

Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 758. £110. ISBN 9780199600304.

‘What is no longer in question is the cultural centrality of theatre in Georgian Britain’ (3), writes David Francis Taylor in the introduction to this *Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre*, encapsulating both the core message of this volume and the cumulative effect of the recent developments in theatre history scholarship upon which it builds. The last quarter-century has witnessed a turn from studying drama as literature to drama as performance; from a focus on the playwright alone to an understanding of theatre as a fundamentally collaborative endeavour, involving the audience, as much as those on and behind the stage, in the generation of meaning; and from text as the exclusive object of analysis to an exploration of the host of other arts that made up the increasingly spectacular theatrical product. The new style of theatre history has also been firmly committed to situating dramatic performance within its cultural and historical context, and has thereby demonstrated the theatre of this era to be a vital crucible for the formation and contestation, not merely the reflection, of attitudes towards gender, race, class, nation and empire. Moreover, this research has exposed the manifold legacies left by the Georgian theatre to contemporary culture, through for instance the emerging celebrity culture that surrounded its actors (as discussed by Helen McPherson in Chapter 11), or innovations such as melodrama, which, as Matthew S. Buckley writes, ‘informs in fundamental ways both the history of modern narrative and that of modern culture and consciousness’ (459). To summarise, advocate and expand this new scholarly agenda has been the task of this *Handbook*, one in which it succeeds abundantly.

The volume is broken down into eight parts, each comprised of several chapters, which explore these themes in depth. Part I outlines the new theoretical approaches to Georgian theatre history, arguing in particular for an increased emphasis on the audience, on theatre as performance and on adopting research methodologies sensitive to the collaborative nature of theatrical production. Part II offers useful summaries of the developing relationship between the theatre and the state, and the effect of changing regulatory regimes upon dramatic writing, publication and performance.

Part III examines the various forces shaping performance styles in this era, including different theories of acting, theatre design, celebrity culture, commercialisation, and the political and stylistic implications of the concept of ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ drama. The growing contribution of the other arts – painting, music, dance – to theatre is the subject of Part IV, a development which, as Shearer West argues, stimulated intense debates about whether theatre was becoming too visually ‘spectacular’ at the expense of aural attention to text (Chapter 16).

Alongside fresh perspectives on standard theatrical genres such as comedy, tragedy and opera, Part V also offers a series of excellent introductions to Georgian generic innovations, such as pantomime, gothic drama and melodrama, which further underline the innovative dynamism of Georgian theatre and its important legacies for later theatre and culture. Part VI builds on recent research challenging the idea of Romantic anti-theatricality, through a series of essays exposing the serious engagement with the theatre that underpinned the work of writers like Byron, Shelley, Godwin and Austen.

The work of women in the theatre, as actresses, but also as theatre managers and playwrights, is the subject of Part VII, reflecting the fact that recent scholarship has increasingly rendered visible women’s vital contribution to theatrical culture. Far from being antithetical to women’s writing, the Georgian theatre was a space in which, as Paula R. Backscheider observes (Chapter 34), women such as Elizabeth Inchbald could achieve equal,

if not greater success as playwrights to their male contemporaries. Finally, the work of the theatre in the formation of attitudes towards race and empire is made abundantly clear in Part VIII. Prithi Kanakamedala describes, for instance, how plays frequently took inspiration from reports of slave rebellions in the colonies, but depicted them in a way that ensured ‘the perpetuation of racial fantasies, the alleviation of white anxieties, and the erasure of the potential agency of the enslaved’ (687).

The volume is not completely comprehensive; there is no chapter on masculinity, for instance, while the question of class remains relatively underdeveloped, despite the evident importance of both of these topics for the Georgian theatre. Nevertheless, the breadth of material covered in this ‘disciplinary map’ (1) remains impressive. Furthermore, many of these essays are exceptionally clear in their presentation of concepts and every chapter includes a short list of further reading, making them an indispensable teaching resource, as well as an excellent starting point for researchers looking for an introduction to these topics. Showcasing the very latest research in this field in an accessible and detailed manner, and capturing all of the vibrancy and dynamism of the Georgian theatre, this *Handbook* will remain a vital resource for those teaching and researching Georgian culture for many years to come.

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