Review


Theatre & Scotland is the seventeenth publication in Palgrave Macmillan’s Theatre& series, which began circulating in July 2009. As series editors Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato note, these slender volumes “should all be readable in one sitting by anyone with a curiosity about the subject” (p. viii). This text, then, imagines a wide audience, one possibly comprised of students and a general population interested in the arts or in Scottish history but not necessarily familiar with the historical and contemporary dimensions of Scottish theatre. While those who have closely followed Scotland’s performing arts may not find the volume immensely beneficial, theatre scholars with a different geographical focus or Scottish political scholars may well find the volume enlightening.

Author Trish Reid usefully outlines two main objectives: “to provide a concise overview of the shifting role(s) of theatre and theatricality in contemporary Scottish culture in the context of wider debates about the theatre of small nations in the age of globalisation and devolution” and “to raise the curtain on a theatrical Scotland richer, more varied, raunchier and less uptight than has hitherto been readily imagined” (pp. 2-3). Reid does not forward an argument about the place of theatre in Scotland’s social imaginary or in its cultural or political sectors. Instead, she offers a survey of numerous plays and playwrights (including David Greig, Rona Munro, John McGrath, Sue Glover, David Harrower, and Gregory Burke) and of relevant cultural studies (by authors such as David McCrone, Nadine Holdsworth, Tom Nairn, Murray Pittock, and Christopher Harvie).

While Theatre & Scotland centres on play texts and staged productions from the 1970s through the 2000s, Reid references historical events and plays to make visible artistic, socio-cultural, and political lineages. For example, she details the production history of Sir David Lyndsay’s sixteenth-century morality play,
Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis, and its adaptations and re-stagings in the twentieth century (pp. 35-38). Moreover, she traces the performative role of tartan in branding a shifting Scottish identity from the 1746 Jacobite defeat at Culloden to its deployment in the National Theatre of Scotland’s (NTS) international hit, Black Watch (pp. 20-31).

In addition to discussing the work of the NTS, an institution (funded directly by the Scottish Parliament) that partners with artists and companies across the nation, Reid observes the varying degrees of Scottishness in the artists, companies, and dramatic texts under discussion. The book’s foreword by Anthony Neilson sets an ambivalent tone: “I’m neither ashamed nor proud to be Scottish. It’s simply a matter of fact that I am. I’ve certainly never wanted, artistically, to be defined in those terms and resent any implication of duty to address my Scottishness dramatically” (p. ix). While Reid does not comment on Neilson’s observations, the book resists singularly defining a Scottish artistic identity. This perhaps foreshadows the uncertainty of the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, supported by some artists (David Greig, for example) and challenged by others (including David MacLennan).

How might one characterize the working definitions of “theatre” and “Scotland” here? Theatre appears predominantly as text-based staged productions. While Reid mentions earlier popular entertainments and more recent site-specific performances and experimental work (by companies including Grid Iron, Suspect Culture, Vanishing Point, and the NTS), the written work of playwrights take centre stage. Reid does not take up Gaelic or Scots drama to any degree (although she notes the politics of language) nor does she delve into radio plays. Scotland, meanwhile, emerges as a complex cultural entity with a contested history and current identity in flux. Less important to the volume is the nation understood as, say, a diverse geographical terrain.

As someone keenly interested in Scottish theatre and politics, I am pleased that the work and historical conditions of these artists is circulating in such a well-written format. However, I am curious about the politics of including “Scotland” within the series. The only other nation thus far included is Ireland (written by Lionel Pilkington). While various cultural and governmental
sectors forward Scotland as a “small nation,” I wonder about the presumption that the heterogeneous theatrical practices, however abridged, of such a complicated nation can fit within the confines of such a small book. Of course this is the series’ challenge, with massive topics that range from education to globalization to ethics. But it is difficult to imagine a Theatre & USA or Theatre & France; one might perceive the breadth and depth of their artistic practices and cultural histories as too big to capture within such a slender volume. So although this book certainly demonstrates the “multivalent, playful and performative nature of Scottish culture and identity” (pp. 88-89), I hope its place in the series does not unwittingly frame Scotland itself as an easily accessible and consumable entity.

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