

Book Reviews

Theatre Research International 48:3 doi:10.1017/S0307883323000202

Plays by Women in Ireland (1926–33): Feminist Theatres of Freedom and Resistance. Edited by Lisa Fitzpatrick and Shonagh Hill. London: Methuen Drama, 2022. Pp. vii + 254 + 6 illus. £75 Hb; £24.99 Pb.
Reviewed by Alinne Balduino P. Fernandes, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, alinne.fernandes@ufsc.br

In 2022, I designed a course to be taught at the English Postgraduate Programme of the Federal University of Santa Catarina. The course was meant to be an overview of literary works by Irish and Northern Irish women writers, from the New Woman movement onwards. I intended to use works of various literary genres but had a particular interest in finding out more about women dramatists of the early twentieth century, as most of my research draws on the works of contemporary Irish and Northern Irish women playwrights. I could find a reasonable number of short stories, poems and novels, but the plays were very scarce. As I searched for materials, to my dismay I could only find the odd play by Alice Milligan and Helen Wadell, and, of course, plenty of plays by Lady Augusta Gregory. Although still notably under-studied, Lady Gregory is undoubtedly the best-known Irish woman playwright of the early twentieth century. A few weeks after my course ended, I took notice of *Plays by Women in Ireland (1926–33)*, the book that would have filled a substantial chronological gap in my syllabus.

The book gathers five playtexts by five different Irish women playwrights who had their works staged between 1926 and 1933, by either professional or amateur theatre groups. The playwrights in question are Kate O'Brien, Margaret O'Leary, Mary Manning, Dorothy Macardle and Mary Devenport O'Neill. The playtexts provide vivid and sensitive insights into the lives of young adults living in that period; they reveal the angst, hopes and fears of a whole generation – the dire consequences of pregnancy out of wedlock, keeping a marital facade of happiness, being gay, women's desire for independence, frustrated professional desires (especially for aspiring artists), depression and suicide in a very Catholic Ireland. Not only does the anthology make accessible plays that had never been published before, but it also provides detailed information about their production and reception at the time. It is incredible material for theatre researchers, lecturers and students alike.

Besides the rich overview provided in the Introduction, each play is accompanied by a two-page contextual overview with information on the playwright, original production and context of production; an additional page with illustrations (photograph, programme cover and news clipping); and explanatory footnotes on both the usage of Irish words and

Hiberno-English, eventual handwritten insertions on the typed manuscript and cuts made for production or due to censorship. In line with Rita Felski's emblematic examination of gender and modernisms in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), the book engages in the hermeneutic movement of reconstructing the past from the point of view of the present, shedding light upon the discourses and paradigms of each play's immediate sociohistorical context. In other words, it assesses the major pressing issues of the 1920s and early 1930s in Ireland by demonstrating their political importance for Irish women's history then and now.

The historical, political and social context that provided the troubled and bloody grounds for the formation of the new Irish Free State is carefully discussed in the Introduction. Not only does it expose the legislative and material constraints under which women worked in the theatre industry of the time, but also how theatre 'was not subject to a censor in Ireland; instead, public opinion, self-censorship and the gatekeepers of cultural institutions prevailed' (p. 8). From an overview of the theatre stages and the types of plays that were selected to be staged, readers understand which theatres were more progressive, and thus more receptive to women's work and the counterculture that was developing despite the straitjacket imposed by the conservatism of the highly religious new Free State. This panorama illuminates many of the issues brought about in the plays to an audience not necessarily familiar with Irish history and the major tropes of Irish theatre. In the contextual overview section of Manning's play *Youth's the Season -?* (1931), the editors acknowledge how it exposes 'a crisis of possibility for the younger generation, while simultaneously exploring the stage as a space of resistance against normative identities in the independent State' (p. 142). I believe that this comment could very aptly refer to all plays in the anthology.

This anthology is a major contribution to the field in that it showcases the diversity and richness of works by early twentieth-century Irish women playwrights in an informed manner. In the Foreword to the pioneering *Women in Irish Drama* (2007), Marina Carr dares the reader to name the women in Irish theatre for the last century. The lack of critical attention to the women in the Irish theatre industry until the 1980s rendered their work almost non-existent. Luckily, though, part of the answer to a question that remains to be addressed is here.

Theatre Research International 48:3 doi:10.1017/S0307883323000214

Performing Silence: Women in the Group Theatre Movement in Bengal. By Trina Nileena Bannerjee. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xxv + 354. ₹1795 Hb.
Reviewed by Gargi Bharadwaj, Jindal Global University, Gbhbaradwaj@jgu.edu.in

Trina Nileena Bannerjee's *Performing Silence* stages a feminist intervention in the history of political theatre in India to recover the largely absent figure of the actress from the patriarchal history of the group theatre movement in Bengal (an offshoot of the left-aligned, anti-imperialist theatre of the Indian People's Theatre Association). While the focus of the study is the urban, educated, politically astute and creatively committed middle-class actress, the *bhadramahila*, it weaves a multi-layered narrative of how nationalist and revolutionary masculinity fashioned itself in theatre in twentieth-century India. The book illuminates how women's labour (theatrical, familial, social) in and outside the theatre remains buried in the masculinist archive, if not completely erased from it. Peering through the silence of theatre historiography, Bannerjee unearths aspects of female political imagination, agency and negotiations with power to explain the many points of tension between revolutionary ambitions of progressive cultural movements and their limitations. Her unequivocal, yet gentle, critique of political theatre's inability to accept the artistic autonomy and labour of women, despite its