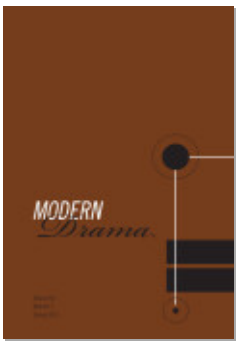
Scenes from Bourgeois Life by Nicholas Ridout (review)

Timothy Virgil Dugan



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As such, *After August* will prove worthy to those interested in Wilson studies, American drama, literary studies, and blues studies.

NICHOLAS RIDOUT. *Scenes from Bourgeois Life.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 220. $70.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by Timothy Virgil Dugan, St. Francis College

Scenes from Bourgeois Life is a dense but at times conversational book about the devolution and eventual reformation of spectatorship in England from the Restoration to Brexit. Nicholas Ridout structures *Scenes from Bourgeois Life* as a kind of reverse chronicle, a backstory that begins with the experimental Channel 4-Britain–TV era, then wends its way rearward to canonical authors and beguiling aspects of England's literary history. Although bourgeois spectatorship is the enunciated theme of this sometimes inscrutable book, television viewing – in many places considered a very non-bourgeois pastime – commands a righteous presence in Ridout's arguments, at least early on. Here is a high-minded exposition from the second of three prologues, titled "To Be a Spectator": "The condition of the spectator, then, is one in which you feel powerless to act, separated from those whose suffering you watch" (11). As hyperbolic and clamorous as Ridout's definition of television viewing might sound, watching "the tube" is for Ridout a serious aspect of contemporaneous life in England that demands and deserves our awareness and responsiveness.

Scenes from Bourgeois Life commences with three prologues that reveal wildly deviating topics, such as the taxonomy of Balzac's opus *La comédie humaine* (1829–48); "British television viewing as a whole during the second decade of the twenty-first century" (7); and an assessment of Swiss playwright and director Milo Rau's drama *Compassion: The History of the Machine Gun* (2016), a series of testimonial "duelling" monologues set in the throes of the Rwandan genocide. This odd troika of prologues is driven by fetishized television, uncommon history, and shock and awe performativity, but never without recompense for the reader, particularly prologue three, "Compassion," where the above-mentioned solo dramas recount in testimony the ordeal of a female prisoner being forced to urinate on a cadaver (15).

The first prologue, aptly subtitled "Scenes from Bourgeois Life: 'A Box in the Theatre of the World,'" is an aggregate of stage directions from august titles in the modern canon and will be recognizable to graduate students but a challenge for most freshmen. Ridout's list includes quotidian verse from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and Eugene O'Neill's signature work,

Long Day's Journey into Night (1956). At a cursory glance, Prologue 1 seems professorial, a master syllabus pop quiz of sorts, but on closer reading, it contextualizes for the reader the cluttered landscapes that have come to define space and environment in western theatre praxis. Here is a quizzical non sequitur from Ridout's archive: "*There is no ashtray, but there could have been*" (2). Obviously, the incongruity of this stage note offers the reader a glimpse into the tyranny of "realism" as it has consumed the modern era. As Ridout's Prologue 1 reveals, playwrights and their stage architects, from Ibsen forward, are gatherers of relics, hoarders of bourgeois tastes and liberality; where once it was cakes and ale on the English-speaking stage, now it is illusory ashtrays.

Scenes from Bourgeois Life is an ingenuous offering by (in my careful, friendly opinion) a committed university Marxist with tremendous sympathies for England's non-bourgeois viewers. As Ridout sees it, such "spectators" are smarter than we think and should be listened to. Here are chapter and verse from prologue two, "To Be a Spectator": "They are, in fact, expert spectators. Just like those connoisseurs of boxing whom Bertolt Brecht imagined might constitute the new ideal audience for his new theatre" (8). Brecht's "ideal audience"? This is a refreshing and startling perspective from an academic – a Brechtian, no less, of our time – who makes his arguments about the modern British spectator, and sporting or otherwise, they are well worth considering.

Scenes from Bourgeois Life is organized around a series of thoroughgoing essays and an epilogue consuming nearly two hundred pages. The essays are a neatly packaged quarto, with the lead essay offering a somewhat haughty title recalling John Locke: "I: An Essay Regarding the Bourgeoisie." The less byzantine chapter titles – "II: The Scene with *The Spectator*"; "III: The Scene with the Trunk-Maker"; and "IV: The Scene with the Smoke" – offer rigorous scrutiny of the seminal London broadsheet, *The Spectator*; the progenitors of that magazine, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele; and finally, their iconic stick figure that is burned into British lore, Mr. Spectator. The later chapters also include a preternatural discussion of the Drury Lane critic and doppelganger (a Caliban spinoff) identified in *The Spectator* as "The Trunk-Maker" (101). This numinous essay and, later, a macabre account of "The Mohocks" (deriving from Mohawks), a malevolent but well-heeled gang that terrorized late-night fashionistas with impunity in early-eighteenth-century London, comprise Ridout's most substantial reportage and are worthy of Mickey Spillane (132).

Although I would amply recommend this scrupulously cited study, this recommendation comes with a caveat: Ridout's book does not dish about astounding moments in the age of repertory; there is limited re-creation of momentous stagings beyond a reading of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, produced by Eleanor Marx, daughter of the man himself, Karl, and featuring the popular if idiosyncratic George Bernard Shaw in the role of Krogstad (3n3). As

such, excitable amateur theatre enthusiasts might be confounded with Ridout's book because the alluring cover jacket – a wispy graphic of a formless, smoky, velveting rose – suggests a theatrical tour de force, a crowd-pleaser, a life in the theatre as Lawrence Olivier and Vivian Leigh might have lived it. Appropriately and unambiguously, the title of the book is *Scenes from Bourgeois Life*, not *Scenes from Bourgeois Theatre.*

MARIA SHEVTSOVA. *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xvi + 288. $34.99 (Hb).

Reviewed by Amy Skinner, University of Hull

Maria Shevtsova's new volume on Konstantin Stanislavsky is aptly named: this book is most certainly a rediscovery, whose careful framing and clear, detailed analysis sheds significant light on the practice of one of modern theatre's towering figures. Shevtsova begins from the premise that "we d[o] not know enough about the Stanislavsky whom we kn[o]w so well" (ix) and proceeds to develop a tone and ethos of exploration, guiding the reader through Stanislavsky's life and work in a way that draws out engaging and challenging new perspectives. That Shevtsova debunks some unhelpful myths around Stanislavsky (e.g., of his over-exaggerated political naivety) is only the starting point in a complex work, which acts as a significant piece of scholarly and practical re-evaluation.

Rediscovering Stanislavsky begins with two chapters on context. The first deals with Stanislavsky's early life and childhood (steeped in creative experiences) through to his contribution to the Silver Age of the Russian theatre. Shevtsova draws out interesting ideas around utopian communities, exploring the influence of *sobornost* [togetherness] on Stanislavsky's thinking (22), which becomes thematic as the volume progresses. In chapter two, context is picked up again, this time from a political perspective, leading into the Revolution and ultimately to the Stalin era and Stanislavsky's death. Shevtsova then turns her attention to specific aspects of Stanislavsky's practice, starting with his approach to the actor, followed by a detailed analysis of the role of the Art Theatre Studios, covering the first, second, third, and fourth studios, as well as the Bolshoy Opera Studio and the Opera-Dramatic Studio. Shevtsova pays careful attention to Stanislavsky's engagement with opera and to the influence this had on his practice as a whole. Stanislavsky the director forms the focus of the final chapter, where a close reading of production scores allows Shevtsova to engage specifically with Stanislavsky's work as a director, an area that, as she notes, is often minimized in comparison to his contributions to actor training (180).