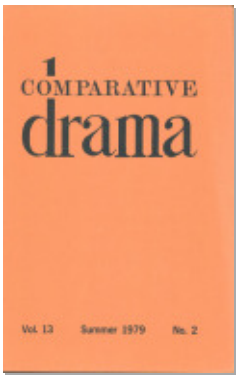
Fields of Play in Modern Drama by Thomas R. Whitaker (review)



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to a "sacred fiction" and Macbeth to a victim of socially conditioned "overperception."

Finally, I feel that the tendency to reduce the plays to explorations of role behavior results in an extremely limited view of their contents. Although Felperin talks about "the fullness of humanity" of Shakespeare's characters, his commitment to an anti-mimetic theory of art leaves him little to say about the moving human experience of the tragedies, and even his insight into the self-conscious role-playing of the characters is not worked out with the rich particularity one might expect. The relative "aporia" of Felperin's argument (to use one of his favorite Greek loanwords) is compounded by his preference for sociological, philosophical, and literary jargon. In this book, Shakespeare's characters are not viewed in terms of their fundamental human relationships nor are they subject to powerful emotions; they are caught instead in a seemingly endless cycle of "mimesis and endomimesis," "romanticization and deromanticization," "mythologization and demythologization," "mystification, demystification, and remystification." Dramatic moments like Othello's last speech, expressive as it is of grief, love, guilt, and shame, are reduced to academic cliches:

> His final speech and gesture can only point inward toward an indefinite antecedent, a radical self that remains humanly impossible to denote truly. He has reinvented his own earlier dramatic language with a new understanding that prior sign and present significance, conventional role and distinctive self, can never fully coincide, and creates in the process a more authentic, because more human magic than that displayed in any of his previous rhetoric of self-definition. (p. 85)

Felperin may be right in insisting that art often does not imitate life directly, but passages like the one just quoted make one wish for a literary criticism that retains more feeling for "the thing itself."

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Thomas R. Whitaker. *Fields of Play in Modern Drama.* Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977. Pp. 192. $11.00.

Thomas Whitaker opts for an interpretation of drama based on a willed, empathetic, participatory experience by the audience-member of the individual play in performance and also for an interpretation based on the actors' participatory interactions with each other as the play unfolds. The spectator thereby "witnesses" the drama and comes at its meaning as the actors in their turn bear "witness" to the universe actualized by the author within the play. In both instances the process is one of discovery and self-discovery. The modern stage play thus provides both (1) a configuration of characters who "witness" concerning each other and incrementally inform us about the themes, the situations, the philosophical and social orientation, and the conflicts taking place and

(2) a medium through which the viewer participates in a voyage of discovery both about the play and about himself as he identifies with the characters as they perform their parts. Of the various sorts of "witnessing" that he is concerned with, Whitaker discusses most often the obligations of the spectator to become an active element in the experience that is the drama performed in the theater.

From one point of view Whitaker could be regarded as elaborating a truism, that we never can be sure of the final meaning of a dramatic work until we experience it as performance. There are few if any students of the drama who would deny the importance of performance, in allowing us to come at the full meaning of a specific play. As a critic who regards this proposition not only as a central truth but *the* central truth about interpreting drama, Whitaker underscores the need felt by drama students to see plays as well as read them. Certainly, Whitaker is persuasive in giving this view great authority.

My reservation concerning Whitaker's thesis and his book (the book is the thesis illustrated) is this: he tends to make of the participatory process the only method whereby we can get at its reality. But cannot we actually get deep into the meaning of a dramatic work by participating with the author, as it were, through an alert, sophisticated, conscientious reading of his play? One dimension concerning the reality of the work still escapes us if we lack a performance, but we need not wait until a first-rate performance is available to start studying a given drama. Indeed, I would even argue that there is something fixed and solid and unchanging at the core of any play of intellectual substance, something that a misguided performance cannot violate.

Actually, I sometimes question the absolute authority of performance, since it is possible, I think, to gain a distorted view of what a play may be through a miscast, misconceived, and mishandled production. The excellent presentation will, granted, take us many degrees beyond the flatness of any printed text, but a poor performance can be painful to the extent that it violates the integrity of the text. I would argue, therefore, for a greater importance to the printed text than Whitaker seems to allow, in his stress upon the spectator's obligatory empathy with the actors, upon the incremental revelation of meaning in a temporal mode in the theatre, and upon the active role of the spectator as he "witnesses" the play. In Whitaker's view we are not so much guilty creatures sitting at a play as guilty creatures if we only sit at a play. Is the role of passive enjoyment of literary art, moreover, so reprehensible as Whitaker would perhaps imply, or is the informed reading of the text quite so inadequate a means of apprehending dramatic truth as he also implies? "Playing the player" is indeed one mode of entry into the world of dramatic art, but is it the only one possible? Certainly, it seems to me, we can use in our critical discussions of drama a plurality of approaches.

In Whitaker's view the drama is not a mental construct or a patterned view of social or psychic reality, at least primarily; but rather it is primarily process—a process of discovery for both actors and members of an audience. The historical and cultural milieu, for example, does get assimilated into a given play and is therefore worth consideration, in

my opinion; the intellectual ambience is more important in itself than Whitaker seems prepared to grant. As for content, both Whitaker and I would agree that it is not the ideas that are important but the dramatist's use and reshaping of them. But I am not so sure that I would then go on to say that ideas are important only as dramatic constructs. Nor would I regard them as quite so relative, provisional, and indeterminate as Whitaker finds them to be on the one hand nor quite so completely assimilated into the work as participatory ritual as he sees them on the other hand.

The text of a play, I think, has an authenticity that cannot be violated by any performance of the play, though an excellent performance extends our knowledge of the play and illuminates it in the most significant way possible. Philosophically, ideologically, aesthetically, and psychologically, the work can also be seen apart from the student-spectator's activity in identifying with its performance—partially perhaps, but still not falsely. If the final ranges of truth that we can apprehend about a dramatic work are to be found in our participatory motions with respect to it, still the full truth about it is, in my view, not only to be found there. The relativity of Whitaker's approach, that participation is the means to interpretation and that interpretation in turn depends on a shared participation in the dynamics of a play, sometimes bothers me, in that his own comments on individual plays must almost of necessity be subjective and impressionistic. He is also so much given to a paradoxical view of reality (but who is not?) that his style emerges as more elliptical and convoluted than the complexities of the works themselves will at times justify.

But I cannot close on a negative note. Whitaker's net is wide as he discusses one major work, sometimes more, by each of the following: Stoppard, Beckett, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, Claudel, Pirandello, Genet, Brecht, Eliot, and Hofmannsthal. The book is immensely stimulating; it is also pathbreaking, I think, since it will forbid any critic from taking, as the only mode of interpretation, the traditional, more passive view that I may seem in part to have championed. We can recognize, moreover, that Whitaker may have had to overstate his position in order to get it stated at all, and then we are free to make any corrections to it that we may deem necessary. Whitaker's enthusiasm for the drama is infectious, and his conviction that the drama provides means for expressing difficult, central, complicated truths about the human situation is genuine and heartening. Whitaker is a gifted critic whose insights about the works that he discusses are fresh and prepossessing.

Much of the value of his book resides in these insights which his theory engendered (or which even may lie to one side of his theory) rather than in the elaboration of the theory itself. Concerning the characters in *Rosmersholm,* Whitaker announces clearly with respect to their repeated failure to declare themselves: "They still continue to want, not the risks of spontaneous mutuality, but the distantly intimate securities of reciprocal domination and dependence." Concerning the philosophical direction of *The Ghost Sonata,* Whitaker succinctly sums it up in these words: "There is no peace in the world—but peace is at hand." And does not this epigram summarize the memorable paradox that is explored

in *The Three Sisters:* ". . . a host of pressures and distractions conspire to demand that resolute action be taken just at the moment of extreme fatigue or even paralysis." When the audience-participator in the action considers this play, he must, so Whitaker asserts, do what the characters as people refuse to do, ". . . that you open yourself to the full music of our existence in mutuality." Analysis of this play is not so much needed, therefore, as "A widening of your peripheral attention, a listening in quiet alertness to the jagged texture of this music—and to the harmonies produced by the gestures through which these people construct for themselves a dream of shared need."

Whatever may be our considered view concerning the theory which Whitaker propounds in *Fields of Play in Modern Drama,* no one can question the depths of response, the aesthetic sensitivity, and the creative vision out of which it has developed.

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