Le Théâtre Tragique ed. by Jean Jacquot (review)

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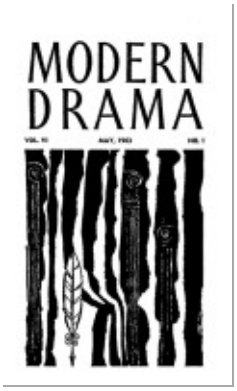

Modern Drama, Volume 6, Number 1, Spring 1963, pp. 92-93 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1963.0022*

made without a searching analysis of his plays, into which he poured all his secret obsessions. The light reflected from his dramatic visions may illuminate the recesses of his inner life. Here we may discover his yearning for a mother that he could possess totally; his distrust of all women because of his mother's betrayal; his rejection of his father's God; his alienation from the establishment and his revolt against its authorities in any guise; his creation of a world of the mind to confound external "reality"; and ultimately his tragic conception of man.

On many occasions the Gelbs do attempt to relate the events of O'Neill's life to his plays, but where they go beyond the obvious parallels, the results are not uniformly happy. Their comparison of the dull Philistine god William Brown with O'Neill's brother Jamie may turn that anarchic, Dionysian spirit restless in his coffin. Another time the Gelbs contend that O'Neill's early conception of the main characters of *Mourning Becomes Electra* "clearly indicated that . . . this was to be yet another examination of the emotional fabric of the O'Neill family." Although they mention certain superficial similarities (for example, the order in which Lavinia loses father, mother, and brother), the real biographical source is deeper: in the incestuous rivalries and hatreds which can destroy a family. Certainly the basic situation where the helpless father is murdered by an adulterous mother bears no resemblance to O'Neill's parents. The Gelbs' connection of *Desire Under the Elms* with Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Medea* is tenuous at best. The evidence is overwhelming that *Desire* was inspired by such Strindberg works as *Son of a Servant, The Bridal Crown,* and *The People of Hemsö,* as well as by Nietzschean motifs of paganism and the superman. As for the truly perceptive criticism of *The Iceman Cometh,* this the Gelbs borrowed from other writers.

When these flaws have been discounted, the fact remains that the Gelbs have mined a great store of valuable ore, not likely to be equalled in future, if only because many of the interviewees who knew O'Neill will have died. The great critical biography of O'Neill remains to be written; when it is, it will be deeply indebted to the work of the Gelbs.

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LE THÉATRE TRAGIQUE, ed. Jean Jacquot, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1962, 46NF.

Both the dimensions and the scope of this impressive contribution to the literature on tragedy suggest the encyclopedia, and most readers will probably prefer to use it as such, consulting those chapters or essays which deal with their particular interests.

The five-hundred page volume, edited by Jean Jacquot, Director of Research at the CNRS, brings together a brilliant array of critical minds, shedding light upon the works of the many periods and countries in which tragedy, or something called tragedy, has been written. The essays, originally presented, Monsieur Jacquot tells us in his introduction, as part of a conference at Royaumont in May and December, 1960, are frankly presented as contributions to a seminar on tragedy, and this honesty adds a delightful bit of life to the work.

The point of view adopted is a historical one, which is to say, an empirical one. Taking a general definition of tragedy as "a dramatic action which comes to grips with some of the fundamental problems of existence and of the human condition," the contributors have attempted to deal with specific works in specific

periods, rather than to develop a *theoretical* definition of tragedy. This leads, as Henri Gouhier (doubtless he most important philosopher of drama in France today) says, to a great richness, for these scholars are attempting to perceive *le tragique*, which, unlike *la tragédie*, is a dimension of real existence.

The essays constantly remind us that real scholarship is not only imaginative and exciting, but at the same time is modest and liberal in its attitudes. The lack of a narrow, dogmatic, or parochial outlook is, of course, not surprising in a gathering including such distinguished men of letters as A.D.F. Kitto, Raymond Lebègue, Paul Renucci, Jacques Scherer, Jacques Madaule, Colette Audry, Roland Caillois, Henri Gouhier, Jean Jacquot, etc.

"It appears," says Henri Gouhier in "Tragique et Transcendance," his introduction to the general discussion with which the conference closed, "It appears that the organizers wished to discover just what these works we call tragic are, not in order to find a definition in so many words, but in order to ascertain whether among all the different works we include under this tag, there is some kind of residue, something common to them all which might correspond to our sense of the tragic."

The five chapters of *Le Théâtre Tragique* are as follows: I—The Ancient World (Greek tragedy, Latin tragedy, and a penetrating comparison of "The Decline of Tragedy in Athens and England," by Professor Kitto. II—From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. III—Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Renaissance and Counter-Reformation in Italy, the Elizabethans, Siglo de oro, Le Grand Siècle, The Low Countries). IV—From "Sturm und Drang" to Romanticism. V—From Naturalism to the Present (including particularly perceptive articles on Ibsen, Claudel and Sartre).

The final article in the book is a lengthy, but terse and extremely intelligent, synthesis by M. Jacquot, of the essays presented and the discussions which took place at Royaumont. It serves either as conclusion or as a general introduction to the work.

Le Théâtre Tragique, like the other volume published by the Editions du CNRS, is a handsomely printed, solidly bound volume, and belongs, like them, on the shelf of every serious student of theater.

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TWENTIETH CENTURY DRAMA, by Bamber Gascoigne, Hutchinson and Company, London, 1962, 216 pp. Price 30/.

Whatever one's view of twentieth century drama, one hopes, when commencing a book with a title like that of Mr. Bamber Gascoigne's, to complete it feeling satisfied that one has learned all there is to learn about a period in dramatic history that seems acutely disordered, rather directionless from decade to decade, and not up to snuff in far too many ways. Learn, one can, from Mr. Gascoigne, but not all that one would like. After two readings of his book, I gather that his intention was to provide the reader with a sense of direction, to indicate that underlying the variety in contemporary drama is an ordered development, and to insist that, over the last forty years, there have been peaks in playwriting as well as shallow, unenticing valleys.

For such an intention Mr. Gascoigne deserves our esteem. In his Introduction he has cleared ground that needs brushing out pretty thoroughly when he asserts with unflinching conviction that contemporary drama begins with Pirandello and not with Ibsen, as the textbooks keep telling us; and that the years of *avant-*