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# Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty

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no definition of tragedy “has ever worked” that goes beyond “very sad” (3). He turns the phrase over and over like a multifaceted but extremely dull stone. “Very sad” doesn’t work either, as “‘tragic’ is a strong word . . . whereas ‘sad’ is embarrassingly feeble” (2). This longish early discussion clears the way for deeper insights later but does not match the power of *Sweet Violence* as a whole. There is much fuss over how tragedy is impossible to define, which, given the arbitrariness of the sign and all, is a bit of a dead horse to begin with. Yet so obvious a distinction as between adjective and noun is never drawn. One can be Delphic without being an oracle, and something can be tragic without being a tragedy. Just stating this would put an end to God knows how many disputes over whether this or that qualifies as tragedy.

Eagleton’s exploitation of the slipperiness of language to seek the universal in the diverse is both revelatory and disingenuous. He rejects trendy theoretical destabilizations, then writes 300 pages about a term he says is indefinable. The dismissal of theories that are not explicitly contingent is too easy, and he can approve others, since, definition being fluid, one might as well. That same fluidity invites the frequent use of supposedly self-evident counterexamples as an argumentative technique. For instance, Northrop Frye’s notion of tragedy as “an epiphany of law” is invalid because “it does not apply, for example, to *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* or *The Cherry Orchard*” (107). Given that the term is indefinable, on what basis are these works tragedies? In fairness, Eagleton hedges his own theorizations in the same way. After making a compelling argument for tragedy as a convergence of the Lacanian categories of symbolic, imaginary, and Real, he sighs that “it is of no particular relevance to *Titus Andronicus*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Cherry Orchard*” (165). *The Cherry Orchard*, a counterexample more than once, is especially problematic, as its author regarded it as a comedy—perhaps because it is filled with characters that act as if every little “very sad” thing that happens is a tragedy.

Tragedy *does* mean more than “very sad.” Semiosis has done that for us over the centuries, and I left *Sweet Violence* wishing that Eagleton had been a little more definitive. Raymond Williams, of whom Eagleton generally approves, argues in *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford University Press, 1966) that “where suffering is felt, where it is taken into the person of another, we are clearly within the possible dimensions of tragedy” (47). This is not a totalizing definition, but a parameter that both “works” and goes beyond “very sad.” Eagleton’s best insights might have been based on this simple

formulation, and he finds in the dual function of the scapegoat a mythic equivalent that embodies both physical suffering and social critique.

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**AGITATED STATES: PERFORMANCE IN THE AMERICAN THEATER OF CRUELTY.** By Anthony Kubiak. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002; pp. xi + 239. \$55.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

In a post-9/11 America, when we seem more disposed than ever before to explain our woes by recourse to a variety of big, bad Others, it is particularly meaningful that Anthony Kubiak locates our central problem within our own borders. In order to understand America, Kubiak argues that what we need to explain is why children in our country shoot other children. This is not an entirely original proposition; recall, for example, Michael Moore’s recent documentary *Bowling for Columbine*. But Kubiak’s answer is original. The reason children shoot other children in our country is not the availability of guns, nor international terrorism, nor even the effects of the media on contemporary culture. Our states are agitated because they repudiate their own theatricality—and they always have.

*Agitated States* is a satisfying companion to Kubiak’s earlier work, *Stages of Terror*. There, he elucidated violence as the ground of performance and of culture itself, throughout the Western tradition. Here, he reads the American context somewhat differently, arguing that it is our refusal of theatre that leads to a uniquely American brand of violence.

Kubiak begins his argument by pointing out a symptom of America’s repudiation of theatricality within the theatre itself. Our theatre, he asserts, lacks a tradition that “questions, critiques, the hidden and blatant theatricalities of culture in the manner of Brecht, Beckett, Pirandello, or, more pointedly . . . Artaud” (13). It is to the advantage of Kubiak and his readers that his book does not try to defend this assertion—some of the very playwrights Kubiak later reads make compelling counterexamples—but proceeds to a compelling reading of blindness to theatre in American theatrical and cultural history.

Kubiak's study makes two essential contributions to contemporary theatrical thought, one theoretical and one historiographic. The first gets off to a somewhat shaky start. I am not convinced that his readings of Lacan and Artaud are particularly useful to his theoretical project. Kubiak uses Lacan to preserve a vaguely articulated notion of the Real, and Artaud for apparently contradictory purposes, aligning him now with the theoretically savvy Brecht, now with the theoretically bereft Puritans. What is truly valuable, however, is Kubiak's own smart and refreshingly skeptical critique of high theoretical chic. Kubiak's American history begins with the Puritans who, though absolutely repudiating the theatre as an institution, were, nonetheless, in their search for the authentic and their deep anxiety over appearances, always acting. With this example, as with subsequent ones, Kubiak deftly recovers the insights of performance studies for the theatrical, arguing eloquently against Judith Butler and others that theatre is the more encompassing term. By relegating theatre to a subcategory of performance, Kubiak argues, we lose sight of "the very site in which performance and performativity arises and is problematized. . . . As theatre seemingly disappears, we lose focus—we lose, in a sense, our critical faculties" (157–58). While others such as Jill Dolan have called for a recovery of performance to theatre studies, none have so clearly demonstrated its need and utility.

Along the way, Kubiak offers broad yet concise readings of performance theories about, among other things, blackface minstrelsy and realism, purportedly oppressive theatrical traditions that he argues have never, at least as they are traditionally understood, existed. He also deconstructs the notion that deconstructed selfhood is inherently empowering via a discussion of multiple personality disorder and its role in cultural understandings of the theatrical.

The second contribution of Kubiak's study is the history itself. Kubiak reads historical moments such as the 1801 Enthusiastic performances at Cane Ridge, Kentucky—arguably the inauguration of theatrical performance in America—and cultural moments such as the one giving rise to the eighteenth-century dramatic text *The Contrast*. In examining the nineteenth century, he makes a surprising move to fiction, arguing that this genre's understanding of the theatrical outstrips theatre's misapprehension of itself during the same period. His reading of Washington Irving's wildly popular story *Rip Van Winkle*, adapted for the theatre by Joseph Jefferson, elucidates the connection between America's historical amnesia and its search for the

nontheatrical authentic. Indeed, through Kubiak's analysis, *Rip* becomes a trope for American history itself, the hole at the center of our theatricality that enables us to forget/become who we are.

Finally, in three chapters on contemporary American theatre, Kubiak offers incisive readings of plays by O'Neill, Albee, Shepard, Kushner, and Parks. Some of these readings are so deft as to seriously challenge Kubiak's own thesis that American theatre forgets itself. In his reading of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, for example, Kubiak writes that George and Martha's "child," "born within the very space of truth/illusion and the limen of that space, now takes center stage" (147). If Kubiak can be aware of such rips, presumably other readers/viewers can and indeed are meant to be. But just because you're paranoid doesn't mean people aren't out to get you; being reminded that you have inherited a history of amnesia or blindness doesn't necessarily enable you to remember or see.

Some of the most powerful moments in *Agitated States* are framed as footnotes. Kubiak offers a brilliant reading of the scene of Lincoln's assassination and later a breathtaking elaboration of this moment as an optic onto contemporary presidential history. Here, as much as (though differently than) in the book's overall argument, Kubiak wakes us up to the persistence with which we have pretended that we don't have a history and, at the same time, pretended that we are absolutely and authentically real. I am as thankful for these isolated moments as I am for the book's sweep, ambition, and sensitivity.

*Agitated States* urges us not to remember who we are, but to wake up to it for the first time. Virtual violence is not the problem; real violence is. We desperately need to get real. And we can only do this, Kubiak persuasively argues, if we dare to truly understand our American theatre.

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**THE THEATRES OF MOLIÈRE.** By Gerry McCarthy. London: Routledge, 2002; pp. xvii + 238. \$95.00 cloth, \$30.95 paper.

Some time in the middle of the twentieth century, a sea change occurred in Molière studies. Scholars woke up to the fact that Molière was an actor. Decades of literary criticism that had ignored