

BOOK REVIEW / COMPTE RENDU

MARC MAUFORT and FRANCA BELLARSI, eds.

Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium.

Brussels: P.I.E. - Peter Lang, 2002. 343 pp.

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Marc Maufort, Professor of English literature and drama at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, is the Series Editor of *Dramaturgies: Texts, Cultures and Performances*, and *Crucible of Cultures* appears as number four in the series. Those of us with an interest in Canadian drama will also be familiar with the first title in that series, *Siting the Other: Revisions of Marginality in Australian and English-Canadian Drama*, also co-edited with Franca Bellarsi, which appeared in 2001. It is worth noting that the aim of the series is “to re-assess the complex relationship between textual studies, cultural and/or performance aspects at the dawn of this new multi-cultural millennium,” with a particular emphasis on “innovative research work in the field of twentieth-century dramaturgy, primarily in the anglophone and francophone worlds.” *Crucible of Cultures* came out of a conference of the same name, held in Brussels in May of 2001.

The contributors to *Crucible of Cultures*, the book, are from Canada, the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, and Europe (Spain, Germany, Belgium), with a lone entry from Japan by Eriko Hara, writing on Asian-American women’s theatre. While a selection of essays deals with African theatre, none is by a scholar coming from an African university. Of the twenty-eight contributors, eleven are women. In addition to the African entries, the book is organized by a loose grouping of essays that focus on British, American, Canadian, and Australian/New Zealand theatre—so despite the insistence on cultural exchange articulated in Maufort’s Introduction, national boundaries remain an organizing principle. This choice may be a simple convenience, but also implies an attachment, by both theatre artists and academics, to nationalist perspectives as a way to withstand ongoing cultural imperialism. Maufort does not say as much, but the adherence to nationalist groupings seems to acknowledge that theatre remains a local project even when engaging with global forces.

I offer all of this background positioning to help the reader make sense of what the conference proceedings are intended to represent and how best to make use of the book. The broad category of “Anglophone drama” and, what seems increasingly, in retrospect, the arbitrary temporal designation of the “dawn of the millennium” do not, at first, paint a particular landscape—that is, they do not in themselves tell us what to expect from the collection. We get a much clearer picture in the Introduction, when Maufort specifies that his organizing and unifying principles are multiculturalism and postcolonialism. These are helpful guidelines to keep in mind when searching for connections between the essays, since the agenda is to interrogate and reassess this drama that shares a language and possibly some history, if not geography. The real focus is on communities within nations, on finding the instances when non-dominant discourses transform what can be spoken onstage. A number of the contributors draw from Homi Bhabha to explore this idea of “counter-narratives.” Because the book does not have obvious sub-divisions or an index, the reader needs to dive in and do some work to find these points of convergence.

There are other organizing categories and lines of communication at work here as well. The first two pieces are by playwrights—Timberlake Wertenbaker and Drew Hayden Taylor—while the last essay is, according to Maufort, the perspective of the pedagogue, represented by Helen Gilbert with a meditation on teaching Aboriginal drama in an Australian classroom. The scholars writing from a Canadian context respond most directly to the questions about Aboriginal drama raised by Drew Hayden Taylor in his short introduction to the field, with Robert Nunn addressing Taylor’s play *alterNatives* and both Ric Knowles and Robert Appleford focusing on Daniel David Moses. But these essays in particular also answer Wertenbaker’s plea that we engage in a “dialogue with history.” The recurrent focus on Aboriginal plays, both in these articles and others, provides a depth of discussion that moves multiculturalism and postcolonialism past the level of mere inclusion and into real debate and engagement. In his essay, for example, Jerry Wasserman discusses Drew Hayden Taylor’s work in the context of plays by Guillermo Verdecchia, Djanet Sears, and Rahul Varma.

The dialogue and discussion in all the various articles is most exciting when introducing more recent theatrical innovations, and less so when the focus is on work from earlier in the twentieth century: Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* or David Mamet’s

American Buffalo, for example. While the critical lens may indeed be new, even when aimed at canonical texts, the freshness of Suzan-Lori Parks's work, as discussed by Harry J. Elam, Jr., or Robert H. Vorlicky's discussion of hip hop-inspired, hybrid performance practice, resonates most strongly with a claim on the new millennium. Both in collecting essays for a book and in reviewing that book several years on, it is of course easier to critique the past than to anticipate the future.