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Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman,
and: *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams* ed. by
George W. Crandell (review)

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Modern Drama, Volume 40, Number 2, Summer 1997, pp. 299-302 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1997.0019>



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Drawing on Shaw's recently published diaries, his collected letters, and the works themselves, the biography presents many interesting insights into Shaw's inner life. Shaw's deep suspicion of doctors, for instance, is traced convincingly to his revulsion at the decay of the body; his flight from that fear made him seek the ethereal realm of purity and sunshine (67) – and the porous wool of a Jaeger suit of clothes (105). Less convincing is the speculation around Vandeleur Lee, third member of the Shaw family ménage à trois. An incident where Lee drew a moustache on the six-year-old Shaw's face is suggested as only the first of other, more shameful, attacks (20), but no evidence is offered for this supposition.

Peters finds numerous incidents which reveal Shaw's feminine side and suggests that he was deeply troubled by doubts about his sexual identity. Dismissing his philandering as "misogyny masquerading as sex" (123) and his pain over Stella Campbell as "wounded vanity" (248), Peters reduces Shaw's pursuit of women to mere posing. His relationships with men are scrutinised much more closely, from his childhood friendship with McNulty to Graham Wallas, who is associated with an ecstatic experience which changed Shaw's vision of himself. The most important relationship, however, is with Harley Granville Barker, whose friendship with Shaw stretched over the first decades of the century, and who brought to life many of the major Shavian heroes. Peters finds in Shaw's *Heartbreak House* and Barker's *The Secret Life* coded messages that the two playwrights sent from their inner lives to each other. Such biographical commentary reduces the larger impact of the plays to personal writing and diminishes the breadth of both works.

Was Shaw homosexual? Probably not. Peters produces so much questionable evidence that a wary reader rejects her thesis in the end. Was he sexually ambivalent? Quite possibly. Peters's most important discovery reveals a consistent presence in Shaw's personality of a hitherto hidden and feminine side, which may lead to a fresh understanding of Shaw's works.

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PHILIP C. KOLIN AND COLBY H. KULLMAN, eds. *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press 1996. Pp. x, 425. \$44.95.

GEORGE W. CRANDELL, ed. *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press 1996. Pp. xxxix, 307. \$59.95.

By their very nature collections of interviews are uneven, especially when conducted by interviewers of variable experience without a common mandate. Of the twenty-six items in *Speaking on Stage* eighteen were published between 1986 and 1993 as discrete contributions to the journal *Studies in American Drama, 1945–Present*. To these have been added eight more: an independent radio interview with David Henry Hwang, now

published for the first time, and seven others especially commissioned for the present volume. The latter are not identified, but from their dates would seem to be the interviews with Jack Gelber, Emily Mann, Beth Henley, Tony Kushner, Joan Shenkar, Wendy Wasserstein, and either Terrence McNally or Maria Irene Fornes. The original eighteen, in order of appearance, are: Robert Anderson, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee (as a duo), Arthur Miller, Neil Simon, Edward Albee, (Maria Irene Fornes?), Adrienne Kennedy, Megan Terry, Jean-Claude Van Itallie, Charles Gordone, David Mamet, Albert Innaurato, Romulus Linney, Ntozake Shange, Kenneth Bernard, Tina Howe, Karen Malpede, (Terrence McNally?), and Mark Medoff. A few of the early interviews have been brought up to date by supplementary discussions (e.g., Terry, Linney, Howe), but most have merely had more recent data worked into the interviewer's brief foreword to each item, with Albert Innaurato left unembellished at 1986. Despite many fine interviews, the collection is more uneven than most, so I shall note its weaknesses before appreciating its strengths.

At the behest probably of their publisher, the two editors attempt to present *Speaking on Stage* as "representative of American playwrights since 1945," but the collection has too many major omissions to make such a claim persuasive. There is no Sam Shepard, none of the three important Wilsons (Lanford, Robert, or August), no Baraka or Bullins, no Rabe or Weller (or indeed any of the Vietnam playwrights except for a brief reference to Terry's *Viet Rock*), no Foote, no Gurney, no Guare, and no Laurie Anderson or other "performance" artist. Yet several of the writers who *are* featured are either essentially one-play phenomena – Gelber, Gordone, Medoff, Innaurato – or too marginal in terms of production – Bernard, Malpede, Schenkar – to be considered with any plausibility as "representative." This is not to say that the actual interviews are uninteresting, of course – most of them in fact are fine (Gelber's in particular) – but a false centrality is being claimed for them.

Moreover, in pursuit of this same representativeness the interviews are divided into four main periods – 1945–59, 1959–69, 1970–79, 1980–93 – mostly (but not invariably) according to the decade in which the dramatists first made their mark. This leads to all sorts of anomaly. For example, Neil Simon is placed in the 1945–59 period, though his first full-length Broadway play (*Come Blow Your Horn*) did not appear until 1960 and he has featured prominently in every decade since, with an important new emphasis on "serious" autobiographical plays beginning with *Brighton Beach Memoirs* in 1983. Yet Terrence McNally, who came to prominence as an experimental satiric dramatist in the 60s and had important work produced throughout the 70s, is included in the post-1980 section because, though the interview covers his whole career, its emphasis is on the realistic gay drama that has characterized his writing in the 80s and 90s. Similarly, Arthur Miller appears in the first period, characterized as "Broadway Realism," though the interview itself is concerned solely with his later work which premiered in England and concentrates on *The American Clock* (1983), *Elegy for a Lady*, and *Some Kind of Love Story* (both 1989) which are all distinctly *non-realistic*.

After a general "Introduction" that argues that interviewing itself should be seen as "metadrama," the editors provide each of the four sections with a short overview essay.

These are mostly useful summaries of accepted opinion, though in part 1 it is surely self-defeating to cite the theatricalist-expressionist *Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Death of a Salesman* as exemplary "boulevard theatre" characterized by "realism." And as was mentioned, actual interviews often have little relation to the period being described. An especially curious example of this is the interview with Adrienne Kennedy in part 2, which concentrates almost entirely on the innovative form of Kennedy's later 1987 autobiography *People Who Led To My Plays*, and only gets to her drama briefly at the end, with Kennedy resisting all attempts to define her too narrowly as a representative black militant of the 60s. Similarly, Neil Simon evades Jackson Bryer's attempts to channel their interviews towards the concerns of showbiz; several women playwrights reject the "feminist" label; and Arthur Miller has patiently to explain that for people old enough to remember the 30s "socialism" was a very sane option to an interviewer who claims youthful ignorance of such matters, which extends to not realizing that "Solidarity" should be capitalized (51) because it refers to the movement that democratized Poland well within her own adult lifetime. Several such contretemps make one realize exactly why the editors argue that reviewing should be regarded as a form of metadrama!

The collection is a rich one, however, and the general level of discussion high; so rather than carping at shortfalls, it will be fairer and more useful to recognize some of the superior interviews. Three that stand out are those with Neil Simon, Terrence McNally, and Tony Kushner. Simon is so often omitted from critical collections about American drama, despite – or, more probably, because of – his extraordinary popular success, that it is a particular pleasure to discover how very modestly and intelligently he understands his art. He is particularly good on the imaginative genesis of his plays, the need for constant rewriting but shrewd discrimination about whom to accept advice from (a lesson his idol, Tennessee Williams, never learned), the way that farce is structured, and the serious elements that have ballasted his comedy from the start. McNally's interview is similarly informative and relaxed, with particularly interesting comments about musical influences on his sense of structure, on observation-of-behaviour as more basic to comedy than witty dialogue (a point Simon also makes), on the advantages of presenting gay life non-tendentiously, and on the way that "fear of intimacy" often corrupts the accepted "other" status that society grants to minorities. The Kushner piece gains a special edge from the fact that David Savran, his interlocutor, is not only very knowledgeable about the writers and political events that especially concern Kushner, but is also an experienced interviewer whose questions push all the right buttons. Kushner, moreover, is exceptionally analytical, so that for the first time I now understand aspects of *Angels in America* that formerly baffled me: their connection to Walter Benjamin's vision of history, I learn, is particularly important. I may still retain reservations about such referentiality, of course, but at least these will no longer be based on misunderstanding. *Speaking on Stage* is full of such illuminating detail despite the awkward fit between interviews and academic "envelope," and it conveys very strongly the two editors' second aim: a sense of the sheer *diversity* of modern American drama.

This journal does not usually review critical anthologies, but George Crandell's *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams* deserves brief mention as another contribution to the growing renewal of interest in Williams that was noted in the Fall number of *Modern Drama* 39, providing, as it does, a survey of reviews and criticism that complements Crandell's monumental *Descriptive Bibliography* of Williams's own work. After an overview essay and chronology of the Williams *oeuvre*, Crandell analyzes in detail the critical response to twenty-eight individual plays, with each section reprinting key reviews plus one especially central critical essay. Concluding with a selective bibliography and a very thorough index, the volume provides yet another indispensable tool for the exciting Williams revival.

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