

David Worrall, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 305. £50.00. ISBN 9781107043602.

‘Anyone who has read *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* will’, claims its author, ‘have been left in no doubt as to the sheer volume of London’s theatrical assemblage’ (235). He is right, and neither do readers remain ignorant about the ‘vast contemporary theatrical network’ of provincial and regional Georgian playhouses (237). Market factors loom large in the theoretical formulations Worrall adopts, which is apt given the awesome statistic that at the end of the eighteenth century ‘the total population of the capital city (1,096,784 [according to the 1801 census]) more or less mirrored the annual number of theatre seats for sale within it’ (38). The author constantly counts – people, plays, pounds sterling – to demonstrate empirically that a ‘rebalancing of cultural history’ is needed to restore Georgian theatre to its rightful place as the dominant artistic form of the Romantic period – and a fine comparative example follows as he reveals the modesty of footfall and takings at the much more frequently studied Royal Academy exhibitions when seen in a theatrical context (40, 40-42). This isn’t to say that the macro always trumps the micro, or that historical detail and colour are lacking. Worrall also demonstrates that ‘the pervasive modern unfamiliarity with both the repertoire and the scale of Georgian theatre has produced a cultural distortion of the past’ (41) through fascinating, minute revelations about varied nightly theatre schedules, the mixed fortunes of Shakespeare, cavalier Georgian approaches to textual fidelity, the speediness of topical re-writes and the strikingly alien behaviour of theatre-goers and their ‘audience led anti-theatricality’ (207).

The book is structured around a series of broad topics which link together to advance these larger arguments about the character of theatrical assemblages in the Georgian era. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the tricky nature of celebrity, Chapter 5 with unique theatrical takes on naval conflict, Chapter 6 with Anglo-Ottoman relations, Chapter 7 with the French Revolution and stage representations of French queens and Chapter 8 with issues of censorship, loyalism and treason in Georgian theatre. Given the pivotal role of specific records and material artefacts in Worrall’s methodology (he scrutinises and deploys playbills, receipts, newspapers, prompters’ notebooks, diplomats’ diaries, court archives and much else besides) summary cannot do justice to the subtle textures, and painstaking strategies at work within *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* but, with luck, a couple of examples can convey its flavour. For instance, the stage ‘as a gendered workplace’ is an expected concern but it is Worrall’s burrowing into the Proceedings of the Drury Lane Theatrical Fund, 1789-91 that enables him to reveal what highly progressive employment acting was for women, as he discovers, rather amazingly, that ‘benefits were disbursed to both sexes under roughly equal conditions’ (42,43). Given women’s profoundly inferior financial situation, the independence open to theatrical females in a workplace where they matched men in numbers and often in wages certainly does have ‘considerable implications for what is understood about the equality of women in Georgian Britain [...] the benefit provisions of the theatrical funds represent a major social innovation’ (43, 235). So, do put your daughter on the stage Mrs Wollstonecraft.

This dynamic and productive movement between the micro to macro characterises the fascinating treatment of sexual themes throughout. For example, consideration of specific stagings of long-forgotten maritime plays reveals ‘a network of dramas performed in London that reflect anxieties about British military readiness and the fabrication of appropriate gender roles’ (64), or, again, Worrall’s delving into the gritty details of Benefit Night ticket sales and

wage bills illuminates both the monetary deftness and the pulling power of famous female performers.

In short, Romantic orthodoxies are overturned by expert knowledge of the workings of all levels of the Georgian theatrical assemblage, and in this light celebrity Romantic geniuses are more correctly stage-makers, ‘products of voluminous social reception networks as fascinating and varied as the celebrities themselves’ (236), patriotic plays put on by the patent theatres actually form ‘a contrarian canon of dramas about the war’ (131) and so on. The social assemblage and actor-network theories of DeLanda and Latour, to which Worrall passionately cleaves, do not always make for lively or digestible prose – ‘In other words’ (20, *passim*) is a welcome phrase – but they are put to productive use throughout *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* as Worrall proves that ‘Georgian theatre was the nation’s dominant culturally expressive form in the long eighteenth century’ (1).

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