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Reviews

Religion in Contemporary German Drama: Botho Strauß, George Tabori, Werner Fritsch and Lukas Bärfuss by Sinéad Crowe. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2013, 178 pp. £65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-57113-549-0.

What role does theatre play in investigating the decline of organised religion in the postmodern era? Does the historical link between drama and religion make theatre more potent than other artforms in exploring religion and spirituality? Such questions lie at the heart of Sinéad Crowe's book *Religion in Contemporary German Drama*. While German critics have argued there has been a "return" of religion to the stage since the turning of the millennium, Crowe argues that religion and religious themes never went away, illustrating this through close textual analysis of works from the 1970s to 2000s by four leading German playwrights.

Crowe frames her study with useful definitions of religion and spirituality and, drawing on thinkers from Max Weber to Grace Davie, suggests that rather than modernity inevitably leading to the decline of religious belief (Weber's "disenchantment of the world"), "religiosity is not dying out but transforming" into alternative spiritual movements and individuals "locating the sacred within the self." (5, 6). The first two chapters investigate the close relationship between theatre and religious ritual, from church-based drama in the medieval era to Schechner's broad performance categories, and a succinct overview of religious preoccupations of modern theatre-makers including Strindberg, Toller, Artaud, Grotowski and Beckett. The form of the expressionist *Stationendrama* (literally "Station Drama", after the Stations of the Cross) is particularly relevant to Crowe's case studies, as it reflects parallels between medieval dramatizations of the passion of Christ and the spiritual quests of modernist protagonists.

In chapter three, Crowe compares two plays by Botho Strauß: his breakthrough epic *Groß und Klein* (1978) and *Die Eine und die Andere* (2005). Although *Groß und*

Klein deals with the disillusionment of the post-1960s era in Cold War West Germany, some critics of the 2011 Sydney Theatre Company revival starring Cate Blanchett marvelled at its timelessness and relevance to the modern world. Crowe concludes that “Strauß confronts us with religion, but does not allow us to seek refuge in it.” (62)

Crowe’s discussion of George Tabori’s “theological farce” *Mein Kampf: Farce* (1987) in chapter 4 neatly draws out the connections between religion, politics and culture. Tabori provocatively imagines a relationship between a young Adolf Hitler and a fictional Jewish roommate whose “moral integrity is rooted in traditional Jewish wisdom” (85). The play uses Jewish humour to explore the irreconcilable paradox that the concept of a benevolent, omnipresent God is at odds with the atrocities of the 20th century.

The two following chapters examine the programmatic writings and plays of Werner Fritsch, because out of all four dramatists, “his work has the most explicit quasi-religious aspirations” (10). Fritsch’s “dream-plays”, *Wondreber Totentanz* (1995) and *Aller Seelen* (2000), deal with memories of the Third Reich’s atrocities in Bavaria during the Second World War. Crowe ultimately dismisses his work as exploiting the externals of religion “for their aesthetic and atmospheric value” and is unconvinced by his argument that theatre can take the place of religion in a disenchanted society (144).

Finally, Crowe discusses *Der Bus* (2005) by Lukas Bärfuss, which explores hostility towards religious faith by dramatizing the ordeals of Erika, a young Catholic woman on a religious pilgrimage who is relentlessly harassed by her fellow bus passengers. This play depicts the Christian believer as an outsider in a disenchanted society, and is ultimately sceptical about faith in the contemporary West. The moral bankruptcy of Erika’s grotesque tormentors suggests “that ethics no longer have a solid foundation” in a secular world (134). The connections that Crowe draws between the modernist void depicted in Strauß’s *Groß und Klein* and the post-millennial spiritual decay in Bärfuss’s play are particularly resonant.

Crowe’s writing is characterized by clarity and coherence and her readings of each play are detailed and lively, exploring issues which are relevant far beyond the cafés of Prenzlauer Berg. Although I would have liked to see some discussion of the intriguing dramatizations of Islam in German theatre, the tight focus on Judaism and Christianity enables Crowe to produce a credible alternative to the dominance of post-dramatic theory in recent German theatre scholarship. She convincingly demonstrates that the philosophical and ethical concepts central to Judaism and Christianity have continued relevance in secular Western societies and that the embodied liveness of the theatre remains a potent space for exploring faith and spirituality.

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Performing the Secular: Religion, Representation, and Politics edited by Milija Gluhovic and Jisha Menon. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 258 pp. £72.00 hardcover. £56.99 ebook. ISBN: 978-1-137-49607-2, ebook ISBN 978-1-137-49608-9

This anthology is part of the rapidly growing field of studies on religion as discourse on transcendence and all forms of performativity. It is the first contemporary,

transnational, and collective reflection on performance, theatre, and the secular. The angle of inquiry is unique in the field: Editors Milija Gluhovic and Jisha Menon twist current debates on religion, spirituality, and performance by taking the secular (in contrast to the religious, or the spiritual) as a starting point.

As Rustom Barucha lucidly points out in the foreword, theatrical performances are, when publicly shown, always protected by the state, and what might be considered as transgression of other frames is inside, not outside, of what is tolerated within theatre, therefore there is an urgent need to critically reflect on “what constitutes ‘the political’ in ‘our theatre practice’” (xiv). This question is indeed at the core of the collection, as the subtitle “religion, representation, and politics” unmistakably shows. In their introduction, the editors make it clear that, in order to understand the frictions of religious and state institutions, values, and ideologies, it is necessary to dismantle any easy understanding of the secular. Referring to Charles Taylor’s thinking, they show that, and how, the current Western understanding of secularism is shaped by the Enlightenment—that is, by the claim of an autonomous subject that exists independently from and critical towards any transcendental order (3f). The editors’ introduction is followed by nine articles. Jane Taylor, in her consideration of overlaps of theatrical and theological discourses alongside the terms toleration, hypocrisy and sincerity, takes its readers even deeper into Performance Studies issues. This crucial reflection is followed by Chris Balme’s undoing of the transnational circulation of anti-Muslim media representations that follow upon the cancellation of Hans Neuenfels’s 2003 production of *Idomeneo* at the Munich opera. In the third article, Lance Gharavi and Aamir Mufti tackle the concept of “postsecularism” in England and Nigeria. Chris Megson presents a thorough reading of Jürgen Habermas’s thoughts on post-secularism post 9/11, and the “secular imagination” in contemporary British drama (86). Avishek Ganguly carefully unfolds the diverse aspects of Wole Soyinka’s critique and affirmation of religions in his theatre works and shows how Soyinka’s thinking is part of early post-secular discourses. In the fifth essay, Jessica Nakamura tackles the issue of the sacrifice (for a transcendental value) by analyzing Masayuki Imai’s play *Winds of God (Kamikaze)* as contribution to the visual culture of Japan. Jordana Cox unfolds the Canadian politics of open secularism as expansion of “the repertoire” of public discourse (151). John Fletcher in his chapter on dialectic clashes between religion and science offers a synthesis of these two seemingly conflicting discourses by reading “the science guy” (164) as “postsecular evangelist of science” (178). In the eighth chapter, Trina Banerjee argues for a rupture of the “ossified partitions between the supposedly ‘secular’ and the hegemonically ‘sacred’ ... in order to make way for new notions of sacred performance that arise from the bodies of a violated people within the political public sphere” (207) with the 2004 Kangla protest as example. Finally, Ann Pellegrini reads Freudian psychoanalysis as a secular (time) regime that still carries religious seeds, such as the binary division of the good and bad object of identification. Of these, the concepts of love, empathy, and identification, crucial to psychoanalytic theory and practice, are key to her argument.

All in all, this ground-breaking anthology is to be read both as an introduction to studies of performance and the political, as well as an excellent example of how to critically reflect on religion, public spheres, art, and culture. Both new scholars and more experienced ones will find it a rich well of information, inspiration and insight. I specifically enjoyed reading this collection as it interweaves gender and queer studies with a critique of the secular from Performance Studies perspectives. Anthologies such

as this one open new spaces, and the editors take the network of critical Performance Studies scholars a considerable step further in showing how the secular (still) holds the traces of religious imagination within it. Especially in that political discourse is the most common currency within the current field of Performance and Theatre discourses, this book is a very necessary and timely one.

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The Theatre of the Occult Revival: Alternative Spiritual Performance from 1875 to the Present by Edmund B. Lingan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 247 pp. £60.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-137-45130-9, ebook ISBN 978-1-137-44861-3.

Edmund B. Lingan's *The Theatre of the Occult Revival* is likely to remain the key point of reference when researching Occult religion and its relationship to innovative early twentieth century theatre and drama. Beginning with profiles of influential practitioners from many avant-garde religious organizations—Madame Blavatsky and Katherine Tingley of The Theosophical Society; the Steiners of the Anthroposophical Society, as well as Aleister Crowley and his Thelemic Theatre—Lingan details the philosophy and place that theatre holds in each. Throughout, Lingan maintains an even-handed, descriptive narrative regarding comparative theology, never passing judgment upon the various systems of belief that comprised the Occult Revival movement.

He describes their respective approaches for ritualizing their complex ideologies using drama as a tool for the exercise, education and spiritual enhancement of the practitioners. Because Lingan attended theatrical samplings of each style, the reader is offered eyewitness accounts of many of the important plays that emanated from these groups, which almost universally ascribed to their creations the ability to impart their spectators with beneficial spiritual enhancements.

Lingan does a good job of untangling the complex threads of influences found in the actual productions of the four varieties of occult practice he analyses. His thorough research helps the reader evaluate each practice. He documents the importance of dramatic literature to Madame Blavatsky, for instance. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky declares that the spiritual insights of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Shakespeare are due to their connection with the Divine, or Infinite Principle, that she espoused. For Blavatsky, the workings of Karma are central to an understanding of life in relation to the universe. The Steiners, by contrast, combined their philosophy with medieval-style mystery dramas that “provides visual insight into Steiner’s conceptualization of the physical, astral, and spiritual realms” (75). To satisfy his project, Rudolf Steiner built his own theatre he named the *Goetheanum*.

But by far the most eclectic and outrageous practitioner of occult theatre was Aleister Crowley. Many of his plays combined the work of Swinburne with Crowley’s own poetry, and his aim, variously conceived along symbolist lines, “sought to provide a spiritual experience that transcend[ed] the rational” (123). While most practitioners discussed in this book envisioned their spiritual enterprises on the foundations of Christianity, Crowley’s motifs flew in the face of traditional doctrines. Basing his theatrical ventures on the performance of magic, Crowley’s works rejected traditional

Christian tenets with glee. Lingan explains, “Where some saw whimsical, Symbolist theatre, others saw the public exhibition of blasphemous and gratuitous practices that formed the liturgy of a sex cult” (101).

As a cultural historian, I find it interesting to note that the theatrical aspects of the occult societies studied here reflect the milieu in which they were created. Lingan does not linger on similar observations, but his work reveals that, as European and American cultures evolved through the early twentieth century, more varied forms of visual and aural performance appeared just as occult theatre moved away from traditional theatrical styles and into a wider variety of performative practices centered on ritual but employing everything from dance to poetic recitations to magic.

Lingan transitions from the body of his book with descriptions of Rosicrucian and Wiccan rituals gathered into a single chapter, which serve to mark the break from established theatrical practice, to more eclectic ritualistic evocations. While both of these mid-twentieth-century religious constructs are modeled on purported ancient practices, Rosicrucian Theatre looked to past influences, while Wiccans took on sometimes disturbing, varied, and secretive rites, incorporating a hostility toward Christian practices with an opposition to religion writ large.

In the late twentieth century, occult religious ceremonies gave way to a mash-up of dance, drumming, music, and other ecstatic practices. Lingan brings these forms to light in his last chapter entitled “Neo-Paganism Performance Current,” when he describes rehabilitative snake dancing, multi-dimensional arts festivals, and finally, the second annual *Occult II* festival in 2014, founded by two Thelemites, which gathered diverse elements of Neo-paganism into a series of workshops, presentations, and performances, in a tapestry of sights and sounds.

Although Lingan finds only vestiges of influence between early forms of the Occult Revival and the ongoing neo-paganism current, he makes an interesting inference about the flow of energy from art to religion. Quoting Victoria Nelson’s observation that “Whereas religion up to the Renaissance provided the content for most high visual art and literature, art and entertainment in our secular era have provided...the context for new religion” (184), Lingan notes that, in the twenty-first century, the flow of the Neo-pagan current moves toward reconciliation of all faiths, which opens the way for a wider examination of this idea.

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