

Book Reviews

edited by Grace Joseph

The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays edited by Leanna Keyes, Lindsey Mantoan, and Angela Farr Schiller

London: Bloomsbury, 2021, 456 pp. (ebook)

By Robyn Dudić

The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays joins a growing corpus of queer drama anthologies that include trans plays in their selection. The editors differentiate this anthology from other collections—such as those by Oberon Books, Mark Gatiss, or Fintan Walsh—through their exclusive focus on trans plays. The anthology spans an intersectional and stylistically diverse collection of eight plays by trans playwrights, with an introduction for each play, in most cases by a trans writer. In each, the play is situated in its theatrical and historical context: its themes analysed in relation to a broader societal background. The plays and their respective introductions are organised into three thematic sections: ‘Disembodied Articulations’, ‘Fraught Spaces’, and ‘Familiar/Familial’. This organisational choice stands as a challenge to Western colonial chrononormativity, engaging with discourses surrounding queer temporality—after Jack Halberstam, Jaclyn Pryor, and Julian Carter—and thus challenging both linguistic and theatrical limitations regarding gender and identity (2-5). The plays themselves continue, and are in conversation with, a developing body of work—including plays by Olivia Dufault (2013), Aziza Barnes (2020), and Taylor Mac (2016)—that engages playfully with language, location, and temporal nonlinearity (3).

The strength of *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays* lies in its reflection on positionality, voice, agency, and representation. The anthology constitutes an important step in a continuing effort for

more inclusive, diverse, and nuanced trans representation: on stage, in publishing, and within academia, too. In the general introduction, the editors reflect on the history of trans performance, marked by the predominance of cis playwrights, actors, and audiences. They present a shift of focus towards trans artists and audiences, together with an emphasis on the complexity of transness, moving beyond a central focus on the transition or death of trans characters (1-2). Both the collection and the individual plays, which ask specifically for the casting of trans actors, share the objective of changing the theatrical landscape. The introduction writers and playwrights have been curated in such a way as to promote critical reflections from within different communities, and the book itself is set up as a stage for these diverse voices. The editors facilitate this opportunity, stepping back to hold space for trans voices. Remarking that only one of three identifies as trans, the editors advocate for amplification of trans voices within the publishing industry, too (2). Thus, while the composition of the editorial team can be read as a disadvantage, it is also reflective of the present reality within publishing and academia.

Another strength of this anthology is in the varied nature of its introductory texts, which compare theoretical and practical approaches, giving insight into the benefits and drawbacks of each. The introductions are respectful in their tone and powerful in their challenge to normative readings, as well as being accessible and comprehensive. They range from academic analysis to informal conversation and personal reflection, while consistently discussing how the plays reflect and challenge social realities and dominant theatrical representation of trans characters. Through this critical framework, the book gives access to both academic and general audiences, as well as serving as a basis for the production of trans plays. A conversation between academic theorist Stephanie Hsu and playwright Mashuq Mushtaq Deen on Deen's play, *The Betterment Society*, is especially insightful. Hsu and Deen reflect on the productivity of academic discussions of transness within a practical context, offering insight into casting policies and institutional biases (55-57).

Their challenge to gender normativity is echoed in the other introductions, which all present guides, in various forms, on how to approach a reading of these plays. This is important, as a majority of the anthology's readership can be expected to have been educated by, and are positioned within, a white cis-heteronormative society. The introduction by Courtney Mohler to Ty Defoe's *Firebird Tattoo* is especially powerful in its argument for the play's decolonisation of gender and identity through nonlinear genealogy, and its presentation of two-spirit characters against a settler colonialist background (347). The anthology, on various levels, continuously challenges how to approach the practice of reading these plays, and gender in general, and is adamant about the need for reform; the collection thus reflects the broader societal necessity for challenging normativity and power structures.

The plays themselves share a participatory style, prompting direct engagement from their audiences by asking them to engage in shared risk-taking (61) in order actively to change the outcome of the play, as, for example, in *The Betterment Society* by Mashuq Mushtaq Deen. Another approach is presented in *She He Me* by Raphaël Amahl Khouri, in which the audience is included in the story-telling process through interactions between actor and audience before the narrative begins, encouraging active involvement in learning about trans experiences (184). In this way, the plays transgress the boundary between actor and audience, play and reality, thus asserting that advocacy for trans representation concerns everyone.

The anthology offers a starting point in this discussion; its openness is reflective of the need for future conversations. The collection does not provide an answer to all the questions one might have, and neither does it aspire to do so. While this openness may invite criticism—for example, some of the introductions might have included a more critical reflection on internalised biases—it also presents the need for further discussion. To this end, an afterword may have been beneficial, in order to collate general reflections, as well as questions for future activism and research.

Overall, *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays* delivers an intersectional and diverse collection of trans plays, and self-reflexively advocates for the need to amplify trans voices. Both the openness and absences in this collection hold exactly to that provocation: the trans community has more to say, and their voices require more stages on which to be heard.

A Companion to British-Jewish Theatre since the 1950s

edited by Jeanette R. Malkin, Eckart Voigts, and Sarah Jane Ablett

London: Bloomsbury, 2021, 272 pp. (ebook)

By Rou-Ni Pan

A Companion to British-Jewish Theatre since the 1950s is a response to the growing number of British-Jewish playwrights asserting their identity through theatre. Significantly, it is the first collection devoted to case studies of contemporary British-Jewish playwrights and plays. There has been considerable effort in the academic field to push British-Jewish theatre towards the centre stage since 2017, and a number of international conferences have been organised, such as ‘Shakespeare and the Jews’ (UCL 2017).

The book is divided into five parts: an investigation into the artistic styles of the first generation of prominent British-Jewish playwrights, including Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter; the factors (the Holocaust, antisemitism and Israel’s occupation of Palestine) that shape the liminality of British-Jewish identity; the new narratives of younger generation British-Jewish writers; and the progression of Jewish characters in television drama. The book concludes with interviews with Nicholas Hytner, Julia Pascal, Patrick Marber, Ryan Craig, and John Nathan.

Peter Lawson indicates that Wesker dramatises overlapping utopian and messianic visions in his plays, which are related to his portrayal of the 'Good Jew' in the historical process. In the turmoil of the 1960s, this utopian vision was generated by a disillusionment with human goodness. Turning to 'empowerment and hope beyond worldly experience' (37), he grasps for a saviour figure to provide his readers with hope. Lawson concludes by implying that differing religious views are the primary reason Jews are an excluded group in the Christian world, leading directly to persistent antisemitism (43).

Jeremy Solomons writes about the Jewish East End as a narrative strategy for Bernard Kops and Steven Berkoff. Kops inserts actual East End locations into the geography of his plays, while Berkoff blends Cockney dialect into his characters' speech. The plays' dramaturgies combine, separate, and transpose English cultural icons, in order to 'connect with the wider British theatre and culture' (55). Postmodern London, as articulated by Kops and Berkoff, has lost the certainty of its identity, a sense generated by the writers through multiple discourses. In light of this, the East End becomes a base that enables them to redefine themselves and affirm their belonging in Britain.

Peter Lawson suggests that indefinability is a Jewish cultural aspect in Pinter's plays, just like linguistic identity, postmemory, and trauma. Pinter's early plays are characterised by loneliness and terror; in his later plays, ugly confrontations between victims and aggressors become more explicit. In *One for the Road* (1984), Victor is interrogated by Nicholas, who represents the force of the state. Victor is initially unwilling to submit, but ultimately becomes docile and compliant. Nicholas' apparent absolute authority, on the other hand, is undermined by his commitment to the regime, which in turn reveals his own vulnerability. Through Lawson's analysis, Pinter's characters, in resisting structural power dynamics, engage with their oppressing institutions. This traumatic relationship goes some way towards explaining the dissociative identity of Pinter's characters.

Mark Taylor-Batty writes about the profound impact of post-war British society on Pinter's worldview and dramaturgy. According to

Taylor-Batty, the apathetic, neglectful attitude that Britain maintained towards the Jewish community led Pinter to question the stability of British-Jewish identity. In his analysis of *The Room* (1957), Taylor-Batty interweaves issues of ethnicity and belonging to expose traumas suffered by the Jewish community. He suggests that, in *The Birthday Party* (1957), Goldberg represents orthodoxy and tradition, connecting the character to an overarching theme of belonging. By extension, the play can be read as being to some degree about the misuse of authority. When analysing *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), Taylor-Batty asserts that Rebecca's personal trauma is derived from the collective memory of the Holocaust. Historical revisionism as a theatrical device in *Ashes to Ashes* requires the reader to make ethical judgements about the manipulation of discourse and distortion of historical fact.

Similarly, Phyllis Lassner suggests that the British mainstream sidesteps the history of the Holocaust, and that Eva Hoffman's play, *The Ceremony* (2016), serves as a reminder of it. In the play, Hoffman dramatises her memory of the Holocaust in Poland, exploring 'the ethical and cultural role of historical memory in any nation's identity' (97). A sense of 'borderlessness' is engendered by Hoffman's careful blending of Jewishness and universality. Location, in *The Ceremony*, is ambiguous, as remembrance of the Holocaust in Poland is applied to other nations' cultural memory.

Axel Stähler draws attention to the existence of many antisemitic calumnies, with blood libel among the most pernicious. Stähler first traces historical allegations of blood libel, continuing by citing Wesker's and Berkoff's plays to excavate both the source of this antisemitic canard, and the lasting harm done to the Jewish people. The unreliability of judicial machinery is implicit in both plays, as judicial discourse is manipulated by interest groups.

Mike Witcombe focusses on plays by Mike Leigh, Ryan Craig, and Julia Pascal, in order to examine the dilemmas that the Israeli occupation of Palestine poses for the Jewish community. He describes the way in which the conflict is a source of increasing friction amongst British Jews, sowing discord within communities as issues on each side

appear irreconcilable. Witcombe notes that the domestic setting of plays by Craig and Leigh reveals clashes of opinion within the British-Jewish community, whereas Pascal—by locating her play in Israel and featuring diverse characters—exposes a range of viewpoints. This includes the perspective of a younger generation of Jews, dealing with its own issues of identity.

Eckart Voigts and Sarah Ablett observe that, as a result of not having been sufficiently valued, many female British-Jewish playwrights have redirected their careers away from theatre. Plays by Shelley Silas and Nina Raine address themes that are specific to the Jewish experience, alongside ‘issues of subjectivities as well as questions of affiliation and belonging’ (147). In *Calcutta Kosher* (2004), Silas presents a range of perspectives that are not limited to a specific ethnic background. Raine’s *Tribes* (2010) exposes sentiments that are symptomatic of modern society in general. These writers thus transcend the particularities of the individual ethnic experience.

Björn Kraus defines ‘lifeworld’ as ‘a person’s subjective construction of reality’ (156). Jeanette Malkin adopts this concept to explore the way in which the personal circumstances of playwrights’ lives influence their writing. For example, Patrick Marber’s plays expose the intersection of his English and Jewish identities; Ryan Craig’s explore the Jewish diasporic experience; and Tom Stoppard’s plays do not exhibit his Jewishness, with the exception of his last.

Cyrielle Garson describes the significant contribution of Jewish practitioners to the success of contemporary British theatre, and yet, wary of the political and social fallout, many have tended not to indicate their identity. While Garson points out a historical lack of critical attention to these playwrights, from the 2000s, theatres have begun to stage Jewish plays with increasing regularity. Next, Sue Vice lays bare the persistence of reductionist Jewish characters in television drama from 1970 onward. The medium has both constructed and perpetuated a repertoire of stereotypical Jewish figures, framed in the context of British spiritual and material struggles. This dramatised Jewishness exposes the unidirectional control held by British television

producers over the screen representation of Jews, and ‘the “Jewishing” of hegemonic Britishness’ (198).

By contrast with the clichéd portrayals that populated television dramas until the last decade, Nathan Abrams claims that, increasingly, Jewish television characters are indistinguishable from their non-Jewish counterparts. Today, as Abrams evidences, there are Jewish police, and Jewish gangsters and criminals on our screens. However, Abrams asserts that, for the most part, non-Jews create and play these complex and developed Jewish characters. He presents a call to action: that Jewish artists should engage more actively in promoting diverse and truthful images of Jewishness.

The book concludes with interviews with five theatre artists, each expressing contrasting and overlapping views of themselves as Jews living in Britain, as well as reflections on the Jewish diasporic experience. Nicholas Hytner believes that the British-Jewish community is somewhat protected, by contrast with the Jewish community in France. This runs counter to the experiences articulated by Julia Pascal, who obtained a French passport as a result of her perceived insecurity in British society. Pascal expresses that ‘to be a Jew in England has been a state of low-level anxiety’ (223): an anxiety implicit in Patrick Marber’s mention of ‘passing’ as a non-Jew (236). Both John Nathan and Pascal imply that America allows for a more uninhibited expression of Jewishness.

This is a comprehensive book on British-Jewish theatre, providing a view of how Jewish identity is conveyed through the work of playwrights and via television drama, as well as how that identity has been shaped by the mechanisms of cultural change. As an immigrant culture, the Jewish community has both a symbiotic and conflicted relationship with its British host. British Jews’ hyphenated identity indicates inclusion and acceptance, as well as its own particular characteristics. In this sense, British-Jewish theatre has the opportunity to provide rich, complex representation, and to add a new dimension to the British stage.