

*Modern American Drama 1945-2000* by Christopher Bigsby. NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001. ISBN 0-521-79410-2.

*Contemporary American Playwrights* by Christopher Bigsby. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999. ISBN 0-521-66108-0.

As both author and editor, Christopher Bigsby has previously contributed to the field of theatre studies a number of valuable volumes on international and United States drama, but his two most recent books provide essential resources for the study of the American stage in the second half of the twentieth century. In two complementary texts, *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* and *Contemporary American Playwrights*, Bigsby surveys a range of developments in post-World War II theatre, identifying those dramatists who have made significant contributions. This is tricky, of course, as the much-needed perspective provided by time is in short supply, but few scholars, critics, and audiences will disagree with most that Bigsby highlights in these two handsome, elegantly written volumes.

In *Modern American Drama 1945-2000*, the updated second edition of Bigsby's decade old *Modern American Drama 1945-1990*, the author actually backs up to well before 1945, with introductory chapters on the role of the critic in assessing American drama that begins with Eugene O'Neill's towering achievements and another on O'Neill's late plays (especially focusing on *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *A Touch of the Poet*, *Hughie*). Bigsby views them not only as forerunning American dramas, but more specifically as introducing to the U.S. stage a Beckettian endgame inspiring the elevated seriousness of purpose marking the best postwar Broadway theatre. Vividly portraying O'Neill as the Protean father of American drama, Bigsby moves on to single chapters exploring the plays of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and David Mamet, with interspersed catch-all chapters surveying sundry other American dramatists (William Inge, Neil Simon), as well as the post-World War II musical theatre, the counter-culture theatrics and artists of the 1960s, and an appropriately lengthy chapter covering emerging writers whose plays emphasize politics, race, and gender and the attendant issues of theorizing and criticizing these new regions of dramatic subjects—and new techniques brought to bear by the dramatists emerging from these ranks. It might be argued that an August Wilson, Terrence McNally, John Guare, Wendy Wasserstein, Maria Irene Fornes, or Tony Kushner merit single chapters (it should be noted that some of them get full-chapter treatments in *Contemporary American Playwrights*), they are all present in brief glimpses, as are literally dozens more.

Despite his obvious focus on dramatists of the literary tradition, Bigsby

admirably pays attention to important collectives (the Living Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, etc.) and solo artists on the fringe of mainstream culture beginning in the late 1950s and flourishing in the 1960s. Bigsby notes in his introduction that he must inevitably overlook certain writers – the omission of Larry Kramer, for example, seems especially egregious considering the profound social impact of Kramer's searing, accusatory *The Normal Heart*, as well as the subsequent generation of AIDS related plays and gay dramatists indebted to Kramer.

Bigsby also generally overlooks the influence of European plays, except for the expected references to Beckettian or Brechtian influences. This is especially problematic since British plays and playwrights have undeniably influenced their American counterparts increasingly since the 1960s. Quibbles aside, however, this is a major study offering a more complete survey of postwar American drama than likely to be found anywhere else. Bigsby's penetrating analysis is characteristic of his scholarship; one may disagree with some of his opinions, but they are elegantly expressed throughout. The volume might be improved by the inclusion of illustrations of key plays, but otherwise *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* is a necessary addition to the library of anyone interested in the recent history of theatre in the United States.

*Contemporary American Playwrights* is constructed much like *Modern American Drama 1945-2000*, but narrows the focus to ten current dramatists (each featured in individual chapters) analyzing their most characteristic work. Once again, one might well debate some of the choices included, especially given that Bigsby does not provide any catch-all chapters to sketch in other figures, but the chapters on those chosen (John Guare, Tina Howe, Tony Kushner, Emily Mann, Richard Nelson, Marsha Norman, David Rabe, Paula Vogel, Wendy Wasserstein, and Lanford Wilson) are excellent. Rabe, for example, might well be moved into *Modern American Drama 1945-2000*, as his best work is associated with the 1960s-1970s, while August Wilson, a more current major voice, might be featured here to greater impact. Including Howe and Norman, but not Maria Irene Fornes, also seems a decidedly odd decision, but the task of choosing a mere ten dramatists out of the diverse and complex mix of current American writers undoubtedly provided a daunting challenge.

The individual chapters in *Contemporary American Playwrights* do serve to fill in some evident gaps in *Modern American Drama 1945-2000*. Bigsby tends not to extend beyond major produced and published works by these writers—for example, his view of Tony Kushner emphasizes, not surprisingly, *Angels in America* and, less so, Kushner's other full-length published works (*A Bright Room Called Day*, *Hydriotaphia*, and *Slavs!*). However, Bigsby pays scant or no attention to Kushner's broad range of one-acts, adaptations, and, works-in-progress (or as-yet unproduced plays) that might provide a fuller look at a writer whose work is impressive in both subject and technique. On the plus side, playwrights like Vogel,

Mann, and Nelson get more attention here than in virtually any other available study and, as such, the text offers a genuinely valuable introduction to artists whose achievements are likely to continue to influence the next few decades. Again, illustrations would enhance the volume, as would appendices of production histories and full bibliographies for each playwright featured. Hopefully, Bigsby will expand and revise this volume to include more playwrights of promise and accomplishment.

Minor quibbles aside, *Contemporary American Playwrights* provides cogent analyses of the works of ten undeniably significant figures on the current American stage and, like *Modern American Drama 1945-2000*, more than achieves its ambitious goals. Bigsby has unquestionably attempted the impossible—and, impressively, he has largely succeeded. Any reader of these two books may inevitably be disappointed by omissions, but Bigsby has managed to provide two articulate and well-researched studies likely to be useful to advanced scholars as well as students seeking a serious introduction to the riches of recent American drama.

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*Shakespeare at the Moment: Playing the Comedies* by Albert Bermel. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2000. ISBN 0-325-00206-1.

Inconsistency becomes the strange attractor for Albert Bermel in this chaotic and phenomenological reflection on Shakespeare's comedies. But this is too theoretical an approach to discuss a book that, at its author's insistence, remains practical rather than theoretical. Bermel's focus on inconsistency is both the weakness and the strength of this survey of Shakespeare's comedies. The weakness lies in the concept of inconsistency that, by its very nature, lacks the kind of cohesive viewpoint that would provide organization and passionate argument. However, this lack opens the door for Bermel's widely ranging exploration of genres, structures, thematic concerns, and approaches to character.

An examination of the book's title provides clues to Bermel's approach to the comedies. The use of the phrase, "at the moment," introduces many of Bermel's ideas. Bermel stresses that most productions of Shakespeare's comedies are products of their time, as are most critical approaches to the plays. In a similar fashion, most attempts at definitions of comedy and/or the comic vision rely on phenomenological attitudes and perspectives. Rather than positing his own theory of comedy, Bermel chooses to embrace the uncertainty within the order that composes any dynamic system. Thus, the comedies provide the opportunity for "play" that combines both a looseness of space and performance. Rather than attempting to provide any sort of closed system of definitions and opinions, Bermel insists on the openings, the inconsistencies, and the "loose ends" of these plays. The essays encompassed within the loose organization of the book are both revelatory and multifaceted.

Bermel provides an introduction that forms the basis of his discussion of the selection of Shakespeare's plays that he considers comedies. In many ways, the book is a continuation of some of the ideas and the structure that Bermel utilized in *Comic Agony: Mixed Impressions in the Modern Theatre*. In both cases, the books' introductions serve to introduce and clarify definitions of role, character, and plot. Bermel writes from the perspective of "playwright-critic" (p. x). His focus centers on elements of the scripts, such as plot, character, and theme, but he insists that the collaborative nature of theatre must take into consideration the contributions of actors, designers, and directors. One of the more interesting ideas Bermel presents in his introduction considers the concurrence of Freud's life and views on psychology with that of Stanislavski and his views on character, particularly the concept of through-line or spine. This modern insistence on consistency of plot, character, and idea no longer appears applicable from Bermel's postmodern perspective. In addition to dismissing the idea of through-line or spine, he refutes the acting technique proposed by David Mamet in which the actor considers the

scene rather than the entire play. In Bermel's approach, each moment of Shakespeare's plays should be played without regard to consistency of through-line or spine of either scene or play. This playing of moments allows the actor the freedom to embrace multiple aspects of the role rather than narrowing the characterization to fit prescribed or predetermined parameters.

While Bermel's introduction provides thoughtful definitions of role, character, and personality, among other concepts, the remainder of the book refuses to cohere to this focus, in part because Bermel's thesis is that any cohesive thesis becomes limiting. For Bermel, there is no such thing as a Shakespearean comedy because no identifiable structural pattern or definition emerges. Bermel does include an interesting list of characteristics of Shakespeare's comedies, but he admits that "not every comedy incorporates every one of the fifteen touchstones listed here" (p. 19). Although Bermel insists on the arbitrariness of his organization, the remainder of the book is loosely structured into five thematic sections: Twinning; Woman vs. Man; Justice; Love, True and False; and Transformations. Each section encompasses from two to five chapters, each of which examines a single play. These chapters could be read singly without benefit of the book's introduction or the one or two paragraphs that introduce each section of the book.

For Bermel, the inconsistencies of genre, role, character, and plot provide the "play" that continues to make Shakespeare's comedies both remarkable and relevant for today's audiences. Bermel provides a scholarly, thoughtful perspective from which he attempts to examine three areas: "(a) vexing, unsettled questions exhumed from past criticism of the comedies; (b) questions earlier criticism hasn't taken much notice of, if any; and (c) some productions that help clarify both sorts of questions" (p. 3). To elucidate the last of these areas, Bermel includes criticism of recent television and film productions.

The final section of the book is entitled, "Conclusion: Loose Ends," and is devoted to Bermel's somewhat random but passionate musings on the theoretical approaches and productions he describes as "a glut of modern, postmodern, posed-modern, and supposed-modern Shakespeare" (p. 321). Constant in his focus on inconsistency, Bermel refuses to tie up his ideas in a pretty little package. In these final pages, Bermel introduces his opinions on recent approaches to Shakespearean criticism, including those of feminists, Marxists, traditionalists, revisionists, and futurists, although Bermel himself would never stoop to the use of labels such as these. For Bermel, labeling anything places limits on it; consequently, these "loose ends" defy tidy organization and summation. For Bermel, Shakespeare remains an open rather than a closed book.

*Shakespeare at the Moment* does offer its readers appealing and scholarly analyses of individual comedies, but without a firm focus or viewpoint, the collection lacks excitement and fails to generate enthusiasm from its readers. Bermel includes an eclectic bibliography and some interesting thoughts on Shakespearean

scholarship in his prefatory acknowledgments. Writers, directors, actors, and others with an interest in the comedies may find the book useful for its criticism of contemporary film presentations as well as its examination of the smaller, worrisome inconsistencies within individual plays.

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*Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire* by Philip C. Kolin. Plays in Production Series. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000. ISBN 0-521-62344-8 (hardback); ISBN 0-521-62610-2 (paperback).

Philip C. Kolin's new study of the production history of *A Streetcar Named Desire* offers Williams' buffs, theater directors, and literary scholars the opportunity to see how the play has evolved in performance and among critics and theatergoers since it was first produced. Beginning with a lengthy chapter on Elia Kazan's defining production which, as Kolin notes, has influenced later attempts to realize Williams' ideas, the book examines the ways in which the complexity and elastic nature of *Streetcar* continues to satisfy audiences world-wide.

By focusing primarily on Kazan's production notes and on contemporary reviews of significant productions after the play's 1947 premiere, Kolin gives readers a sense of how each production was measured against the Kazan production, particularly the performance of Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski. Even though Jessica Tandy played the original Blanche, Vivien Leigh's performance is, however, more embedded in the world's imagination partly due to her London premiere and her outstanding film performance.

One of Kolin's central points is that portrayals of Blanche and Stanley have varied considerably in productions over the years—from those which show Blanche's vulnerability to those which almost justify Stanley's revenge against Stella's beloved sister. The problem with many revivals, according to Kolin, is that a strong Blanche is often paired with a weak Stanley or the reverse—with Stanley becoming a stronger stage presence than Blanche and thus creating more sympathy for him. Seemingly, achieving the necessary balance in the performances of the actors playing Blanche and Stanley to convey the play's tensions has proved difficult, though not unsurmountable, for many directors.

Though Brando's mark is indelibly imprinted on the minds of many audiences, the various productions Kolin discusses suggests that only recently have viewers been able to accept a different kind of Stanley. Kolin suggests particularly that Alex Baldwin's 1992 version at the Barrymore (the site of the original Kazan production) draws upon Brando but moves beyond him to become "funnier, more ingenious" and "less menacing" than many other Stanleys in various revivals (116). Other, less successful Stanleys include Anthony Quinn (Brando's replacement), James Farentino (the first nude Stanley, though not animalistic enough to satisfy critics), Martin Shaw (one of the most successful) and Aidan Quinn (too soft and non-muscular).

Portrayals of Blanche have varied from those which suggest the tiger and the moth to those which make her almost comical and thus fail to effect the play's tragic dimensions. Tallulah Bankhead, while managing to capture Blanche as "the

steel magnolia" in a revival of *Streetcar* on Broadway in 1956 (88), was considered too campy. Nevertheless, according to Kolin, her controversial performance "emancipated Williams's script from stylized rigidity" (89). One of the best actors to play the role, Claire Bloom portrayed Blanche in a 1974 London revival as "a lady fighting age, poverty, the ravages of desire" (101). Despite her excellent performance throughout most of the play, Blythe Danner, in the production of 1988 at Circle in the Square, "erred by slipping into madness too late while earlier Blanches succumbed too soon" (113).

Kolin gives less attention to the actors playing Stella, Mitch, and other characters such as Steven and Eunice Hubbell, though there is some useful material here on the variations within performances of these characters. Of course, Kim Hunter as the original Stella and Karl Malden as the original Mitch on stage and screen provided a formidable act to follow. In the first Asian production of Williams in Tokyo in 1953, Tomoko Funimo excelled as Stella in a performance described as "nearly flawless" (81). Amy Madigan, in the 1992 New York revival at the Barrymore, was one of the best to play Stella, surpassing Jessica Lange as Blanche. Marcello Mastroianni, in Visconti's production, was too young and sexually desirable for the role of Mitch. In addition to the commentary about lesser characters in the play, there is also in Kolin's study some attention to set design in the various productions (especially the original Broadway production and the national premieres in Rome, Italy, and Gothenburg, Sweden). However, the primary emphasis of the book is on acting, performance styles, and critical response.

Kolin also discusses original productions and revivals in the rest of the world. *Streetcar* has appealed to audiences in Germany, Mexico, Japan, China, South Africa, and Sweden—among many others—and was directed by such internationally known figures as Ingmar Bergman and Jean Cocteau. Of international productions, Luchino Visconti's *Streetcar* was one of the most important national premieres despite the fact that the play lost some of its poetry and its authenticity as a product of American culture "through a dark, brutally realistic prism" (51).

Perhaps the most provocative section of the book is an overview of nontraditional productions—those using role reversal and cross dressing, interracial pairings, and all-black casts. Black productions suggest that the play can be read as a commentary on racial and class privilege as well as a critique of color status within the African American community. Moreover, Kolin devotes considerable space to discussing *Belle Reprieve* (1991), a queer/camp parody of the play, suggesting that "What may have been latent and opaque in *Streetcar*, *Reprieve* disclosed through seething revelations" (148). The book ends with a select production chronology, numerous endnotes citing the many sources to which Kolin refers, and a select bibliography of resources on the play and scholarship on Williams in general.



Part of Cambridge University Press's Plays in Production series edited by Michael Robinson, Kolin's book is a useful addition to scholarship on *Streetcar*. The book contains five chapters: one is devoted to the original production and first tour; the next, to premieres outside the United States; another, to revivals in English; another, to radical reinterpretations; and a closing chapter on *Streetcar*'s presence in other media such as ballet, opera, television, and film. Kolin points out that the 1995 television version is closest to Williams' original script and praises the opera for showing the play's sustaining power regardless of the medium in which it appears.

For the reader Kolin's commentaries provide easy access to varying critical responses and will save scholars the time of tracking these down on their own. This thoroughly-researched study would be especially helpful to directors looking for alternative approaches to the play, and, as part of a college or university course devoted to modern drama and/or the work of Tennessee Williams, the book would provide much opportunity for discussing and expanding upon the many approaches to interpreting Williams' greatest play. For lovers of Williams, the book provides good insight into the play and its multiple possibilities.

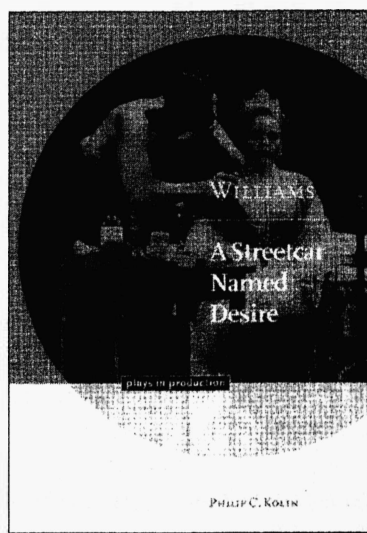
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## New From Cambridge

### **Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire***

**Philip C. Kolin**

*A Streetcar Named Desire* revolutionized the modern stage and this book offers the first continuous history of the play in production from 1947 to 1998. Chapters survey major national premieres by the world's leading directors including Seki Sano, Luchino Visconti, Ingmar Bergman, Jean Cocteau and Laurence Olivier. Interpretations by Black and gay theater companies also receive analyses, and transformations into other media, such as ballet, film, television, and opera (premiered in 1998) form an important part of the overall study.



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#### ***Plays in Production***

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