



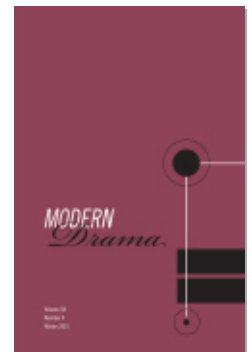
PROJECT MUSE®

Staging the Slums, Slumming the Stage: Class, Poverty, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in American Theatre, 1890-1916 by
J. Chris Westgate (review)

Brenda Murphy

Modern Drama, Volume 58, Number 4, Winter 2015, pp. 538-541 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press



➔ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/604850>

For example, Asma Mitra acknowledges the crucial importance of the (relatively) visible and politically confrontational “parallel theatre” of theatre groups like Ajoka and Tehrik-e-Niswan to theatre activity in Pakistan – a country in which theatre as an idea is almost necessarily marginal. Mitra also acknowledges the “mainstream” theatre work in Pakistan of such entities as the National Academy of Performing Arts and the central government’s nods toward theatre (funding, for instance, productions of *Chicago* in 2009 and *Mamma Mia* in 2010). Mitra also concedes, following Baz Kershaw, that Pakistan’s most vital, vibrant performances often occupy spaces outside theatre buildings, in the bodies and voices of minority populations and the marginalized. On the way to a conclusion, Mitra provides a superb summary of the efforts of theatre to make a difference in post-independence Pakistan. The conclusion ties Mitra’s essay to the rest of the book: “*So theatre continues . . . we continue our journey in a fragmented society and within the complexity of a culture where nothing is given*” (128; emphasis in the original).

The remaining essays similarly strive to show that contemporary theatre in the greater region has recognized that unity – national, cultural, political unity – has not materialized, or that the pretence of unity has sewn together a few fragments and ignored the rest. Syed Jamil Ahmed, Carol C. Davis, and Kanchuka Dharmasiri each pack a lot of detail into their studies of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, respectively. A generalization will not do. Each of these authors speaks differently about the very different countries and theatrical circumstances they address. But the book’s common theme is prominent in each case. “Mainstream” theatre, inescapably – by its very nature, apparently – plasters over the cracks. The contemporary theatre in South Asia with which these scholars are concerned works to knock the plaster off, to expose the cracks that unity never closes but can only deny. The theatrical attempts to expose disunity that the authors of these essays examine provide the basic elements of theatrical life in South Asia.



J. CHRIS WESTGATE, *Staging the Slums, Slumming the Stage: Class, Poverty, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in American Theatre, 1890–1916*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. xii + 278. \$90 (Hb).

Reviewed by Brenda Murphy, University of Connecticut

Staging the Slums, Slumming the Stage participates in a new wave of theatre history and criticism focused on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century

American “plays, playwrights, and productions that were important culturally, sociologically, politically” (15). Specifically, it addresses a neglected area of American drama and theatre studies, the plays that were identified with the Progressive Era. In this book, Chris Westgate trains a consistent New Historical perspective on a clearly defined subgenre, the slum play, to demonstrate that the playwrights and theatre artists who created these plays were both representing and participating in important cultural phenomena. The study considers “what it signified, for individual productions and for a generation of theatregoers, that going to some theatres was like going slumming, a reality that had critical implications for theatre and society at the threshold of modernity” (2).

Because of their “contravention of traditional boundaries of taste, propriety, and morality by bringing the ‘hideous reality’ of the slums into the ‘consecrated Make Believe’” of the theatre, the slum plays, Westgate amply demonstrates, “prompted vehement debate, which filled the columns of newspapers and magazines during the Progressive Era” (3). His project examines the cultural work of these theatrical productions and specifically considers “how slum plays on Broadway stages functioned as a locus for discovery, affirmation, and interrogation of changing upper-class assumptions (particularly among the emergent middle class) regarding their ethical responsibility toward urban poverty” (7). Westgate contends that productions of slum plays “functioned as enactments of competing discourses of poverty during the historical moment in which [William Dean] Howells defined the dilemma of ethical responsibility toward urban poverty” and “tacitly instructed individuals on how to engage with slum life” (9). Thus, the slum plays “functioned as sites for the negotiation, interrogation, and dissemination of discourses of poverty in the Progressive Era” (9).

Westgate’s deft elucidation of the tension between what he defines as the “tourism” and the “sociological” narratives in the plays gives the book both coherence and energy. It is divided into three parts. In the first, Westgate defines the two types of narrative and describes the modes of ethical engagement with the slums that each encourages. The tourism narrative privileged the “sights/sites of the slums through the emphasis on plot and setting” (26) and endorsed the abjection of the working class and immigrants by inviting middle-class audiences “to contrast themselves, morally and materially, with what they found” (27) in the slums. The sociological narrative, on the other hand, emphasized “problems from slum life, from tenement neglect to ethnic prejudices to the social evil of prostitution” (55) and reflected “the progressive discourse of reformism, which privileged advocacy of better living conditions, better wages, and improved way of life for the working class” (56). Any particular play might be intentionally driven by one of the narratives, but as

Westgate demonstrates, the other is almost always present as well, creating a tension at the thematic centre of the play. Chapter one focuses on several plays that most clearly embody the tourism narrative, notably Charles H. Hoyt's extremely popular *A Trip to Chinatown* and Robert Neilson Stephens's *On the Bowery*. Chapter two analyses several plays that exhibit the beginnings of the sociological narrative, including Charles A. Taylor's *From Rags to Riches*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Dawn of a To-morrow*, and Clyde Fitch's *The Straight Road*.

In part two, Westgate reveals the tension between the tourism and sociological narratives as they relate to three common destinations of slumming. Chapter three looks at the tenement house in plays such as Charles Kenyon's provocative *Kindling*. Chapter four considers the immigrant enclaves of the Lower East Side in plays like Horace B. Fry's *Little Italy* and James H. Reid's *The Peddler*. Chapter five takes on the red-light district in some plays that may be better known to the reader, Eugene Walter's *The Easiest Way*, George Scarborough's *The Lure*, and Rachel Crothers's *Ourselves*.

The first two parts of the book are enlightening, both in their revelation of how extensive the dramatic representation of the slums was during this period and in the analyses of the plays themselves. Part three opens new ground in another way. Westgate brings a new perspective to studies of relatively well-known plays with well-documented productions, by highlighting the tension between the tourism and sociological narratives and their modes of engagement with the slums. In chapter six, he examines Edward Sheldon's *Salvation Nell*, and in chapter seven, Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* and *The Melting Pot*. The chapter on Zangwill serves as a particularly effective conclusion for the study because, as Westgate puts it, his plays "demonstrate the key tensions involved in the enactments of class, poverty, and ethnicity during the Progressive Era" (223). They exemplify the "radical potential of slum plays" to "challenge the privilege of the elite by making them confront subjects like class, poverty, and immigration" (223). On the other hand, they also fall into the trap of aestheticizing poverty, which Williams Dean Howells had warned about in a touchstone quotation that Westgate cites throughout the book: "There is nothing more infernal than the juggle that transmutes for the tenderest-hearted people the misery of their fellows into something comic or poetic" (6).

Westgate's discussion of the plays and productions provides a wealth of theatre history as well as a rich cultural context for understanding it. Drawing with confidence on his knowledge of history and the relevant critical theory, Westgate makes his arguments clearly and persuasively. And he tells a fascinating story. *Staging the Slums, Slumming the Stage* is a significant contribution to our understanding not only of American drama and

theatre but also of the cultural and social history of the American Progressive Era.



TIMOTHY R. WHITE. *Blue-Collar Broadway: The Craft and Industry of American Theatre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 275, illustrated. \$45.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by Jonathan Chambers, Bowling Green State University

In the introduction to *Blue-Collar Broadway*, Timothy R. White posits that his study “pushes against the design-oriented boundaries of theatre history” (6), by focusing instead on “the carpenters, seamstresses, and other craft experts who brought stage shows to fruition” (8). Through seven chapters, White accounts for the frequently forgotten efforts of those skilled workers who constructed and crafted pre-Broadway and Broadway productions, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the present. In doing so, he also traces the rise and fall of the Times Square theatre-craft district – which, in its heyday, constituted “a de facto ‘factory’” (38) – as well as the developments and subsequent changes (e.g., unionization, the long run, technical advances, tourism, angels and investors, etc.) that altered the Broadway production model.

A historian trained in urban history, White brings, to his project, expertise in recording the geographic and demographic dynamics of midtown Manhattan. Drawing data from telephone directories, business listings, and building occupancy records, White ably demonstrates the shifting spatial relations of theatre-oriented businesses to Broadway theatres. The study includes a number of expertly rendered maps, composed using geographic information software, which serve to accentuate the argument that, while the first half of the twentieth century saw the rapid advent of a centralized theatre-craft district in and around Times Square, the second half saw the relatively swift decentralization of those crafts as they moved to regional, national, and international destinations.

Not surprisingly, White is at his best when working within the confines of his disciplinary home. His explications of the migration patterns of those individuals and companies involved in theatre crafts and of the shifting geographies and demographics of midtown are nuanced and intriguing. Although White’s command of theatre history and aesthetics is sound, it nonetheless occasionally lacks nuance (e.g., in his dismissive take on melodramatic performance, his rudimentary reviews of Ibsen and Belasco, or his