

Ed. Katarzyna Fazan, Michal Kobialka, and Bryce Lease. *A History of Polish Theatre.*

Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xx, 426.
Notes. Index. Figures. \$145.00, hard bound.

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doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.358

To write a history of theater is, of course, much more than to compile names, titles, dates, and plot summaries. But how to synthesize a vast amount of material without sounding pedantic or formulaic? How to engage readers' attention without resorting to overheated platitudes or seductive generalizations? Even more fundamentally, how does one go about writing a history of theater at a time when some theorists claim that there is no scholarly activity more conservative than writing literary or theater histories?

The volume under review has several major predecessors. Zbigniew Raszewski, the doyen of Polish theater studies, opted for conciseness in his *Krótką historia teatru polskiego* (1977). So did Kazimierz Braun in *A Concise History of Polish Theater from the Eleventh to the Twentieth Centuries* (2003). A project launched under the general editorship of Tadeusz Sivert in 1977 took the opposite direction. Entitled *Dzieje teatru polskiego*, it produced a multi-volume series, each written by a different author. At 446 pages, *A History of Polish Theatre* is slightly shorter than Braun's 502-page-long *Concise History*, but undertakes a comprehensive redesign of traditional models of theater historiography. To begin with, *A History* is the result of teamwork involving a large group of authors and translators. Divided into fourteen chapters, typically consisting of two essays each, it showcases the work of some thirty scholars. Their methodological approach, in general, is new historicist—that is, seeing theater practice in terms of its own historical moment, as a product of and response to the ideas, values, beliefs, and events of a particular time. The contributors go beyond discussion of acting and directing styles to explore fundamental realities informing theater events then and now and to examine the place and role of theater in public space and political debate.

Given that theater practice involves crossing numerous disciplinary boundaries (dramatic literature, acting, directing, set and costume design, lighting, and music), the subject matter of any theater history does not allow an easy and simple organization of contents. The editors of *A History* have sought to carve out a middle ground between a conventional chronological framework and an exclusively thematic approach. Chapters on historical periods are supplemented by thematic chapters or subchapters (“Political Theatres,” “Puppet Theatre,” or “Homosocial Relations and Feminist Transgressions: Theatre and Patriarchy”). Unlike Braun's *Concise History* that follows the older, nation-centered model of theater historiography, with its privileging of a single ethnicity, its focus on a single language, and its commitment to bolstering national pride and educating the nation to civic purpose, *A History* highlights the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of Poland's theater history. Accordingly, it includes subchapters on Jewish and German theaters in Poland and Polish theaters in Vilnius. Oddly, the flourishing Polish émigré theater in postwar London has been omitted, even though Ch. 1 opens with a manifesto-like statement: “There is no such things as one Polish culture” (16).

The overall design of the volume is ambitious and innovative, and several chapters present new, original research. But there are also chapters that recycle outdated scholarship and resort to ready-made formulas. Let me offer three examples. My first concerns Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz's now classic drama, *Powrót posła* (The Deputy's Return, 1790). It is described as

“a propagandistic comedy about [the Four-Year Parliament] portraying its procedures” and a play that “enjoyed tremendous success” when it opened in 1791 (94). Apart from the fact that *Powrót pośła*, set in a rural area, does not actually depict parliamentary proceedings, it is reductive to present the play solely as a vehicle in the service of the Four-Year Parliament. Niemcewicz’s work on this political comedy in November 1790 coincided with the publication in London, also in November 1790, of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s rebuttal to Burke, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. While Burke denounced the upheavals taking place in France and depicted revolutionists as violators of royalty and womanhood, Niemcewicz, like Wollstonecraft, declared sympathy for the French Revolution. Deemed inflammatory by many, his play proved to be a bombshell with immediate and far-reaching political repercussions. None of this contextual information appears in the volume under review, even though it aims “to theorize broader historical trends” (2).

My second example has to do with Franciszek Dionizy Kniaźnin’s *Matka Spartanka* (The Spartan Mother, 1786). Unlike Niemcewicz’s canonical drama, Kniaźnin’s play, now forgotten, gets a whole paragraph to itself. And yet, despite the editors’ commitment to recovering contributions made by women theater artists, the paragraph makes no mention that the play was commissioned by Izabela Czartoryska, that she collaborated with Kniaźnin on researching and drafting the play, that she staged it in her theater at Puławy, and that she starred in the title role. Her production became a major event, politically as well as artistically. For my third example, I turn to a subchapter on Adam Mickiewicz that introduces him as “an avid reader” of the greats such as William Shakespeare, J.W. Goethe, and Lord Byron, but fails to mention that he also immersed himself in popular French Romantic plays that were flooding European theaters and bookstores at the time (113). One of those plays, by Edmond Ludovic Auguste Cavé and Adolphe Dittmer, provided a template for Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* (Forefathers’ Eve, 1823–32).

It is almost unavoidable that a multi-authored volume that attempts to cover so much ground is bound to have its stronger and weaker sections. In the introduction, the editors announce their ambition to bring new material and new conceptualizations into view, but *A History of Polish Theatre* does not always deliver on this promise. Although it breaks with nationalist frameworks, the volume leans heavily toward highbrow theater, ignoring most of the middlebrow repertoire that has been the bread and butter of the theater in Poland and inspired some of the acknowledged masterworks.

Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă. *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires.*

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022. vii, 261 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Figures. £88.60, hard bound. £27.29, paperback.

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doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.359

Little had I imagined when I was studying Liviu Rebreanu’s novel *Ion* (1920) that three decades later a world literature scholar would join a sociologist specialized in world-systems analysis to write a timely book on what modernity meant in a small rural village in Transylvania.