Ric Knowles, Joanne Tompkins and W. B. Worthen, eds. *Modern Drama: Defining the Field*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. $27.95.

The twelve essays in this book, all previously published in two issues of the journal *Modern Drama,* represent the proceedings of the "Modern: Drama" conference held at the University of Toronto in May 2000. Organized "with the express purpose of interrogating the terms 'modern' and 'drama,' and of initiating the process of (re) 'defining the field,'" the conference sprang from newly appointed editor Ric Knowles' desire to re-examine the titular terms of *Modern Drama* in light of the significant shifts in critical discourse, methodology, and attitudes towards canonization that have occurred since its founding in 1958. The fragmentation and deconstruction of modernity and of drama itself, once assumed to be stable, transparent, and culturally neutral concepts, have largely drained the terms of their meaning and authority. If what was once Renaissance is now Early Modern, how can the era from 1850 to the present be "modern"—especially if the present is post-modern? Moreover, Knowles asserts, changing scholarly perspectives have taken us a long way from *drama,* which some time ago came to be seen as "the somewhat quaint residue" of *theatre.* In turn "the concept of 'theatre' itself" has come "under attack by scholars … as the repository of cultural reproduction—the reinforcement of currently dominant and oppressive social structures and naturalized 'realities.'" Thus theatre studies, having lost its innocence, gives way to cultural and performance studies, and the very notion of "modern drama" begins to seem naive, if not reactionary.

The impressive international roster of invited essayists, somewhat heavily weighted with Americans, had broad latitude to interrogate the terms and redefine the field, so the essays range widely in their approaches and conclusions (as well as their readability and usefulness). Even in the absence of anything like a consensus regarding definitions or limitations, certain through-lines do appear. And numerous mainstays of the dramatic modern pretty much disappear—Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, O'Neill and Glaspell, Williams and Miller seem to have gone the way of Hauptmann, Meyerhold and Maeterlinck. Beckett barely gets a mention. Strindberg has a walk-on in Elin Diamond's provocative take on dramatizations of modernity, in which Aphra Behn gets top billing as a playwright whose comedic strategies comprise "a refusal of modernity's historical mandate." Of the formerly canonical, only Brecht remains seriously in play in this conversation. And his fate is put into focus by Sue-Ellen Case, who valo-

rizes Mme Blavatsky's "performances" of occultism as avatars of internet art, anticipating the work of "cyborg sha(wo)man" Karen Wendy Gilbert, while poor Brecht's "performance theories suit a consideration of a now dated modern drama."

Among the book's most popular recurring tropes is dis/embodiment—the physical body in its various manifestations and absences on the modern stage. Stanton B. Garner, Jr. argues rather abstractly for the centrality of Zola's theories of the medicalized body in the development of naturalism. Josephine Lee systematically recuperates the racially fetishized body in the theatrical context of African-American cultural nationalism. And in one of those juxtapositions of the ludicrous and the sublime that sometimes make contemporary scholarship so wildly entertaining, Loren Kruger explores notions of embodiment and sensation from the theories of Hegel to the "ordeal art" of Ron Athey, whose *The Solar Anus* concludes with the performer "insert[ing] dildo-shaped high-heels into his own anus," to the strategies of puppetry used to dramatize apartheid-era torture in *Ubu and the Truth Commission.*

The threat of bodily pain is only the most extreme generator of the condition most endemic to modernity in these essays: anxiety. The modern age and its theatre, however defined, appear unbearably anxious about race, gender, class, history, coloniality, time, and much else. Garner even attributes to "the modern" a self-conscious anxiety of its own: "an anxiety of legitimation, a fear that the values and goals by which it grounds itself may not prove adequate." David Savran accounts for what he calls "the ghost plays" of both the European 1890s and the American 1990s as an anxious return of the repressed "dark side of imperial triumphalism." But the award for historical anxiety must go to *Peter Pan.* In Ann Wilson's thorough and methodical if somewhat pedantic analysis (the only one in the collection devoted to a single work), Barrie's play performs anxiety in numerous permutations and serves as the paradigm for "strateg[ies] of managing [nearly every conceivable] anxiety about the changes that the modern brings."

Although these critics rarely speak directly to one another in the essays, they sometimes raise red flags about each other's critical strategies and assumptions. Kruger wryly refers to "the promiscuous political allegorizing at the conference … in which all manner of performances were found to dramatize the inequities of late modern globalization or its surrogates." She might have been addressing Wilson's argument or, less directly, Michael Sidnell's judgmental finger-pointing at "Lillian Hellman's flawed aesthetic in *The Little Foxes* and its associated moral blindness" in

his dense examination of the suppression of the performing subject in realist drama. Or Alan Filewod, who astutely argues for the legitimacy of postcolonial agitprop theatre only to lament its "failure" based on what he sees as the neo-racist appropriation of aboriginality in three agitprop plays from Scotland, Australia and Canada.

Another important caution appears in Erika Fischer-Lichte's interrogation of interdisciplinarity in current theatre studies. She questions whether theatre scholars engaged in cultural or performance studies practice a form of dilettantism, assuming as they often do a disciplinary expertise which they may not actually have, and she offers a radical scenario in which "each theatre scholar and each theatre department would only carry out research and teaching in terms of the genres of performance for which they are qualified, competent and authorized." Josephine Lee warns that the pathological connotations of "fetish" in Marxist, Freudian, and postcolonial doctrine need to be reconsidered in the context of the racialized bodies of African-American nationalist drama. Her argument is complemented by Harry J. Elam, Jr., who effectively situates the trope of madness in August Wilson's plays within African-American literary, critical, and theatrical traditions with just passing nods to Eurocentric theory. The implication, I think, is that one theoretical size doesn't fit all.

My vote for the collection's most successful essay goes to Shannon Jackson's "Why Modern Plays Are Not Culture: Disciplinary Blind Spots." This carefully charted, illuminating analysis posits a complex relationship between new criticism and cultural studies rooted in the mid-century theatrical theory of Robert Brustein, Eric Bentley, John Gassner, Francis Fergusson, and especially Raymond Williams. Jackson incisively argues for "a longer, complicated disciplinary genealogy [that] makes oppositions between old literary studies and new cultural studies, and between old theatre studies and new performance studies, less easy to maintain or elide." Her model of critical inclusiveness offers the best hope for making sense of modern drama's evasive profile on history's ever shifting stage.

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