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Postmodern / Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage. By Stephen Watt. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998; pp. viii + 220, \$ 42.50

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Book Reviews

Postmodern / Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage. By Stephen Watt.
Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998; pp. viii + 220, \$ 42.50
hardcover.

Reviewed by Dean Wilcox, North Carolina School of the Arts

While it might not be a stretch to get scholars and critics to agree that the work of people like Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman are postmodern, asking the same folks to agree upon this categorization for Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Sam Shepard might be more challenging. Stephen Watt address this issue of classification with regards to drama, which for Watt excludes "performance," to concentrate on "what writers write" (4). This is not an easy task since, as Watt points out, the very idea of postmodernism dissolves "neatly sutured categories, such as genres themselves" (8). With this understanding, which prompts the dialectical slash in the book's title, Watt searches for a way to "begin to unravel the taut conceptual skein that results from the paradoxical union of the two terms" (13).

Watt further problematizes this rift by suggesting that there are at least two postmodernisms, one related to high modernism and the other consummated and consumed by the MTV generation. While this is an adequate assessment, it never quite addresses the difference in using the term as a periodizing concept and as a stylistic approach. This is further confounded by Watt's use of a plethora of postmodern critics that, with the exception of Jean Baudrillard, he never fully explicates. To be fair, a simple and straightforward definition of postmodernism is impossible, something Watt gleefully acknowledges by stating that he embarked on this project expecting that "as many questions will remain unanswered as were resolved" (7).

Readers willing to support Watt's resistance to defining postmodernism and willing to embrace his understanding that cleanly resolved conclusions do not really apply will undoubtedly enjoy this stance; those that pine for the stability of concise resolutions may not. Watt's claim is that up until this point there has been scant work done on postmodern drama as such, alluding to the fact that much of these critical energies have been siphoned off by performance studies. In attempting to rectify this situation, Watt virtually ignores performance and devotes all of his energies to the text, despite, or because of the fact that postmodernism challenges this privileged status. I continued to wonder how Watt would handle performance material that slips through the text and yet is still a part of the performative reception of the text. How, for instance, does one read, as Watt does, Churchill's *Cloud 9* without dealing with the idea of cross-gender and cross-racial casting?

After working to construct a set of analytical tools that prepare the reader to "read betwixt and between . . . genres, cultural registers, center and ever

changing margins" (56), Watt plunges into the question of whether Beckett's works should be considered postmodern, a question that he, in true postmodern style, refuses to answer. He is deliberately inconclusive yet leads the reader toward conclusions with the warning of "careful" in relation to the postmodernity of Joyce and Beckett (87). Watt's energies are devoted to pondering the stability of Beckett's characters vis-à-vis memory and objects, questioning their nomadic qualities with a discussion of Gómez-Peña's idea of a "borderless future." Truly, next to Gómez-Peña's characters, Beckett's seem downright modernistically contained, and yet Watt never really gets to the heart of Beckett's postmodernism. While his focus on character enables him to state that both Beckett and Joyce "anticipate postmodernist representations of subjectivity" (79), he never begins to address the open-ended, fragmented, and repetitive qualities of Beckett's dramaturgy.

Moving from Beckett to Pinter, Watt explores the "textual flatness" and "horizontal" narrative qualities of Pinter's later, more "political" work, which eschews structural depth for an aesthetic allegiance to the surface (93). Complete with postmodern buzzwords like parody, irony, and indeterminacy, Watt's approach to Pinter appears as if it would transcend his textual analysis of Beckett, but he avoids moving beyond a surface reading. Because Watt spends his time analyzing narrative as opposed to structure, his focus is on texts that document the existence of postmodern societies, not necessarily texts that are stylistically postmodern. Even when addressing such a fragmented piece as Lucas's *Reckless*, his focus is on content, story, narrative, and not on how this narrative is constructed.

From Pinter, Watt sets out to explicate the "Baudrillardian qualities of American drama over the past quarter-century or so" (128). The bulk of this analysis is devoted to the work of Shepard, David Mamet, Arthur Kopit, and David Rabe, who document the "recuperation of phallic prerogatives" (142) via texts that deal either head-on or tangentially with the film and television industries. Watt eventually addresses Finley's *The Theory of Total Blame* and Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* in the final chapter, not as feminist parallels to the machismo of the above authors, but as examples of the absorption of contemporary media imagery within the context of the drama. Here he discusses plays about a postmodern world in which women are either subjugated, killed, or act as castrators, as film and television "invades its viewers' psyches, shaping conceptions of self, gender, and of Otherness" (167).

For all of his desire to open up these plays to the larger cultural sphere, Watt does not seem to develop the tools for analyzing them short of describing the narratives as postmodern. While the work of Wilson, Foreman, and the Wooster Group fall out of Watt's category of "drama" due to the performative quality of their "texts," I couldn't help but question why he omitted the work of Charles Mee, Suzan-Lori Parks, Megan Terry, Heiner Müller, and Tony Kushner, all of which would have allowed him to transcend a surface reading and delve

into the fragmented postmodern landscape that MTV has helped spawn. The strength of Watt's text rests on his willingness to engage in a dialogue about how drama as a writerly category has been affected by theory and culture. For those not ready, or willing, to dive headlong into the morass that is postmodern theatre, this text offers a pleasant wade into the waters of postmodern theory and practice via texts by well-known authors. While embedded in this discussion of postmodern / drama are wisely unresolved paradoxes that urge further consideration, I could not help but wonder in the end if Watt's desire to provide one of the first studies of this material would not be better served without the slash.



Trevor Griffiths: Politics, Drama, History. By Stanton B. Garner, Jr. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999; pp. 317. \$49.50 hardcover.

Reviewed by John E. O'Connor, Fairmont State College

Trevor Griffiths first made his presence felt in British theatre with the 1970 production of *Occupations*, his account of the 1920 factory occupations in Turin, Italy. For the past three decades, he has produced a considerable body of work for stage, television, and film. Griffiths's journey as a writer reflects his lifelong commitment to the socialist cause in England, his exploration of the contradictions inherent in revolutionary politics, and his own struggles as a radical writer working within a capitalist system.

Stanton B. Garner's *Trevor Griffiths: Politics, Drama, History*, part of the University of Michigan Press's excellent "Theater: Theory/Text/Performance" series, is the first comprehensive study in English of all of Griffiths's work. The volume includes analyses of, and context for, thirteen stage plays, eleven works for television, eight screenplays, and one radio drama. One of the many positive features of this excellent study is Garner's analysis of the symbiotic relationship between the plays written for the stage and those written for television and film. His readings of the stage plays highlight Griffiths's increasing interest in the politics of medium and representation, and his recent efforts to create a theatrical language that incorporates a critique of the process of the mediatization of politics.

Garner's analysis also focuses on what he considers to be Griffiths's major preoccupations as a committed socialist writer: an acute awareness of class structure, a commitment to history as a field for political and cultural intervention, a dialectical view of social and individual reality and the negotiation of the contradictions within that dialectic, and an ongoing exploration of the nature of revolution. Additionally, his analysis incorporates an investigation of Griffiths's idea of "strategic penetration," writing within and against cultural institutions in an attempt to expose their conservative hegemony.