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Book Review: Disability Theatre and Modern Drama by Kirsty Johnston

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Kirsty Johnston

Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016, 240 p. £21.99.

ISBN: 9781408184783

The field of Disability Studies is currently enjoying a highly productive phase as the relaxing of earlier certainties, and increasing engagement with other disciplines, are yielding new critical directions. This volume emerges from these developments, reconsidering representations of disabled characters in modernist drama beyond the usual objections that such figures are one-dimensional villains or victims rather than fully realised individuals. Drawing particular influence from Tobin Siebers' observation that disability is a central aesthetic value in modern art, rather than an incidental theme or trope, the essays here bring contemporary perspectives, informed by disability experience and scholarship, to seminal texts and playwrights. The result is a volume that is richly provocative, and confronts directly the complex layers of both disability and aesthetics.

The book is divided into two sections. In the first, Kirsty Johnston offers an overview of key theoretical ideas and practical concerns that circulate through Disability Theatre, from definitions of the field, through the complexities of casting and staging, and finally onto the effects of disabled performers taking on 'iconic' roles from modern drama. In the second, scholars and disabled artists offer their own reflections on particular works. There is, curiously, a narrow range of authors addressed throughout, with Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* being the most prominent text (the contributors are mostly American) along with further discussion of Beckett, Brecht and Lorca.

In her introductory sections, Johnston appropriately resists any temptation to foreground her own critical perspective, and neatly brings together the significant strands of each topic. She sets out a rigorous but accessible overview that opens the field out effectively for those with little previous engagement with it. In doing so, she brings the reader fully up to date, and carefully lays the groundwork for the subsequent sections.

These later chapters are varied in form as well as ideas. Michael Davidson and Ann M. Fox each contribute an essay, providing fresh perspectives on Beckett and Williams respectively. The linking theme is an approach which understands the protagonists' disabilities as real rather than symbolic. These are followed by Johnston's interview with Graeae's Artistic Director, Jenny Sealey, which brings a refreshing and resolutely non-academic set of artistic insights into play. Finally the text of a 2003 multimedia performance art piece by Terry Galloway, M. Shane Grant, Ben Gunter and Carrie Sandahl allows the writer-performers, particularly Galloway and Sandahl, to wrestle with their love-hate responses to *The Glass Menagerie*. This enjoyably provocative chapter exemplifies the contradictory perspectives and approaches that course through the whole book, and evidences its timely value for contemporary students and scholars of performance.

Dave Calvert