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New Playwriting at Shakespeare’s Globe by Vera Cantoni


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New Playwriting at Shakespeare’s Globe is the first monograph to focus exclusively on the commissioning, staging, and reception of new plays by contemporary writers at the reconstructed Globe theatre on London’s South Bank. As such, it marks an important intervention into wider Globe scholarship that, thus far, has sought to both contest and celebrate this site principally as a venue for (or monument to) the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. From the outset, Vera Cantoni is explicit in her aim to show how the 27 new plays produced between 1999 and 2015 ‘have been shaped by the unique environment of their creation’ (1). This focus leads her to explore these works as a corpus ‘[r]ather than emphasising the different choices of each author’ (1). As a result, Cantoni’s argument throughout aims to stress ‘the similarities that testify to the venue’s impact on the plays’ conception and development’, treating them as a logical extension of the Globe’s original mandate to explore the challenges and possibilities of the reconstructed playhouse (1). The theatre’s architecture and audience configuration, therefore, underpin the majority of her observations throughout, at times casting the site itself as the ultimate authorising force in this collection of plays.

Of the two parts, the substantially longer Part One: The New Globe Plays reflects on some of the established truisms of the Globe as a venue oscillating always between past and present, in tension between evoking a specific historical moment and the imperative to function as a working, modern theatre. For the most part, Cantoni’s engagements with existing Globe scholarship in chapters such as Chapter One: Something Old, Something
New, or her later claims concerning the Globe’s audience in Chapter Three: The Spectacle of Spectators, reinforce current critical thinking in these areas. For example, she underscores the primacy of the audiences in shaping productions on the mainstage, positioning them variously as ‘spectacle’ (given their visibility in the open-air theatre’s shared light) and meaning-makers; at times restless or enthralled, quick to laughter and often ‘put to use, employ[ed] as a mass of supernumeraries that spontaneously represents the community each production is meant to address’ (80). For Cantoni, the presence and function of these spectators are as fundamental to new writing on the Globe stage as to its Elizabethan progenitors, and are thus key factors that today’s playwrights must both account for and embrace.

Throughout, Cantoni employs textual and production analysis of the plays as her key methodology, drawing specific connections between texts and identifying recurring formal or thematic links (the role of history and multiple time planes, the invocation of or references to Shakespeare, anachronism, music, and the centrality of language, for example). Cantoni’s forensic attention to detail in drawing these points of connection is most striking when integrated with interviews – both existing and her own – with playwrights Jessica Swale, Chris Hannan, and Howard Brenton, and with archival records including show reports, scripts in development, prompt books, correspondence, and production materials. Her engagement with documentation detailing the extensive script development for Peter Oswald’s The Golden Ass (2002) or cuts and revisions to Brenton’s Anne Boleyn (2010) during the rehearsal process, for example, is testament to the involvement of playwrights in the creative processes of the Globe, and serves to evidence Cantoni’s central argument concerning the impact of the space on the development of and eventual production choices in these works.

As a result, perhaps, of examining all 27 plays concurrently, what emerges during Part One is a largely homogenised sense of this corpus of work. Cantoni identifies the ‘elaborate relationship this cultural enterprise tends to establish between the present and the past, one that asserts continuity and stresses similarity or even identity rather than distance’
and, at times, her own arguments risk reproducing this logic by prioritising what is the same about these texts in relation both to each other and to the rest of the Globe’s programming (25). In so doing, her analysis leaves little room for a consideration of the potential dissonance that these plays might represent, occasionally eliding any sense of difference between texts or authors that might lead to an even more nuanced understanding of these works.

One author who is given sustained individual consideration, however, is Howard Brenton. In contrast to Part One’s rapid appraisal and juxtaposition of 27 plays, Part Two: Brenton’s Globe focuses exclusively on the venue’s most frequently performed contemporary playwright. This shift in approach effectively demonstrates how a focus on specific new works or playwrights as individuals usefully extends current critical thinking on both the playwright in question and the Globe itself. No longer attempting to account for the entire corpus of new works allows Cantoni to place her own observations about Brenton’s Globe plays (In Extremis (2006), Anne Boleyn (2010) and Doctor Scroggy’s War (2014)) in dialogue with existing commentary from critics, scholars, and Brenton himself, which makes for an even more compelling and clear insight into the possibilities and peculiarities of new writing in this venue. By retracing Brenton’s career trajectory alongside this commentary, Cantoni underscores the Globe’s suitability for work like Brenton’s that has continually sought to blend politics and historical critique with popular entertainment, positioning the relationship between writer and venue as the harmonious coming together of ‘virtuoso [and] Steinway’ (144).

Cantoni’s focus on plays produced between 1999 and 2015 under the artistic directorship of Mark Rylance and, later, Dominic Dromgoole provides a rigorous insight into the form and function of new work at the Globe during this sixteen-year period. What is striking is how already since Emma Rice’s short-lived tenure as the Globe’s artistic director during 2016 and 2017, some of Cantoni’s observations are differently inflected. She notes, for example, that ‘the reconstructed Globe has never produced re-writings of Shakespeare’s works: showcasing new versions side by side with acclaimed masterpieces in a place
dedicated to their author might hurt some devotees’ feelings’ (34-5). In Rice’s inaugural season, Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* was reframed as *Imogen* in collaboration with the director Matthew Dunster, placing the play’s female protagonist at its centre. Far from undermining Cantoni’s arguments or the important groundwork that this book establishes, these kinds of developments underscore the urgency of this publication’s focus on a currently underexplored – and consistently changing – phenomenon at Shakespeare’s Globe.

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