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New Tragedy and Comedy in France, 1945-70 by Peter Norrish
(review)

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Modern Drama, Volume 34, Number 4, Winter 1991, pp. 584-585 (Review)



Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1991.0026>

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PETER NORRISH. *New Tragedy and Comedy in France, 1945-70*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1988. Pp. 156. \$82.50

Peter Norrish's book, *New Tragedy and Comedy in France, 1945-70*, deals with the reshaping of these two genres in serious French drama in the quarter-century following World War II. He has taken that period in order to discuss the philosophical theater of Sartre and Camus as well as the "new" theater of Ionesco, Beckett, and others. Norrish stops at 1970, however, since he feels that it is too early to assess the impact of the most recent theater. In addition, he suggests that the French stage since 1970 differs considerably from the earlier part of the century (it includes, for example, further developments in politically oriented theater, experiments in collective creation, and *Le Grand Magic Circus*).

In one form or another, all of French theater during the twentieth century has dealt with the human condition, Norrish maintains, and, "already in the first half of this century, the fundamentals of living and dying were being thoroughly explored again, with an intensity of concern reminiscent of eighteenth-century *philosophes* or nineteenth-century poets with a zeal for reform, but with the difference that the debate was now regarded as a matter of greater and ever increasing urgency" (p. 1). Essentially, up until the mid 1950s, serious drama could be characterized as "Theater of Ideas." The writer briefly explores early attempts at this type of theater, noting the religious plays of Paul Claudel and François Mauriac; the work of Jean Anouilh, Jean Cocteau and Jean Giraudoux, who borrowed from Greek drama, using myth in their reconsideration of the issues involving the human condition; and some of the philosophical plays of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. In his examination of Sartre and Camus, he observes that both writers found it difficult to turn complex philosophical ideas into exciting drama, as can be seen in Sartre's "declamatory" *Les Mouches* and Camus' "monotonously insinuating" *Le Malentendu*. Both Camus and Sartre define tragedy as the moment when the affirmation of values and rights is placed in a situation of conflict. The two dramatists maintain that the solutions to this situation come about by means of a pragmatic approach to metaphysical, political and social realities. Norrish sees Henri de Montherlant as a different example of the Theater of Ideas, representing a psychological strand. Montherlant's drama, he finds, is an attempt to vie with the seventeenth-century tragedians, Corneille and Racine, in the exploration of the human heart. Montherlant, however, does this less effectively since the tragic effects of his characters come mainly from the negative aspects of their personalities.

The "new tragedy" of Samuel Beckett and the "new comedy" of Eugène Ionesco represent a major change in the genres. Beckett's theater, with its seriocomic elements, does indeed fulfill many of the traditional requirements of tragedy, but it adds additional dimensions "by placing the accent on suffering without heroism in the conventional sense, and by making the source of that suffering not the terrible workings of the gods but the pain of living, part of which consists of not being able to understand the 'mess' in which it has to be endured" (p. 73). Just as Beckett's tragic theater contains elements of comedy, Ionesco's comedy is related to the tragedy of mankind. Norrish analyzes

plays like *Les Chaises* and *Le Roi se meurt* in which a comic overlay is placed upon essentially tragic material. While this may have also occurred in Molière's works, Norrish feels that Ionesco has shifted the "focus from the absurdity of human behavior to the absurdity of the human situation" (p. 89).

The period from 1945 to 1970 was a particularly rich and diverse moment in French tragedy and comedy and Norrish's study of these two genres and the changes experienced during this time touches upon all of the major dramatists of the period (discussions of Adamov, Arrabal, and Genet are included as well). He has also furnished solid analyses of many of the important plays. Yet, if anything, there is probably an attempt to provide too much information and too many analyses. Since the work is not particularly long (156 pages), the reader often has a feeling of moving quickly from one writer to another. In addition, the analyses of the plays sometimes become general accounts and do not focus on the central theme of tragedy and comedy. Moreover, at times, the study lacks a certain sense of surprise or newness, since the analysis of each dramatist tends to confirm what one already knows.

On the other hand, this is still a highly useful study of recent French tragedy and comedy and it is important to recognize its validity. The work is written in such a way that someone with little or no knowledge of the French theater can read it profitably and the scholar of French drama can also find much of value. While the bibliography does not attempt to be complete, it is well selected and comprehensive.

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ANNE UBERSFELD. *Vinaver dramaturge*. Paris: Librairie Théâtrale 1989. Pp. 228. Fr. 98.

Vinaver dramaturge is the first book-length study of the leading dramatist of *le théâtre du quotidien* (*Theatre of the Everyday*), a movement which might be defined as a postmodern form of realism, or even naturalism. It includes writers in German such as Kroetz, Fassbinder and Achternbusch, and the French playwrights Jean-Paul Wenzel, Michel Deutsch and Georges Michel. As an adjective "*quotidien*" means both everyday (as in everyday reality) and daily; as a noun (*un quotidien*) it is the term for a newspaper. Although diversity characterizes the writers of this group, they have in common their desire to remain close to the real and to express a political awareness of power structures. Vinaver in particular is an ardent clipper of news items; a number of his plays are based on the striking stories he kept for many years.

Anne Ubersfeld, a prominent theatre historian recently retired from the Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III), is the author of *Le Roi et le Bouffon, étude sur le théâtre de Hugo de 1830 à 1839* (Corti, 1974), *Lire le théâtre* (Messidor, 1981), *L'Objet théâtral* (C.N.D.P., 1978), *L'espace théâtral* (C.N.D.P., 1979) and numerous essays. Her book is divided into two sections: "L'Itinéraire" (a description of all Vinaver's plays – including his three translation/adaptations) and "Dramaturgie," a brilliant analysis of his themes, characters, form and language. Despite its objective tone, this book is a consecration.