

Poggi, Valentina and Margaret Rose, eds.

A Theatre That Matters: Twentieth-Century Scottish Drama and Theatre. A Collection of Critical Essays and Interviews.

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Since the Second World War Scotland has been engaged in a serious socio-cultural uplifting which aimed at forging a modernized Scottish identity for its people and giving a distinct face to its arts within the emerging contemporary European culture. The foundation of the International Edinburgh Festival in 1947, followed by the more adventurous Fringe, and Glasgow's position as Europe's city of culture in 1990 were two very important landmarks in the country's post-war artistic movement, often referred to as the "Scottish Renaissance." The emergence of important new Scottish playwrights and dynamic theatre companies spell out the aims and diversity of this new flourishing of the Scottish arts both in novel thematic pursuits (of a national and international caliber) and in an innovative aesthetic orientation.

The present volume captures the cultural pulse of the country as reflected in its theatre of the late twentieth century, while also making recourse to earlier times, especially to the old tradition of variety theatre. It is a collection of articles and interviews of various length and content, edited by Valentina Poggi (also a contributor to the volume) and Margaret Rose (who has also written the introduction). This introduction maps out the aims of the volume, first by delineating the precise socio-political and cultural image of contemporary Scotland and second by presenting a brief description of each individual essay. The thirteen articles included in the collection have been grouped around four loose thematic cycles: the rewriting of history and myth, material culture (fashion and food), the problems of linguistic and cultural translation and the activities of Scottish theatre in production. A fifth section is devoted to a series of interviews with nine Scottish dramatists, conducted by Margaret Rose and Emanuela Rossini, and preceded by a brief but comprehensive and useful introduction also by Rossini.

Solicited writing can be brilliant but it can also, sometimes, weaken the role of the editor(s) in controlling the range of the material – even occasionally its quality. The essays collected in this volume are unequal in aim, perspective and epistemological approach. Some are strongly documented and densely structured; others are more conversational and impressionistic. Additionally, there seems to be an over-emphasis on women dramatists and an over-representation of Liz Lochhead (with three articles devoted to her work exclusively) at the expense of other deserving writers – irrespective of gender – who only find a place in survey or collective presentation. As already foreshadowed in Ian Brown and Barbara Bell's comprehensive survey "A Duty to History: History and Cultural Identities in Scottish Theatre," which strives to pack the three women writers mentioned into a homogeneous group, the whole volume is marked by a rather

outmoded feminist bent, celebratory in tone, which remains largely unjustified. This imbalance is to be seen both in the selection of the essays and in the content of individual contributions.

However, the collection includes some remarkably good scholarship in the area of contemporary Scottish studies and its strong points should be duly highlighted. I would particularly commend the contributions of Ian McDonald, Sara Soncini and Randall Stevenson for their clear and well-structured viewpoint both in the analysis of individual texts and their cultural commentary. Special mention should also be made of the meticulous research and the organized, useful critical presentation of the Scottish theatre tradition, companies and policies by Mariacristina Cavecchi, Laura Cicognani, Marina Garattoni and partly by Vivien Devlin. In its entirety the volume is a comprehensive survey of the aims and activities of contemporary Scottish theatre in the domain of writing (thematic and stylistic) and that of performance. There emerges a rich image of distinct ideology and cultural identity in the country, especially in the years following devolution, and the formation of a new aesthetic in direct interaction with current European trends rather than in the limited context of the old binary antagonism with English forms of dramatic literature and performance styles. As Emanuela Rossini rightly puts it, the book strives to vindicate its title, "A Theatre That Matters," and it largely succeeds in its goals through the serious argumentative tone of its strongest contributions. The effects would have been even greater if some of the articles abandoned their wishful tone for the sake of strict and firm debate.

The section on translation policies and methodologies is useful in that (at its best) it opens up to a more general issue of intercultural politics in dramatic and theatrical practice. All three articles touch upon this discipline of linguistic and cultural transposition. However, two of them (Farrell and Rossini) choose to stay on the surface and only Horvat shows a deeper and more systematic epistemological interest into the matter. The only grievance in this last piece is the mysteriously altered gender of the widely known theatre theorist Patrice Pavis – hopefully not to put it in line with the volume's undeclared feminist biases.

What stays with the reader in the end is a very dynamic image of a postmodern artistic and theatrical Scotland, which is out to play an important formative role in the cultural life of millennial Europe. As a millennial publication (2000) the book has certainly achieved its celebratory goals towards a surfacing new Scottish theatre. As a research project primarily initiated by English scholars of an Italian Higher Institution it must be warmly greeted and congratulated for the crosscultural politics it promotes in the agenda of the international academia.

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