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The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre, 2nd edition.

Edited by Don B. Wilmeth

Thomas Postlewait

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Theatre Survey

Cima offers an interesting reading of the conversion performances of whites during the Great Awakening, yet her account of a psychology of guilt linking white conversion and black bodies is not supported with any additional evidence other than the assertion above. As is always the case with performance, finding the traces of the meanings these performances embodied for a contemporary audience can be difficult and, to my mind, is best done with constraint. What Cima's study enables, however, is new path of access to the cultural work of women in early America—particularly of African American women—which scholars in a variety of fields (history, literature, religion, theatre) would do well to explore.



The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre, 2nd edition. Edited by Don B. Wilmeth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; pp. xvi + 757. \$150 cloth.

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Reviewed by Thomas Postlewait, University of Washington

The original edition of *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, published in 1993 and edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Tice L. Miller, quickly established itself as a major reference work on theatre in the United States. The 2,300 entries, written by the editors and eighty-one contributing scholars, covered individuals, plays, musicals, venues, companies, cities, and special events and topics. Most entries (a dozen of which I wrote fifteen years ago) were fifty to one hundred words, but some were several hundred words (e.g., “Drew–Barrymore family”); a few exceeded a thousand words. This extended coverage was typical of the ninety-three topical entries on subjects ranging from “African-American theatre” and “animals as performers” to “Wild West exhibition” and “Yiddish theatre.” Some 170 illustrations, many of historical significance, graced the *Guide*. The Introduction, written by Wilmeth, Miller, and C. Lee Jenner, provided a tight chronology of key people and events in American theatre history, from the beginning to the present. A select bibliography, besides identifying a few reference works, offered a cross section of scholarship on American theatre. Also, a few biographical sources were appended to some of the major entries. The *Guide* concluded with Wilmeth's “Biographical Index,” which identified hundreds of individuals who were mentioned in the entries but lacked their own entry.

Three years later, a paperback edition of *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* appeared, edited by Don B. Wilmeth, with Tice L. Miller. Besides updating, correcting, and revising some entries, it offered forty new items. The Introduction was slightly enlarged; the supplemental bibliography added a few works. In order to hold down the publishing costs, the illustrations were removed. Moreover, the boldface typography that was used in the 1993

edition for cross-referencing of entries was changed to small capital letters, a somewhat less intrusive and insistent method of informing readers of other entries. Otherwise, the 1996 edition was basically a mirror image of the original *Guide*.

A decade later, a second edition of the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* has appeared, edited by Wilmeth. The new *Guide* maintains many features of its predecessors, including the “Biographical Index” of people who have received a separate entry, a select bibliography of reference works and recent scholarship, and the cross-referencing system by means of small capital letters. The new Introduction, co-written by Wilmeth, Miller, C. Lee Jenner, and Leonard Jacobs, offers the same basic survey, except for more details in the post-1960 section. The *Guide* now has over 2,700 entries, written by 100 contributors. Besides the approximately 400 new items, especially on contemporary theatre, many entries have been revised; others have been updated. The number of topical entries has increased by six (e.g., new entries on Atlanta, Filipino American theatre, documentary theatre). There are fewer illustrations, with an emphasis now on “earlier images.” Bibliographical sources no longer appear at the end of entries (though occasionally such information is incorporated within an entry), and fifty-two entries from the 1996 edition have been deleted (Wilmeth provides a list).

All three editions of the *Guide* show a commitment to covering theatre from coast to coast, though of course New York City remains paramount. The new edition, like the previous editions, provides a wide canvas of popular entertainment, including the circus, vaudeville, burlesque, magic shows and magicians, and “folk” festivals. Holding to the guidelines of the 1993 edition, the new *Guide* does not cover Canadian theatre, nor does it attempt to encompass film, radio, and television. Except for a fine entry on “dance in the American theatre” and a few entries on popular dancers and choreographers for stage musicals, dance is slighted. Thus, Agnes de Mille, who choreographed musicals, has an entry, but not Ruth St. Denis or Martha Graham; Jerome Robbins and Twyla Tharp appear, but not Trisha Brown or Mark Morris; Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and Savion Glover are granted entries, but there is nothing on the history of tap dance and the famous “hoofers.”

In short, the *Guide*, though excellent at what it covers, is still not comprehensive. From my own perspective, I would like to see entries on the rube character, White Rats, the Chitlin Circuit, *The Shaughraun*, *The Two Orphans*, *Cabin in the Sky*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Miss Saigon* controversy, Loïe Fuller, Thomas Dixon, Fred Thompson and Coney Island, Bil Baird the puppeteer, Burr Tillstrom and Kukla and Ollie, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Jim Henson, Mako (Makato Iwamatsu), Frank Chin, Asian American Theatre Company, Velina Hasu Houston, Dan Kwong, Randall Duk Kim, Flournoy Miller & Aubrey Lyles, Lew Leslie and his black revues, Robert Motts and the Pekin Theatre of Chicago, William Gilmore Simms, Genevieve Stebbens, David Sarnoff, Viveca Lindford, Paul Newman, May Robson, and Sol Hurok. To the credit of Wilmeth, some of these individuals are listed in the “Biographical Index,” but I would contend that each person and item identified here warrants a fuller record. Of

course, all reference works require a series of compromises: the editor, unlike a reviewer, has to be selective, in part because of restraints imposed by the publisher.

Without question, the *Guide* is a major reference work. It is an accurate, up-to-date compendium of historical information. For a one-volume encyclopedia, it is a scholarly treasure. Wilmeth has done an admirable job of editing the *Guide*, which reflects his virtues as a scholar of American theatre history. He has remained true to his vision for the *Guide*, which provides concise, authoritative information. I therefore urge all of us to make sure that the new edition is ordered by our college libraries, and for anyone who wants an encyclopedia on American theatre and popular entertainment, I highly recommend the paperback edition at a quite decent price of \$24.99.



American Drama, 1945–2000: An Introduction. By David Krasner. Blackwell Introductions to Literature. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006; pp. xiii + 216, 6 illus. \$74.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.
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Reviewed by Natka Bianchini, University of Maryland, College Park

David Krasner's primer, *American Drama, 1945–2000: An Introduction*, is a helpful, albeit cursory, overview of the seminal plays and playwrights of the period. Invited by the publisher to author this volume, Krasner's is the most recent offering to appear in the Blackwell Introductions to Literature series. The series' mission, as stated on the inside cover, is to "provide concise and stimulating introductions to literary subjects," offering "books on major authors . . . , as well as key periods and movements" designed "to inspire newcomers and others: non-specialists . . . or general readers." The book fulfills this mission adequately, giving a comprehensive introduction to later twentieth-century American plays and playwrights. Its shortcomings therefore stem mostly from adhering to the series' admittedly narrow mission, which prohibits lengthy analysis of individual plays or movements, and precludes the offering of all but the most surface historical context.

The book's five chapters are organized chronologically, each concentrating on a ten- to fifteen-year period. The first chapter, titled "Politics, Existentialism, and American Drama, 1935–1945," serves as a preface to the subsequent four chapters, and explores how the drama of this period laid the groundwork for American plays in the second half of the century. Krasner focuses on two types of play here, both of which, he argues, emerged during a period of "unprecedented self-examination of what it meant to be an American" precipitated by the Great Depression (4). He categorizes these plays as either political/progressive (exemplified by Clifford Odets) or American/existentialist (Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest*,