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Book Review

Silverstone, Catherine. *Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance*. Routledge, 2011. 176 pp. \$141.

Catherine Silverstone's *Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance* focuses on a quartet of Shakespeare's plays rarely discussed together, locates performances of these texts across three different continents, and examines them through the lens of the emergent field of trauma studies. As its title suggests, the book uncovers the way in which traumatic events represented in the plays themselves have been performed so as to bear on more recent historical traumas: *Titus Andronicus* and Apartheid, *The Merchant of Venice* and the dispossession of the Māori in New Zealand, *The Tempest* and homophobic legislation in the UK, and finally *Henry V* and the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The politically inflected performances selected by Silverstone as her four core case studies constitute a diverse group both geographically and generically. She begins with a production which has by now attained the status of a classic—the collaborative stagings of *Titus Andronicus* (1995) at The Market Theatre in Johannesburg and The Royal National Theatre in London, directed by Gregory Doran and starring Antony Sher in the leading role. She then turns to the much less known *Maori Merchant of Venice* (2002), a film version of the play directed by Don Selwyn, which by contrast enjoyed only a limited publicity and distribution, mainly in its home country. Next comes *This Island's Mine* (1986), Philip Osment's play inspired by *The Tempest*, written for the Gay Sweatshop, which toured for several years all over the United Kingdom, to audiences drawn predominantly from LGBT communities. The study concludes with *Henry V* (2003) directed by Sir Nicholas Hytner at The Royal National Theatre, a positively received production replete with echoes of the British military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. This wide-ranging framework serves to elucidate how critical engagement with the traumatic ultimately provides a novel and productive gateways into analyzing Shakespeare on stage and screen. The mix of dramaturgies, venues, and audiences that the book encompasses illustrates vividly how the violence, suffering, and oppression in Shakespeare's texts can be readily re-appropriated by theater and film directors to address a host of contemporary social and political issues. At the same time, Silverstone shows that the goal of creating a performance which will use trauma ethically as well as productively

is an elusive one, contingent on a constellation of circumstances not entirely within the control of its creators. The individual chapters analyze this phenomenon by imaginatively tapping into the archives (rehearsal and production notes, photographs, interviews, programs, reviews) surrounding the making and reception of each production.

The opening chapter's claim is that Doran's *Titus* failed in its ambitious attempts to bring about some measure of closure to the trauma of the Apartheid era. Silverstone argues that this happened because the production sought too hard to act as a panacea to the still festering wounds left by years of Apartheid and ended up simply reenacting the racial, political, and economic stereotypes it was seeking to critique and defeat. The poor attendance of the Johannesburg productions was, according to her, a result of this ossified misfired attempt at redressing past injustice rather than a by-product of logistical issues, such as poor advertising or security concerns. Chapter two provides a much more favorable appraisal of the ways in which Selwyn's *Maori Merchant* impacted meaningfully on its audiences. Silverstone asserts that despite the many setbacks that dogged the makers of the film from its inception to distribution, the film enabled *te reo* (the Māori language) to "recapture its linguistic 'essence'" (23). In the process it achieved the kind of interactive and introspective audience engagement that she promotes. The third chapter examines what it views as the mixed success of the Gay Sweatshop's *This Island's Mine*. This production clearly plugged into the most current discourses about homophobia and racism in contemporary Britain. Silverstone even offers documentary evidence of individuals mobilized with its aid to political action, although the productions attracted largely those from within the LGBT communities, never achieving a broader exposure. Chapter four locates Hytner's *Henry V* in a peculiarly liminal space in relation to its handling of trauma. According to the author, both the production itself and the photographs from its rehearsals, "fail in their representation of the traumatic thing itself," yet they simultaneously "make claims upon the viewer to acknowledge the violence of war" (131). Although Silverstone does not explicitly identify it as such, this outcome of Hytner's *Henry V* emerges as the potentially most practical and replicable of the models for audience engagement by trauma-depicting performances outlined in the book.

Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance aims to appeal primarily to those interested in the application of trauma studies to Shakespeare. To this end, the book's introduction includes a general overview of the field and a helpful survey of other trauma-related work in literary and specifically Shakespearean scholarship. The author positions herself in relation to earlier work on the topic by emphasizing her book's focus on audience engagement. In performance studies, this process, whereby performances of traumatic events, simultaneously evocative of relevant real life traumas, might elicit ethical response from the audience, is known as "ethical spectatorship." The book more often gestures toward what this might entail in theatrical and cinematic practice than provides concrete examples or detailed theoretical models for how it might be achieved. This limitation is understandable, however, given the range of productions covered and the relative novelty of the Silverstone's paradigms. The book also constitutes a welcome addition to the bookshelves of those of us who teach some of the comparably obscure performances analyzed in it, such as *The Maori Merchant of Venice*. This is especially true

as the four chapters can work quite well as self-standing essays and as they are conceived around a carefully and creatively assembled archive of references, into which anyone else interested in these productions will want to tap. Borrowing a phrase from Ann Cvetkovich, the author herself in fact declares early on that her book works “as much to produce an archive as to analyze one” (19). This rich dynamic archive perhaps represents the most valuable contribution of *Shakespeare, Trauma, and Contemporary Performance* to literary and theater scholarship.

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