Dr. Joanne Leask gets a seat on the stage of her time, as she does on the pages of Lena Ashwell: Pioneering Female Theatre-makers, 1914-1965. Issue 25, 2018. Her biography, a beautifully illustrated and accessible book, is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in British theatre in the first half of the century, and is as ambitious and adept as any of her male counterparts. Leask’s biography goes a long way, however, towards re-locating Lena Ashwell and placing her among the foremost practitioners of the age outside the commercial theatre. Often experimental in outlook, she was also a careful businesswoman, whose career survived in a theatre system without state support. Leask also documents Ashwell’s work with the British Drama League and her support of other theatrical experiment and activity.

A beautifully illustrated and accessible book, Leask’s celebratory approach is not predicated on a critical perspective, nor one which engages with theories of gender and cultural production. Such a positioning might offer a more sociological locating of Ashwell’s work as a professional career woman in the theatre industry as a whole. Author of four books, with a highly public profile early in her career, Ashwell was a divorcee when this was rare – especially for a woman so much in the public eye. She aligned herself with other pioneers and innovators of the day, as well as taking huge artistic and financial risks. Her second husband was surgeon to the royal household, so she was socially well placed by the middle of her career and was as ambitious and adept as any of her male counterparts. Leask’s biography goes a long way, however, towards re-locating Lena Ashwell as one of the key players in the development of British theatre in the first half of the century, and is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in this area of theatre history.

MAGGIE B. GALE

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Sean Carney

The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary English Tragedy


Sean Carney has written a study which every student and academic interested in contemporary English theatre, in political drama, and in the concept of tragedy has been waiting for. The book is structured in five chapters devoted to the analysis of the work of David Hare, Howard Barker, Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, and the new tragedians Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane. As such, it offers a detailed examination of the dialectics between the contemporary presence of the tragic and the political discourse in more than fifty plays by major English authors, ranging from Saved (1965) to Jerusalem (2009). This will prove a valuable resource for students in literature and drama.

In the evocatively titled chapters, Carney is careful to contextualize and illustrate the evolution of each playwright’s political and tragic dramaturgy from the Royal Court Theatre epoch through the shift in social and cultural climate that Margaret Thatcher’s election represented for left-leaning political writers as well as younger playwrights. Prompted by Fredric Jameson, Carney’s historical – though not quite chronological – approach to the English stage enables him to establish an inter-generational continuity of concerns which goes beyond a sense of heritage and hinges on the construction of the tragic as a ‘structure of feeling’.

This approach enhances Carney’s argument that the usual categorization of such drama as either political or tragic hinders a comprehensive understanding of the authors’ dramaturgy. Thus, ‘Barker’s tragic is a political intervention into ideology with the weapon of the aesthetic’ without attempting to deny the contradictions which the case studies raise. He first questions and then demonstrates masterfully that the various forms of tragedy which the authors propose inherently express their politics. It is in the presentation of this thesis, as much as its in-depth development, that the volume’s achievement lies.

Aptly basing his investigation on Raymond Williams’s writings on tragedy and modern drama – while calling upon Nietzsche, Hegel, Lacan, Eagleton, Storm, and Steiner for particular insights – Carney defines the tragic as an experience of loss and suggests that the dramatists’ political discourses explore ‘the representation and interrogation of human suffering’, confront a tradition of social realism with personal despair, place tragic pathos at the centre of contemporary English daily lives, and engage with the political reality of alienation through a tragic aesthetics. One might regret that the final analysis of Jez Butterworth’s Jerusalem is placed as an after-note in the conclusion, but accept Carney’s coherent argumentation in this otherwise flawless volume.

ANNE ETIENNE

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In the first exchange in performance artist and scholar Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s Conversations across Borders, he and curator Gabriela Salgado...