

REIDing SHELF

Popular Drama is the goal, the concept, the hope – perhaps even the illusion – that unites every theatre manager whether motivated by profit or some more fragile ethic. A drama that is popular implies a full house and no theatre thrives on empty seats. But what constitutes popular drama?

In 1977 a Canterbury conference of the University of Kent set out to examine some aspects of popular entertainment and now Cambridge University Press – in a commendable venture far removed from any concept of popular publishing – have printed selected papers from the proceedings, in a book called **PERFORMANCE AND POLITICS IN POPULAR DRAMA**.

The conference was subtitled “a festival and an enquiry” because it included observations of a performance by Strathclyde Group and a rehearsal by Joint Stock. Both companies subsequently joined in discussion with the conferring audience and the book includes an edited transcript.

If any conclusions were reached, they do not leap from the page. There is a summing up chapter by a Lecturer in English and American Literature, Bernard Sharratt, whose use of the English language indicates that he has little respect for the written word as a means of popular communication: if phrases like *experiential obverse* fall easily upon your ears, then Sharratt is your man. But if you are interested in a language more fundamental – even as basic as the language of popular theatre – still pick up this book for it includes a lot of good stuff for the theatrical think tank.

The quality of essays is somewhat uneven: just like the quality of papers at any conference. Perhaps the best chapters are the ones on the more factual subjects. The last great British popular theatre was Victorian and there is an informative chapter by Derek Forbes on Water Drama where we can read details of aquatic spectacles like Clarkson Stanfield's Drury Lane *Cataract of the Ganges* with its exit on horseback up an inclined cascade with fire raging all around. At Sadler's Wells, the stage tank had side branches running off-stage in the bays between the wing flats. This enabled the model boats to make an entrance with the aid of the water boys. (This watery stage crew were issued with thick duffil trousers and received a glass of brandy before and after immersion. The stage doorkeeper has left us a memoir: “Full houses were the reward of having a leaden tank full of putrid water – for it was not renewed but once in two months.”)

The London stage's treatment of the Crimean war is discussed: a function of popular theatre that was overtaken first by the newsreel and now by the television correspondent. There is a reconstruction of popular theatre in Victorian Birmingham

and David Meyer reminds us of the importance of music in popular melodrama.

This gives a bridge to today's popular theatre: there is a strong musical element in much of the ‘fringe’ theatre that has grown up as an ‘alternative’ to more formal mainstream drama. But this alternative theatre tends to be a superimposed popular theatre, developed from an intellectual assessment of what a popular theatre should be – whereas the Georgian and the Victorian popular theatres surely arose from an audience demand imposed by the box office vote.

There is material on Mummers, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Piscator, American Agitprop and French melodrama of the 19th century Boulevard and 20th century Front Populaire. There is a discourse on the disaster movies of the seventies (only the stars survive) and at the end of the book we reach the real popular drama of today: Television.

A lot of meat in this book. It could become essential reading for drama students – especially as it will be a happy hunting ground for those who set examination questions: the following statement is surely ripe for essay treatment. ‘*The Vic*’ was a great proletarian theatre in the days before it was anaesthetised by the *Coffee Taverns and Lilian Bayliss*.

Popular Theatre is part of the subtitle of John McGrath's **A GOOD NIGHT OUT**, a title that conveys much of the essence of what a popular theatre must be about. The full subtitle is *Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form*. McGrath is obsessed with “class” which he views with all the simplicity of vision of a politician of either extremity. I wonder if he has read Jilly Cooper on the subject: her book *Class* is very perceptive yet to read it is to experience the literary equivalent of having “a good night out”.

Yes, the book is a polemic. It has to be.

For it is a report from a battlefield. A battle to establish a new kind of theatre. To fight, you have to have an enemy; and to win, you must not allow yourself a single tiny doubt about that enemy's villainy. McGrath's book will be a key source book for future reassessment of the “alternative fringe” that exploded across the British theatre scene of the seventies.

Unlike the essayists in “Performance and Politics in Popular Drama”, John McGrath is not an academic observer. His analysis is from within. His theatrical apprenticeship is impeccable, if narrow: Royal Court dramaturg reacting against that stage's ideals – reacting with the inevitability of one generation responding to the immediately preceding generation. Via Liverpool Everyman to the foundation of 7:84 whose success had both stimulated his writing and been dependent upon it.

A Good Night Out is a sextet of Cambridge lectures given by McGrath during a sabbatical at the end of the first decade of 7:84. There is some routine bashing of mainstream theatre (the lectures were given just before alternative theatre was embraced by London's West End) and the Royal Court is dismissed as “a theatrical technique for turning authentic working-class experience into satisfying thrills for the bourgeoisie”.

This is all part of the reaction that is an inevitable part of the creative process. The importance of this book is that John McGrath has not only recorded a genuine evocation of the politically oriented alternative theatre of the seventies, but he has revealed the polemic thinking that was part of its creation.

What will the next reaction be? Will it create a theatre whose popularity will bring all classes swarming into theatres as they did in Georgian and Victorian times?

Administration has become a major arts growth area, and arts administration has

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