

relationship to the suffragette movement, for example, and the ways in which star actresses were capable of ‘speaking’ to their female audience members through their choice of clothes and roles. Schweitzer also acknowledges how young working women and society ladies took up this conversation through their emulation and adaptation of the actresses’ clothes offstage. Finally, Schweitzer examines the newly invented fashion show and its theatrical structures, interrogating how it began to model feminine identity as the ‘mannequin’.

This is a hugely valuable work for the field of theatre and performance studies, not least because the masculine disgust at the consumerist frivolities of the young matinee girls that Schweitzer invokes at the beginning of this book, has been so influential on how theatre scholarship has often approached the question of costume and fashion. To presume that consumer practices are merely “false consciousness,” or a form of feminine frippery, is to entirely overlook the ways in which costume might operate as the broker within a set of complex gendered relationships and performances. Indeed, Schweitzer makes an important claim: that clothes and the stage were the means through which modern ideas of the female self could be articulated. As she argues, “female audiences drew upon the cultural meanings associated with admired actresses to fantasize about alternative lives and make personal statements about themselves as modern women” (163). In a post-twentieth century theatre, where the high-minded (usually male) artists of the avant-garde and modernism so roundly rejected the consumerist cultures of the popular nineteenth century stage, it’s easy to overlook the role of fashion in making selves, particularly female selves. These are modes of subjectivity that, as Schweitzer argues, are capable of subversive and profoundly resistant statements of self that don’t simply situate the female body as a passive site of consumption. Schweitzer shows that female spectators were capable of figuring themselves as agents within the webs of consumerism that were so closely aligned to the self-fashioning of actresses.

Of course, finally, what Schweitzer does so well, is to offer a proleptic sense of our contemporary star system now saturated with ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’, with the figuring of the female star’s body as a passive mannequin, devoid of subjectivity, offered up for judgment and derision (often by young female consumers). Schweitzer’s book enables us to see how in the early twentieth century, fashion was a place in which feminine agency could develop and emerge. Stage door chic turns out to be a profoundly complex business that is worthy of further attention.

ROBERTA BARKER and KIM SOLGA, eds.
New Canadian Realisms.

New Essays on Canadian Theatre, vol. 2. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2012.
280 pp.

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Realism has been the bread-and-butter of Canadian theatre for a long time. Merrill Denison’s 1921 comedy, *Brothers in Arms*, the most popular of his “realistic treatments of ordinary Canadian life” (Grace 53), was the most produced Canadian play for nearly half a century. The stark prairie naturalism of Gwen Pharis Ringwood’s Depression-era *Still Stands the House* helped make it, for decades, Canada’s most anthologized drama. The culturally marked domestic real-

ism of David French's *Leaving Home* had Canadian audiences in the 1970s supposedly shouting, "That's us! That's us!" (qtd. in Johnson 88). Realism's sturdy, familiar conventions—verisimilitude of language and setting, accessible characters, local colour, and linear plot—have also contributed to the extraordinary success of Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience*, a twenty-first century Korean-accented *Leaving Home*.

But theatrical realism doesn't get much respect in the academy. The critics I've just cited position Denison's and French's realist work only to promote the anti-realist art of Herman Voaden and George F. Walker. More than its aesthetics, the presumptive politics of realism has marked it as unpalatable to contemporary scholarly tastes. "Over the last thirty years realism has come primarily to be defined by political failure" (3), Roberta Barker and Kim Solga assert in their introduction to the dozen essays that comprise *New Canadian Realisms*, volume two of *New Essays on Canadian Theatre*, the latest excellent Playwrights Canada series overseen by Ric Knowles.

Barker and Solga, and many of their contributors, begin with the critical consensus developed in the 1980s and 1990s behind feminist and queer theorists (Butler, Diamond, Dolan et al), which argues that realist theatre constructs, naturalizes, and re-inscribes an exclusionary, reactionary view of reality, at the same time insidiously hiding the mechanisms by which it operates. The title of their introduction, "Reclaiming Canadian Realisms," constitutes the collection's objective: "we will advance an argument for contemporary Canadian realism as 'unsafe': that is, not as *Realism* (fixed, conservative, and linear in outlook) but as *realisms*: plural, adaptable, attentive to difference, alive to paradox and uncertainty, and thus politically formidable" (2). The awkwardness of this sentence, with its qualifying scare quotes and serial attempts to obscure the binary *Realism* bad/*realisms* good, signals the challenges of their project, met nicely by some sterling essays.

Many of the essays echo the notion, as one contributor puts it, "that classical Realism does something very dangerous" (130-31), then go on to show how realism has been rehabilitated and made politically progressive by the artists under examination. The exceptions to this strategy are notable. Anna Migliarisi informatively describes how Stanislavsky's System of psychological realism made its way to Canada via American teachers in Toronto and Montreal, heavily influencing modern Canadian acting style. "Canadian actors" she concludes, "have embraced System-Method practice more readily than scholars" (31). Harvey Young is equally unapologetic in his analysis of Trey Anthony's massively popular *da Kink in my hair*, arguing that its "affective realism" effectively conveys to multi-racial audiences the embodied experiences of black Canadian women (59).

A number of compelling essays intelligently parse the hybrid techniques of lesser-known works that the essayists make me wish I had seen. Jenn Stephenson rehearses the origins of realism in the early novel to make sparkling sense of "realist performance that speaks against its own realist strategies" in *Garden//Suburbia*, a fascinating bifocal, fictionalized autobiographical walking tour of a Toronto neighbourhood (78). Analyzing a different kind of "performative theatre" by Montreal's *Système Kangurou*, Catherine Cyr arrives at a similar conclusion: the company's work "combine[s] the 'real' and the imaginary in a finely woven fabric, impossible to untangle" (96). Parie Leung writes of Chinese-Canadian theatre artists "mobilizing realist conventions in disruptive ways" (165). Louis Patrick Leroux provides an excellent historical overview of stage realisms in Quebec, arguing that contemporary Québécois theatre's "hyper-

embodied realism calls for a post-dramatic displacement of audience empathy (and identification) away from character and onto performing bodies ...” (107). He offers vivid case studies of Stéphane Crête’s theatrical experiments in pseudo-science and Dave St-Pierre’s choreography of his own dying body.

Two of the strongest, most thoughtful and balanced essays examine the possibilities and pitfalls of strategically employed realisms. Natalie Alvarez marvelously unpacks the knotty issue of colour-blind/colour-neutral casting with regard to the semiotic notion of iconicity, focusing on Toronto’s Latina/o-Canadian Alameda Theatre while drawing from a wide range of Canadian and US sources. Better than anyone else in this volume, Alvarez does what the editors propose, illustrating the value of “a return to realism’s paradoxes and a fuller understanding of the genre’s own complexities and contradictions in order to mine its potential as a site of ‘interpretation and contestation’” (162). Susan Bennett and Kim Solga similarly consider realism pragmatically, as a utilitarian strategy for female playwrights and performers from Ringwood to Tara Beagan, Alisa Palmer, and Rebecca Northan. They acknowledge that “popular theatre culture remains committed to realist dramaturgies” despite academic disapproval (190). But they also ask what price women theatre artists pay in embracing popular realism. Their essay successfully models exactly what it advocates, the need to “come to more nuanced terms” with the complicated historical interplay between realism and feminism (199).

The tensions between realism in academic theory and in theatrical practice are less successfully navigated in an abstract discussion about devising by Evan Webber, Alex McLean, and Bruce Barton. Kristen Pullen’s essay on the celebrity of Canadian screen actors Sandra Oh and Rachel McAdams, and Susanne Shawyer’s performance studies approach to Toronto’s G20 protest illustrate the difficulties of extending theatrical ideas of realism to extra-theatrical situations. Monique Mojica’s concluding essay on her embodied engagement with First Nations burial mounds provides an interesting limit case, bringing the notion of performative realisms full circle with her insistence on the unequivocal authenticity of the experience: “This is real” (221, 229).

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