

Book Reviews

Nelson Pressley. *American Playwriting and the Anti-Political Prejudice: Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Perspectives.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, ix + 185 pp, \$69.99.

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In a TV interview with Ellen DeGeneres in March 2014, President Barack Obama admitted that he regularly watches the TV series *House of Cards*, while his wife Michelle is a *Scandal* aficionado. In an almost regretful tone, he clarified that life in Washington is more boring than displayed on the screen. The two TV series referenced by Barack Obama here are among the A-listers of a plethora of contemporary TV series, films, novels, and radio shows dealing with political subjects in Washington and elsewhere. As Nelson Pressley states: “Politics has perhaps never been so culturally ingrained and, arguably, so sexy” (1). Despite the seeming omnipresence of all things political in all kinds of media, there is a conspicuous absence of popular political plays on U.S.-American stages. This observation forms the basis for Nelson Pressley’s timely and much-needed study. By using Tony Kushner’s immensely successful two-part play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1992) as a benchmark for the “revitalized potency” (1) of political playwriting, Pressley sets out to investigate why *Angels* failed to spark a revitalization of the serious political American drama. Rather than offering simplistic answers and scapegoating playwrights, who are at the bottom of the pecking order, he, in a most provocative way, recognizes “an active anti-political prejudice [...] throughout the complicated apparatus of modern theater making, from production to reception” (1). Pressley dares to articulate the unspeakable: There is something rotten in the U.S. theater industry and the playwrights, the producers, the lighting/sound/costume/set designers, the actors, and, finally, the audiences are not just silent confidants but culprits. Consequently, he sets out “to examine a poetics of political drama and the peculiarly systemic resistance to even the most plainspoken forms of theatrical speech” (1).

Apparently, such an ambitious project necessitates clearly defined parameters which Pressley explains in his programmatically entitled introduction “No Politics, Please, We’re American.” To him, individual American political playwrights and their respective works, which excludes theater collectives such as The San Francisco Mime Troupe, have to fight a number of adversaries on various

frontlines. Those fronts are historical, transnational, and, first and foremost, ideological ones. Historically, there is a long tradition of issue-driven, realistic plays in American theater. Across the Atlantic Ocean, “the sustained aggressive contemporary political theater of the British” (2), spearheaded by David Hare and funded by the state, demonstrates what political theater could achieve if only the conditions were favorable. Last but not least, Pressley sees the “demonstrable American anti-political prejudice” (2) as not only the toughest antagonist of American political playwriting but also the most momentous one. Which is not to say that there is no political theater in the U.S. at all. The reason why playwrights like Naomi Wallace, Paula Vogel, Suzan-Lori Parks, Christopher Shinn, and numerous others whose works have been produced beyond the mainstream stages are not considered by Pressley has to do with his choice of *Angels in America* as a point of reference: “Kushner’s play was recognizably realistic and mainstream, and so the focus of this project is on similar works” (3). This is, of course, a valid argument. Yet, one would have wished for better explanations than, especially in Naomi Wallace’s case, the rather old-fashioned, and not entirely correct, statement that while she admittedly ranks among the most noted practitioners, “Wallace is an expatriate based in London” (3). As a result, Pressley’s study focuses on the usual suspects, “America’s foremost dramatists” (3), i.e. Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Arthur Miller, and Wendy Wasserstein who not only have the right place of residence but also possess the presumably necessary social and cultural capital. A professional theater critic himself, Nelson Pressley’s approach is shaped by what he deals with in his day-to-day business, i.e. reception. In order to understand why particularly politically-themed works are judged negatively by the majority of his peers, one of his objectives is to identify “discernible patterns in American criticism and reception” (4) which inhibit the proliferation of such plays.

Despite its quite simple title “Politics,” the first chapter of Pressley’s monograph is a tour de force of defining the strange beast that is political theater. This chapter is particularly important for the interested reader as writers before Pressley have tried to tackle this definitional problem and, most of the times, fell short of both their own promises and the readers’ expectations. Well aware of these shortcomings, Pressley readily admits the challenging nature of his endeavor as there is no consensus on what might be seen as ‘the political’ in U.S. drama. Pressley diagnoses a field in crisis over its own meaning and legitimacy: “The result is a field lacking serious discourse about political writing, and a field in crisis regarding theatrical language for dramatists taking aim at what Arthur Miller all but patented in this country as ‘the social’” (6). To Pressley, however, this is a matter of perspective and he spends the remainder of the first chapter unearthing the existing writing and pinpointing the “powerful ghosts” (8) which

have haunted American political theater since its early days. Informed by Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory, Marvin Carlson's idea of the "haunted stage," and Diana Taylor's concept of the archive and the repertoire, Pressley contemplates scholarly writings and American playwrights to be able to come up with a "post-*Angels* definition [...] of American 'political' theater" (12). In his view, there is a strange paradox at work since "persuasive claims continue to be made by critics and scholars for the unique qualities of the stage and its particular ripeness for airing matters of civic concerns" (13), while "pains are taken on the contemporary American stage to avoid direct political subjects" (14). While the long shadow of Brecht's decidedly non-naturalistic poetics of political theater practice cannot be denied, American playwrights have always favored realistic plays over experimental ones:

The vernacular/realistic approach was not and is not the only valid approach to political theater (or any kind of theater) in the United States. But its vigor in the 1930s established a popular and accessible political drama that would seem to have a better chance than most at being reinvigorated by new generations of writers and ratified by contemporary producers and audiences, if for no other reason than that realism continues to be the dominant mode on stages across the country. (20)

Even though Pressley offers a precise and informed account of the state of research, he, unfortunately, shies away from providing his own definition of political theater.

Since Pressley is primarily concerned with political playwriting rather than political theater, it is only logical that the entire second chapter is spent on the role of the political playwright. In "The Case of Kushner," Nelson Pressley identifies a tradition of quasi-canonization of playwrights in the U.S. as "idealistic crusaders [...], as activist[s] [...], as social critic[s]" (25), which, according to Pressley, is a burden rather than a blessing. Similar to his granting *Angels* an outstanding role in the recent history of American political theater, he conceives of its author as a "playwright provocateur [...] sui generis" (35). Using Kushner's lesser known play *Slavs!* to explain the dramatist's poetics of politics, he takes aim at what he thinks is really at stake in contemporary U.S. culture: political literacy. He argues that while "*Angels* [...] had established a new sort of interpretive community conversant with Kushner's uniquely prolix, pragmatic-theoretical strain of theatrical language" (26), *Slavs!* has been met with rather mixed reviews. He wonders why *Slavs!* could not pick up on *Angels'* success "despite its comparatively softer demands on audiences and producers in terms of time and resources, and its similar ease of accessibility" (32). To Pressley, it is essentially a matter of political vocabulary (or the lack thereof) and the aversion to "direct, realist-based, unapologetic social engagement" (33) on stage.

Pressley's third chapter reflects on the question of who is to be blamed for this negative reception of topical American theater and the prevailing anti-political prejudice. To him, articulating an anti-political theatrical stance has become a "habitus" (38) in Bourdieu's sense of the word. Politically-oriented works have become anathematic to a profit-oriented industry and audiences not versed in the necessary theatrical language. To Pressley, the reasons are to be found in a mixture of popular discourse, an anti-Aristotelian imperative, and the dominance of performance over the written script. Pressley demonstrates how negative reviews by *The New York Times* can be detrimental to the cultural presence of political plays. Yet, it is not only the praxis of negative journalistic reviewing that has led to the virtual non-presence of political plays on American stages. Academic critics and scholars have frequently eyed realistic, topical plays with suspicion. Realism, it seems, still bears the stigma of reproducing dominant structures and reifying prevailing hegemonies. This is, of course, not a new, let alone original, argument made by Pressley. However, he convincingly shows how the legacy of Brecht and Boal continues to provide a template for what literary scholars deem acceptable for theoretical scrutiny: the "nonbourgeois" (37), anti-Aristotelian, anti-realistic, experimental (political) play. Political playwrights have not only come under fire for their alleged predilection for the realistic mode, their very existence is threatened by the steadily growing number of performances which not only foreground the actor, the audience, and the moment, but which do so without dramatic writing. The playwright's role as public intellectual or even theatrical agent is thus rendered obsolete. Those playwrights who still want to write and produce political works are stuck in a seemingly insoluble dilemma: they are "blamed for not writing what the culture, loudly, consistently, and from multiple vantage points, urges them not to write" (70).

Chapter four not only compares and contrasts the reception and poetics of political playwriting in the US and in the UK, but it offers a blueprint for "a contemporary ecology rich with plays and playwrights confidently dealing with politics" (72). Zooming in on David Hare as "*the exemplar* [...] of the political tradition in Britain" (72), Pressley meticulously traces the playwright's prolific professional life from the mid-1970s to the present day. A public persona like Kushner, Hare has frequently addressed deplorable states of affairs and pressing issues of the day. Yet, throughout his career, Hare has enjoyed a national habitus almost diametrically opposed to the one cultivated in the U.S.: "the chain of production and reception, from writer through theater critic and audience, is positive, not forbidding or discouraging of the political" (71). These favorable conditions have not only led to a greater openness with regard to formal experiments (including realistic plays), but also to the genesis of a unique genre: the state-of-the-nation play, which is hardly to be found in the U.S.-American context.

“American Shenanigans” and “Wendy Wasserstein’s Washington,” the following two chapters of Pressley’s study, offer in-depth readings of post-*Angels* plays by Sam Shepard, David Mamet, and Wendy Wasserstein, respectively. According to Pressley, Shepard’s contemporaneous plays *States of Shock* (1991) and *The God of Hell* (2004) are characterized by caricature, broad slapstick and the infantilization of characters. Driven by political rage, the playwright forfeits the chance of a critical engagement with political issues. Consequently, the plays reveal “a disturbingly unsophisticated stage language and an oversimplified dramatization of policy, politicians, and events” (103). Shepard and David Mamet, the liberal-turned-conservative playwright, are authors of what Pressley terms “shenanigan plays” (107), i.e. poor imitations of the serious political play. When it comes to Mamet, Pressley thinly veils his disdain for the newly converted conservative envoy: “Mamet has no theatrical language/dramatic form available other than that of high-energy farce, larded with caricature, punch lines, and hijinks” (107). While both *Romance* (2005) and *November* (2008) are indeed political plays as they dramatize the nation and the government, they fail in displaying “a feasible stage language for investigating and dramatizing immediate social/political matters” (113).

For much of her short-lived career, Wendy Wasserstein, the only female playwright studied in detail by Pressley, had to fight unjust wars. Her formally traditional plays as well as her critique of second- and third-wave feminism made her the target of many theater critics and academics, feminist or not. While her signature play *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988) has been the subject of much scholarly discussion and controversy, particularly with regard to its unabashed use of the realistic mode and the alleged passivity of the protagonist Heidi Holland, it is still highly popular. By contrast, *An American Daughter* (1997), her “most directly political work” (132), flopped with critics for reasons similar to the ones brought up against *The Heidi Chronicles*. For Pressley, this has to do with characters (“mockable figures”; 138), form (“comedy of manners”; 134), plot, and, first and foremost, plausibility: “The problem of plausibly representing political reality is a far more intractable issue for *An American Daughter* than claims about the shackles of realistic form” (138).

The discussion of realism, the realistic form, and the crisis of representation are the subjects of Pressley’s last chapter, “Erasing the Playwright.” Here, the author once again challenges the “forbidding horizon of expectations” (143) and the detrimental effects it has on American political playwriting. In Pressley’s eyes, playwrights themselves are actively contributing to their annihilation by repeatedly questioning the influence and political license of the theater. What is more, the boom of documentary works in the post-*Angels* age with its “centrality of the ‘document’” (150) and its preference of facts over fiction has led to the virtual

obsolescence of the political playwright. If one is to believe Pressley, the future of American political playwriting is indeed bleak: “The prejudice in the United States is not anti-theatrical but anti-political” (166). If the artist wants to remain independent, free, creative, and unruly instead of a mere supplier catering to the demands of the culture industry, s/he has to be aware of the obstacles this entails. Ultimately, it is a choice between the bright spotlight and the shadow.