films' *Ten Things I Hate About You* (based on *The Taming of the Shrew*), Shakespeare's plays continue to be filmed and videotaped. The American Film Institute estimates that 400 film versions of Shakespeare's work have been produced since the beginning of cinema.

*Shakespeare the Movie* is a collection of essays that examines how Shakespeare's plays have been adapted for film, TV, and video. More importantly, the book examines the impact of the popularization process at work in most of these productions. The focus is not on how faithfully or adequately these new renditions adhere to Shakespeare's originals. Rather, the book explores how a modern "technologized culture" (4) transforms and recreates Shakespeare in its own image. Together, the essays pose a range of questions about spectatorship, originality, and the influence of pop culture. In this regard, the book differs from other interpretive studies of Shakespeare on film and serves as a valuable and worthy companion to Roger Manville's seminal *Shakespeare and the Film* (A. S. Barnes and Company, 1979) and J.C. Bulman and H.R. Coursen's *Shakespeare On Television* (University Press of New England, 1988).

Collectively, the essays in this volume explore "both the pleasures and the problems that popularization presents for any cultural criticism of Shakespeare on film, TV, and video" (3). The book also addresses the interplay among the discourses in literary, film, performance, and cultural studies. These comparisons are interesting because they simultaneously incorporate a variety of perspectives on the films, including "the relation between original and adaptation, youth culture and pedagogy . . . and the relation between the popular as hip and the

popular as politically radical” (2). As the editors make clear in their introduction, the critical question is whether the popularization—one might even say “Hollywoodization”—of Shakespeare is destined to produce dumbed down versions of his plays, or do such adaptations speak more loudly and clearly to modern audiences than traditional staged productions?

In “Totally Clueless” Boose and Burt examine the powerful role Hollywood has recently played in modern Shakespeare-inspired films such as *The Last Action Hero*, *Hamlet* (starring Mel Gibson), and Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. They conclude, convincingly, that the popularization of Shakespeare on film—which began as a stalwart attempt to bring culture to the masses—is now a market-responsive process in which literary astuteness and intelligence are low priority items. Hollywood’s long held ambivalence about intellectualism manifests itself in a film like Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho*, where the characters spout Shakespeare without registering any knowledge they are doing so. As the authors point out, “If this is a Shakespeare spin-off, no one has to admit knowing it” (p.12).

In “Top of the World, Ma: *Richard III* and cinematic convention,” James Loehlin brilliantly anatomizes Richard Loncraine’s *Richard III* starring Ian McKellen and uncovers the cinematic codes it employs, including references to slasher movies, westerns, and gangster films. In this fascinating study, Loehlin detects startling parallels between McKellen’s performance as Richard and James Cagney’s obsessive, mentally ill Cody Jarrett in *White Heat*.

The most intriguing essay—though perhaps less connected thematically to the other essays—is Tony Howard’s “When Peter Met Orson: The 1953 CBS *King Lear*.” In this account of the television production directed by Peter Brook and starring Orson Welles, Howard argues that even though this 73-minute version was largely unsuccessful, the artistic meeting of these two auteurs created a work of flawed brilliance. Particularly interesting is Howard’s contention that the live television broadcast stands as a brave attempt to work radically within the confines of a medium that, even in its infancy, tended to restrict the kind of audacious interpretation Brook and Welles attempted. According to Howard, neither Brook nor Welles apologized for the radical cutting required to fit the play into its television time-slot. On the contrary, both welcomed the challenge of producing a low-budget, heavily edited version of *Lear* for a mainstream television audience. As Howard reports, twenty years later Brooks observed Welles on French television saying, “We all betray Shakespeare.” The CBS *Lear* showed “how revealing acts of betrayal can be” (133).

The last group of essays addresses the impact of gender and sexuality on filmed and televised productions of Shakespeare’s plays. Particularly interesting among these is Diana Henderson’s exegesis of several film and TV versions of *The*

*Taming of the Shrew*. Similar to the process employed by Penny Gay in her book, *As She Likes It* (Routledge, 1994), Henderson focuses her gender analysis on several key portrayals of Kate, demonstrating that each is a product of its culture and political climate. She contends, with convincing evidence, that *The Taming of the Shrew's* frequent incarnations on film and TV tend to directly coincide with periods of antifeminist backlash.

*Shakespeare the Movie* takes a fresh and critically unique approach to looking at “Shakespeare the screenwriter” (or in many cases, ghost writer). The impressive collection of essays ranges across BBC television productions, filmed theatre productions, and motion picture adaptations. As a study of the impact of popular culture on the canonical status of Shakespeare, this book is a unique and welcome addition to the fields of Shakespeare, film, and cultural studies.

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For several years, the editors at Routledge have been putting out some of the most interesting titles that have appeared on cultural, gender and performance studies. Some of these books have even managed to find the tricky balance point between pop-culture savvy and credible scholarship. The best among them—Lesley Ferris’ 1993 *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Crossdressing* comes to mind—have used a mix of essays by informed writers, interesting illustration and even translation to advance our understanding of issues of performance, representation and cultural consciousness that had gotten very little attention until the current decade. *Shakespeare: The Movie* is a noteworthy addition to this body of work—and a worthwhile successor to the similar (if somewhat less theory-driven) *Shakespeare and the Moving Image*, which Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells edited for Cambridge University Press in 1994.

*Shakespeare, the Movie* is nothing if not timely. In their collaborative first chapter, editors Boose and Burt focus on two issues that have come to a head as a result of the flood of Shakespeare films in the 1990s: pedagogy and the status of the literary text in our intensely visual, electronic culture. These two issues are linked to a degree that it is difficult to talk about the first without addressing the second. The editors astutely point out that the shift from literary to electronic culture has brought with it “an increased interest in the strategies of performance accompanied by a decreased focus on the poetic and the rhetorical” (10). This shift from the word to the visual image has implications both for classroom practice and class politics. Films such as Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* are seen by the editors to feed into “the anti-intellectual machismo” of the marketplace,

even as they are embraced by the undergraduate curriculum. The result confirms “the disappearance of (what was always the illusion of) a single, unified Shakespeare whose works could be covered” (18). Students and teachers have suddenly found themselves in the world of *Leonardo and Juliet*.

This first chapter of *Shakespeare, the Movie* convinces us that we should pay serious attention to what follows, and the next few chapters deliver on that promise. The first is Barbara Hodgdon’s “Race-ing *Othello*, Re-engendering White-out,” which is an intelligent reading of representations of Othello by black actors and the cultural fallout of the Simpson trail. Hodgdon manages to neither solemnize or trivialize race and domestic violence; her essay is a penetrating examination of the signification of genuine blackness in our media-dominated culture.

Donald K. Hedrick’s “War Is Mud” follows—a discussion of “Dirty Harry V” and the ambiguous status of war in the Post-Vietnam era. Hedrick resists the obvious in his treatment of Branagh’s problematizing of valor and glory; in the process he interrogates his own status as a practitioner in a “politically self-conscious field like cultural studies” (45). Hedrick’s insight into the potential exhaustion of “anxiety” and “paradox” as tools of ideological critique provide a productive background for his analysis (46).

The strongest and most inventive essay in the book follows—James N. Loehlin’s examination of Richard Loncraine’s *Richard III* in the context of the classic gangster film. Reading Loehlin’s chapter, I recalled that shortly after the release of Loncraine’s film, a student in my own Shakespeare in Film course came into class one evening and announced with excitement that the ending of the film “was a definite riff on *White Heat*,” Raoul Walsh’s 1949 film with James Cagney. Loehlin has taken the same insight and run with it, and the result is a fascinating examination of a moment of supreme self-referential irony. Hollywood and the early modern stage encounter one another in provocative ways in the instant when McKellen’s Richard falls headlong into a pit of fire, grinning demonically, as Al Jolson’s “I’m Sitting on Top of the World” provides the soundtrack. Loehlin concludes that the moment “suggest[s] with equal pertinence the heroic, self-defining suicide of the greatest of movie gangsters and the fall into the hell-mouth of the medieval devils who are Richard’s theatrical ancestors” (76).

The balance of the book includes fine chapters by Ann Thompson on Asta Nielsen’s 1920 performance as Hamlet, Laurie E. Osborne on animated Shakespeare, and Tony Howard on the controversial 1953 *Omnibus* production of *King Lear* that brought Orson Welles and Peter Brook together—an essay that is nicely complemented elsewhere in the volume by Kenneth S. Rothwell’s discussion of *Lear* films by Brook (1971), Jonathan Miller and Grigori Kozintsev,

as well as Godard's "transgressive" 1987 anti-*Lear* (142). Nearly everywhere one turns in this book, there is stimulus to re-view and reconsider Shakespeare films.

Even so, Richard Burt's unfortunate final chapter, "The Love that Dare Not Speak Shakespeare's Name: New Shakesqueer Cinema," nearly manages to knock this book off its axis. This topic deserves something better than Burt's evident delight with his own slight humor ("Ken Doll Branaugh" is an example). Additionally, the fact that a film as dubious as *Tromeo and Juliet* can be admitted into what presents itself as a serious consideration of gay representations in Shakespeare films makes one wonder whether Burt has lost his perspective altogether. Fortunately, Burt's essay is preceded by Susan Wiseman's balanced treatment of Gus Van Sant's use of the *Henry IV* plays in his *My Own Private Idaho*, and the ways in which Van Sant's film "makes explicit the homoerotic potential to be found throughout the Henriad" (238).

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*Speaking on Stage. Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights.* Edited with introductions by Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996. ISBN 0-8173-0796-6. \$29.95 paper.

For students and scholars of present-day theatre in the United States, *Speaking on Stage* is a most agreeable resource. This handsomely bound collection, well-edited by Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, features twenty-seven interviews of varying length and depth with an assortment of influential post-World War II American dramatists. The interviews, many of which were first published in the late and lamented *Studies in American Drama* (although eight are from other sources), provide an impressive argument for the stunning diversity in this country's drama. Eternal fears for the theatre's survival, which may be more legitimate than ever in the face of the wave of anti-arts sentiment that has swept America in the wake of the "Republican Revolution," seem exaggerated when placed in the perspective of the impressive creativity of the artists featured here.

This volume's intended demonstration of contemporary drama's many facets is effective despite the omission of such essential figures as Christopher Durang, Charles Ludlam, Sam Shepard, David Rabe, August Wilson, and Lanford Wilson, among others. Certainly no single volume could possibly contain substantive interviews with all living and working American dramatists worthy of inclusion, so *Speaking on Stage* wisely focuses on the strengths of those featured

in its pages—and many are among our most challenging experimenters with dramatic form.

*Speaking on Stage* is divided into four distinct sections succinctly introduced by the editors. Each interview, except, inexplicably, Albert Innaurato's, begins with a brief introduction written by the interviewer. Not surprisingly, the quality of the interviews vary depending on the engagement of the subject and the insight and probing of the interviewer. The weakest at least provide interesting tidbits, while the best offer engrossing and intimate accounts of playwriting techniques and the writers' wide-ranging opinions on a variety of topics. Surprisingly, two of the book's most engrossing interviews are those with two of its most commercial dramatists, Robert Anderson and Neil Simon, both of whom are superbly interviewed by Jackson R. Bryer in the first section entitled "Broadway Realism." Bryer's penetrating discussion with Anderson may well raise respect for this dramatist. Certainly Anderson's thoughtful assessment of the quality of his own plays (as well as those of others) and the myriad practical and aesthetic problems faced by even the most successful dramatist is highly informative. Anderson's best-known play, *Tea and Sympathy* (1953), may today seem mendacious on issues of sexuality when compared with works by two other interviewees, Tony Kushner and Terrence McNally. However, his powerful *I Never Sang For My Father* remains a searing portrait of the lives of aging parents and their children in the traditional mode of American realism—and Anderson discusses this work with insight. Bryer's lively encounter with the prolific and popular Simon offers a revelation that may surprise—Tennessee Williams was Simon's idol. Undoubtedly Simon's most autobiographical plays, *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1982), *Biloxi Blues* (1984), and *Broadway Bound* (1986), are clearly indebted to Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), but these two writers are rarely compared by scholars and critics. Other interviewees in this section include Arthur Miller, well-interviewed by Jan Balakian, although the conversation unfortunately focuses almost exclusively on Miller's most recent works (reflecting on his *The American Clock* (1980), Miller says that "The past for America dims very rapidly. They don't want to remember. The past is the old; the present and the future are the escape from the past." [45]), and the team of Jerome Lawrence and the late Robert E. Lee, interviewed by Nena Couch. Both seem to have more to say about their least successful works—Lawrence describes them as being "about anomalies, eccentrics, the distinctive individualists of our world" (37) who Lee calls "the odd fish." (38)

Editors Kolin and Kullman introduce the interviews as "metadramas"—a way of making the internal external, certainly an ultimate goal of both a dramatist and an interviewer: "If the interview offers revelation and light, it can also be the lens of the playwright's camera obscura." (1) In several cases, this turns out to be



so. For example, the first interview in Part Two, "Anxiety and Alienation," which covers the years from 1959 to 1969, is with Edward Albee. Jeffrey Goldman seems to have his hands full with the cantankerous Albee, although the interview offers the playwright's pithy opinions on the Bush administration's "war on drugs" and Albee's admiration for the plays of Chekhov, Pinter, and Beckett. However, there is little here that Albee has not discussed in depth in prior interviews. Maria Irene Fornes, interviewed by Una Chaudhuri, offers practical advice on the process of playwriting, insisting that "What's exciting is to have a relationship to the art itself, to the craft itself, and to be honest, to work very hard, not to be arrogant or self-conscious, but to have that relationship to the art." (101) Jack Gelber discusses his entire career with David Sedevie, beginning with his early work with The Living Theatre on his most controversial play, *The Connection* (1959). He also probes the importance of and lessons to be learned from the chaotic social changes of the 1960s, which he calls "a bit of thumbing our nose at the establishment" (122), and the numerous screenplays he contributed to, including *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). Elin Diamond's interview with Adrienne Kennedy expands on issues Diamond examines in *Unmaking Mimesis* (Routledge, 1997). The most revealing responses come from questions about Kennedy's book, *People Who Led to My Plays* (Knopf, 1987), in which she describes such potent influences on her as Lena Horne, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, and, most touchingly, several family members. Other interviewees in this section include Megan Terry (who tells Felicia Hardison Londré that she loves "actors and social interaction" [141]) and Jean Claude van Itallie, best known for his early works, such as *America Hurrah* (1965), but Alexis Greene encourages him to discuss his current plays like *Ancient Boys* (1990), which, like much of his more recent work, is about the AIDS epidemic.

Part Three, "Recovery and Regeneration," focuses on dramatists who emerged in the 1970s. David Mamet's remarks, encouraged by Matthew C. Roudané, are the most absorbing here. Mamet asserts that his plays are written in a national culture "founded on the idea of strive and succeed" (178) and that, as such, concern "with the individual's soul is certainly the fit province of drama." (181) Amusingly, Mamet adds that when he has been frustrated about the amount of time it has taken him to write a play, he remembers that "it took Sophocles eighteen years to write *Oedipus Rex*. That's also because he wasn't trying to write *Gigi*." Neil A. Lester interviews Ntozake Shange, who, like Kennedy, acknowledges that "people should always be able to find references in my work to my predecessors" (224), who she names as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Shange also speaks of her goals as a writer, and the problems of working in different literary forms, claiming that "When I want to write something that I don't want to constrain me in anyway whatsoever, it should be a novel or a poem.

A play or short story has certain constraints.” (228) Other dramatists featured in Part Three are Charles Gordone (who discusses the influence of Jean Genet on his work in an interview with Susan Harris Smith), Albert Innaurato (who tells John Louis DiGaetani that America’s need to be totally honest with itself is a driving force in his plays), Romulus Linney (who is prompted by Donald B. Wilmeth to discuss the importance of his many directing experiences on his playwriting craft), and Emily Mann (who provides Leigh Buchanan Bienen more insight on her work as artistic director of New Jersey’s McCarter Theatre than as a working dramatist).

Part Four, “Celebrating Difference,” presents emerging playwrights post-1980. Here the burgeoning diversity of American drama comes into full focus. Featuring such distinct voices as Kenneth Bernard (who tells Joan Templeton that playwrights are America’s “resident force of conscience” [242]), Beth Henley (who comments persuasively to interviewer Mary Dellasega on the importance of collaborators, from actors to co-authors and illustrators), Tina Howe (who insists to Judith E. Barlow that “each play inspires the next” [262]), David Henry Hwang (who describes to Marty Moss-Coane that his plays are about the “shifting power balance between East and West” [279]), Karen Malpede (who states to Richard E. Kramer that she is “glad I didn’t study playwriting and that I did study plays” [137]), and Mark Medoff (who reports the importance of sports to his plays to Mimi Reisel Gladstein), the standout interviews emerge as those with Terrence McNally, Wendy Wasserstein, Tony Kushner, and Joan Schenkar. Steven Drukman’s conversation with McNally finds the playwright acknowledging that “all of my characters are me as much as they’re anybody else” (336) and the conversation otherwise explores McNally’s background as an inspiration for his drama, cross-referencing of characters in his plays, and theatre critics, which leads McNally to the conclusion that the *New York Times* review is far too important to the survival of any given play on the commercialized American stage. Wasserstein’s amusing and refreshingly self-effacing comments to interviewer Jan Balakian include reference to Chekhov as an important influence on her development. Wasserstein also probes her own brand of comedy, which she relates as “a form of release, a form of non-pretentiousness. It’s a form of sharing, a form of creating community with the audience. It’s a form of non-indulgence.” (386) David Savran’s interview with Kushner, part of which was previously published in *American Theatre* magazine, is an illuminating and bracing encounter with the playwright who discusses influences on his work, from critic Ernst Fischer to playwrights John Guare, Maria Irene Fornes, Robert Patrick, and the literary generation of Queer Nation and ACT UP. Most importantly, he cites Walter Benjamin’s inspiration for his towering *Angels in America*, a “theatre of the fabulous” drama that looks back at “the rubble of history” (300) as a way of cracking it open to aid in the movement toward a progressive future. Kushner also

talks about his background, his experience of “coming out,” his idea that sexuality is rooted in “trauma and loss” (308), and that it is necessary for society to now redefine the meaning of “normal”—for the marginalized races and gays to push “the margin to the center.” (302) Schenkar, interviewed by Vivian M. Patraha, offers perhaps the most vivid accounting of the way a play emerges from a dramatist’s psyche: “I hear a voice six inches behind my left ear. I have some dark dream fifteen minutes before daybreak. I see a place in which I think something interesting might happen. And suddenly things that have been unconsciously brewing for years amass a gigantic precipitation and rain down on my head all at once.” (367)

Other collections of interviews with playwrights, including Toby Cole’s *Playwrights on Playwriting* (New York: Hill and Wang), which covers dramatists from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, and Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig’s *Interviews with Contemporary Women Dramatists* (New York: Beech Tree Books), as well as some encyclopedic work with entries containing significant quotes from current writers, especially *Contemporary American Dramatists* (edited by K. A. Berney; St. James Press), provide similar resources. However, David Savran’s *In Their Own Words* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc.) is the most similar in style and content to *Speaking on Stage*. Although a few dramatists are featured in both books (specifically, Fornes, Hwang, Mamet, Mann, and Terry), Savran deals with a different group of leading American dramatists including Lee Breuer, Christopher Durang, Richard Foreman, Marsha Norman, David Rabe, Wallace Shawn, Stephen Sondheim, Luis Valdez, Michael Weller, August Wilson, and Lanford Wilson, thus making his collection an excellent companion volume for *Speaking on Stage*. Taken together, they gather most of the cream of post-World War II U.S. playwrights. Kolin and Kullman’s *Speaking on Stage* and Savran’s *In Their Own Words* are certainly the standouts among such collections of interviews and both will serve as essential resources for scholars and practitioners by updating prior collections and as amplification to studies on any of the individual writers speaking from their pages.

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*Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* by Peggy Phelan. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

In *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, Peggy Phelan takes up performance and performative writing as basis from which to probe the relationship between private and public grief, and notably the question of political agency in public mourning for women. Reflecting her primary focus on peoples' embodied efforts to expand North America's restrictive customs of grief, she titles the book's eight sections after various parts of the human anatomy. A short list of the unorthodox losses mourned in this volume includes "Uncovered Rectums," a delving into the intersecting forces of capitalism and heterosexism underlying the controversial exhuming of London's Rose Theatre; "Infected Eyes," which takes up the video diary of Tom Joslin, a gay artist who died of AIDS, in order to probe the psychic substitutions at the heart of cinematic and sexual identifications; and "Shattered Skulls," an essay combining "straight" commentary on Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*, with critical "fiction" told in the voice of a neurotic narrator whose relation to the world has been jarred by several blows, including the brutal race riots ensuing the Rodney King verdict. The factor connecting these chapters is that each one explores a particular staging of public trauma and sheds light, in disparate ways, on the disjointed yet overlapping nature of culturally troubling experiences.

Departing from conventional scholarship's clinical approach to trauma, the "organs" comprising *Mourning Sex* not only assess theoretically, but also enact theatrically Phelan's concern with how queer (socially, sexually and financially disenfranchised) subjects perform their bereavement: how they recover from loss. By dramatizing, through a medley of critical and creative prose, the gaps and distortions that often attend socially-unpalatable memories, she shows how both live performance and performative writing may serve as political tools through which stigmatized groups turn private pain, rage and terror into collective discourses of healing. Significantly, the author defines *trauma* as injuries to both the body and psyche; moreover, in proposing a way to redress both types of damage, she posits *rehearsal* as the physical and psychic work of repetition: restaging, revising and often misrepresenting the past so as to cope with the shattering wounds incurred at an earlier time. Through this sophisticated approach to what rehearsal can teach us about the mutable, partly reparable factors of time and remembrance, her book diverges usefully from a recent wave of studies on the relevance of drama to grief. For once, the dramas of forgetfulness and "getting it wrong" acquire a theory of value: "truth is what we can make from what we've missed" (7).