The Contemporary British History Play by Richard H. Palmer (review)

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Modern Drama, Volume 41, Number 4, Winter 1998, pp. 655-657 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1998.0057*

Book Reviews

RICHARD H. PALMER. *The Contemporary British History Play*. Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies No. 81. Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press 1998. Pp. 272. $65.00.

Whose past is it, anyway? Historians try to reconstruct the past from a jigsaw puzzle that has some of its pieces missing, others misshapen, others obscured. Who recorded the observations from which the historian creates a narrative? For whom? With what motive? What was altered, misunderstood, or never recorded? What cultural influences are at work? How is the information refracted through the historian's eyes?

History being so subjective, throw in the creative license allowed the playwright and it would seem nearly impossible to decide on the nature of the history play. Some writers have taken on the challenge only to tie themselves into a knot only the most convoluted reasoning can loosen. Richard Palmer's approach in *The Contemporary British History Play* is refreshing and far more organic: after reviewing other critics' criteria, he admits the futility of defining a "history play," opens the door wide, and admits all British plays that make use of history, beginning in 1959 with Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. He identifies eight kinds of drama using history, ranging from plays in which the "Characters and situations are largely fictional, but the style of the play mimics that of a play from an earlier period" (8), to one-actor biographies such as Whitemore's *Stevie* and *Breaking the Code*, to docudramas aiming for historical accuracy. Thus, Bowen's *Florence Nightingale*, a psychological study, and Bond's highly fantastical *Early Morning*, in which Queen Victoria and Florence are lovers, are two species of the same genre.

Having let in all and sundry, Palmer creates order by organizing his material ideologically into six categories: Biographical, Social, Oppositional, Marxist and Socialist, Feminist, and Deconstructionist and Postmodern. Most

of these categories are further subdivided; for example, the subcategories within the chapter on biographical history plays include Psychobiography, which subjects historical figures to psychoanalysis; Domestic Biographies, that is, plays about the private lives of important or celebrated people; and "Mover and Shaker" plays about the men associated with crucial moments in history. (There *are* women who move and shake, but Palmer reserves discussion of them for the chapter on Feminist history plays. Perhaps the time has come in literary studies to mainstream women and other "others.")

In general, these categories are sound, sensible, and well-supported with numerous examples. Palmer has been attending British theatre regularly for thirty-five years, as he states in his Acknowledgements, and his substantial first-hand knowledge of the subject shows. He covers a truly impressive array of plays; one of the strengths of the book is that it brings several lesser-known playwrights into the discussion of contemporary British drama. Shirlee Gee, Peter Whelan, Michael Hastings, Diane Samuels, and others take their places beside Bond, Brenton, Churchill, and Shaffer. Other major English writers of historical drama, such as Peter Barnes (inexplicably ignored by other scholars of the genre), are given their due.

The one problematic chapter is that on Deconstructionist and Postmodern history plays. It seems belaboured; the author's observations about how contemporary playwrights use elements of deconstruction and the postmodern are valid, but it is another matter to designate the "deconstructionist" or "postmodern" history play. In fact, he seldom succeeds in doing so, perhaps because theatre has made use of "postmodern" devices – fractured narrative, metatheatre, nonlinear structure, the juxtaposition of disparate art forms or styles – throughout its existence.

Of course contemporary British playwrights have made abundant use of these devices, particularly in history plays, and that is the focus of Palmer's final, and most insightful, chapter, "The Search for a Theatrical Form." In an attempt to draw some conclusions about how history, theatre, and politics intersect, Palmer looks at structure, the theatrical conventions that are pressed into service, and how it all acts upon an audience. There is some overlap with the deconstructionist/postmodern chapter, but here the author theorizes about the work rather than making the work fit a theory.

Palmer's style is clear, if on the dry side. Since he has seen most or all of the plays he discusses, I would have liked to know more about his reactions to the productions. Other, less subjective complaints could all be corrected with a bit of editing. For example, on page 75 we learn that "the National Theatre Board discussed staging Conor O'Brien's *Murderous Angels*, but concern about being sued for libel prevented production." It is not until page 82 that we get a description of the plot and can figure out what might have been considered libellous. Shirlee Gee is quoted describing the style of her play *Warrior* as "tuppence coloured," but there is no indication of what she means

by it (156). And my hackles were raised by the use of the word "situationalism" to describe the Situationist International movement (170).

Notes are conveniently placed at the end of each chapter, and there is a helpful index. The bibliography is nicely organized, but the "Books on Theatre" section is skimpy. For all the talk of Brechtian influence, not a single Brecht title is listed – not even "A Short Organum for the Theatre," from which the author quotes. I am puzzled, too, by the format of the two appendices. Appendix A is a list of history plays produced each year from 1959 through 1997. This is lovely; we should have appendices like this more often. In Appendix B the plays, along with their dates of first performance, are organized by venue. Why not combine the two by adding the venues and opening dates to the information in Appendix A?

Minor shortcomings aside, *The Contemporary British History Play* is an efficient and thoughtful treatment of the many uses post-war playwrights have made of history. Palmer's solution to the problem of defining the genre is quite satisfying; it is good to get beyond that silly debate and on to more substantial matters. Finally, since even seasoned scholars are likely to encounter playwrights new to them here, perhaps some less visible writers will receive critical attention.

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MICHAEL MANHEIM, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xviii + 256. $59.95; $19.95, paperback.

Michael Manheim's collection of essays is a major contribution to O'Neill studies, equal in importance to other important monographs published in the nineties, such as Joel Pfister's *Staging Depth: Eugene O'Neill and the Politics of Psychological Discourse*, Kurt Eisen's *The Inner Strength of Opposites: O'Neill's Novelistic Drama and the Melodramatic Imagination*, and Normand Berlin's *O'Neill's Shakespeare.*

The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill is particularly welcome because it offers a balanced and synthetic overview of O'Neill's dramaturgy at a time when, after more than fifty years of criticism about the playwright's work, it becomes virtually impossible for anyone to assimilate the bulk of previous scholarship. The first cluster of articles, comprising perceptive studies by Stephen Black, Egil Törnqvist, and Daniel Watermeier, deals with the biographical, literary, and theatrical influences that shaped O'Neill's artistry. The second group of essays focuses on the O'Neill canon in chronological order : Margaret Ranald deals with the early plays, James A. Robinson with the middle years, and Normand Berlin with the late masterpieces. While Berlin's essay pre-