

Is it not curious how many experts in English literature have a less than scintillating command of English language? Because Frances Gray writes smoothly, interestingly and coherently, her **JOHN ARDEN** at first seems to be a very persuasive piece of critical analysis. Then one gradually becomes increasingly aware of an apparently unbounded admiration for his work until one almost becomes alienated by her defensive stance on his behalf. To receive what almost amounts to praise of polemic proportions can only do Arden a disservice at this point in his development. Which is a pity because once one has got the measure of Ms Gray's devotion to the style and content of Arden's work, there is a very perceptive account of what the playwright is trying to do. What we miss is some cool analytical comment on why, despite elevation to the set book lists of the educational system, Arden appears to show continuing difficulties in establishing rapport with that wider audience which would seem to be warranted by the universality of his theme and the avowed popularity of his communicative style. I certainly find him less easy to understand than I do Frances Gray.

The second page of Michael Hattaway's introduction to his **ELIZABETHAN POPULAR THEATRE** inevitably brings me back to the matter of English language comprehension. I really do rather find that the following sentence interrupts the understanding that should flow between author and reader.

Truth was measured by the internal coherence of the artefacts rather than by congruence with life: dramatists resisted the restrictiveness of the universal when reduced to the socially normative, and they revelled in the truth of strangeness, whether that be the

archaic, the unexpected, the improbable, or the impossible.

Now there may be people who revel in this sort of prose but I would guess that it alienates many (like me) who could most benefit: those wishing to develop their understanding of historical production style as a means to a performance end rather than out of purely academic interest.

So, fellow theatrelovers, consider the advisability of skipping the intro and going straight into the chapters on Playhouses and stages, on Performances, and on Players and playing. There the author gets excited and his enthusiasm does wonders for his language, with his sentences becoming short, factual and readable. The available evidence is relatively slight compared with later periods, but Michael Hattaway is a clever detective who constructs a persuasive case both in general terms and in his case history analyses of five plays.

STAGECRAFT.

The Complete Guide to Theatrical Practice. Consultant Editor: Trevor R. Griffiths Phaidon Press. £12.95 (UK).

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ELIZABETHAN POPULAR THEATRE.

Plays in Performance. Michael Hattaway.

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No Aviary for Canary Fanciers

ANTHONY McCALL

Looking through a selection of London's most notable un-built buildings of the nineteenth century, I came across a splendid project for a national opera house by the riverside at Westminster Pier. There were plans for billiard tables for between arias; a surgery where doctors would treat sore throats; and even a houseboat on which the company could sail downriver for rehearsals or recreation. The plan, drawn up in 1875, failed and New Scotland Yard now stands on the opera house site.

The Victorian age was probably the greatest period for would-be improvers. Committees of Taste sat over architects' plans and projects might be rejected because they were dangerously artistic or seductively ornamental. Other 'failures' included, in passing, a Roman Colosseum at the top of Whitehall; and a true-blue British Eiffel Tower at Wembley - taller, of course, and better than the French original. However, lovers of grand ideas are invited to follow me to the foot of the Alps, to Geneva, to discover another unusually splendid, and perhaps even improbable, opera house.

Here, in the city of Calvin's Reformation, once called "the Protestant Rome", where gracious nineteenth-century houses bespeak comfortable living and the city walls whisper feats of military glories from the days of Julius Caesar to Napoleon Bonaparte, there live 173,000 souls within the city limits. Or, counting the immediate catchment area as well, some 300,000 in all. Yet here too, is a thriving opera house, the Grand Théâtre, modelled on the Paris Opéra in architectural style, and engaging international stars of the stature of Ruggero Raimondi (a regular performer), José Carreras, Katia Ricciarelli, Hermann Prey; legendary names like Josef Svoboda (who recently designed "Tristan" and the complete "Ring" cycle here), Covent Garden's own Götz Friedrich, and such music directors as Raymond Leppard and Nello Santi. How do they do it? No amount of subsidy can bail out a half-empty lyric theatre; and

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