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'Death of a Salesman' and 'The Crucible'

S. Anne Stascavage
University of Southern Mississippi

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): 'Death of a Salesman' and 'The Crucible' by Bernard F. Dukore; 'The Birthday Party' and 'The Caretaker' by Ronald Knowles; 'Murder in the Cathedral' and 'The Cocktail Party' by William Tydeman

Review by: S. Anne Stascavage

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'*Death of a Salesman*' and '*The Crucible*'. By BERNARD F. DUKORE. (Text and Performance) Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education. 1989. 108 pp. £5.95.

'*The Birthday Party*' and '*The Caretaker*'. By RONALD KNOWLES. (Text and Performance) Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education. 1989. 92 pp. £5.95.

'*Murder in the Cathedral*' and '*The Cocktail Party*'. By WILLIAM TYDEMAN. (Text and Performance) Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education. 1988. 98 pp. £5.95.

As General Editor Michael Scott points out in his preface to the Text and Performance series, literary critics and theatre directors have, in recent years, come to 'recognize the significance of each other's work and acknowledge their growing awareness of interdependence'. One result of this interdependence is the three books under consideration in this review. Each volume is divided into two sections: Part I analyses the text of the plays and summarizes major critical studies written about them; Part II contrasts and compares landmark productions and demonstrates the range of interpretation and emphasis brought to bear on the text when it is realized on stage. Each volume is also supplemented by a selective reading list and photographs from major productions.

Bernard F. Dukore notes that Arthur Miller 'writes not of mythological figures but of his own countrymen, whose personal and social loss of meaning relates to disappointment in an American dream'. Professor Dukore's study of *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* is notable for its clear organization and its value as a bibliographic resource. Textual analysis is divided into the areas of language, characters, and dramatic structure. In addition, historical and sociological background is covered under subheadings unique to each play; *Death of a Salesman* has sections titled 'What Happened When' and 'American Dreams, America, Americans', while *The Crucible* has sections on 'Witch Hunts' and 'Authority and the Individual'. The critical discussion of each text concludes with a survey of the critical arguments surrounding the plays' relationship to Aristotelian tragedy and Arthur Miller's role in the development of modern tragedy.

Performance discussion regarding *Death of a Salesman* focuses primarily on 'the two most significant productions': the 1949 Broadway première, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Lee J. Cobb, and the 1984 Broadway revival, directed by Michael Rudman and starring Dustin Hoffman. The three productions emphasized for *The Crucible* are the 1958 Broadway première directed by Jed Harris, the 1965 Laurence Olivier production at the Old Vic, and Bill Bryden's 1980 production at the Cottesloe Theatre. Direction, scenery and lighting, and acting are examined for each production, and relevant comments from theatre reviews are included.

A biographical/critical sketch of Harold Pinter's development as a playwright begins Ronald Knowles's study of *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*. Entitled 'Life and Art', this section highlights 'the general historical circumstances and the particular milieu of Harold Pinter's early life' which 'clearly contributed to the character of his singular artistry'. The last two sections chronologically link the two plays under discussion to others to illustrate the early periods of Pinter's career. Although Mr Knowles's work does not aspire to the bibliographic essay that Professor Dukore presents, his use of quotations from plays, lectures, interviews, and autobiographical works of Pinter are used to develop a sense of the Pinter style and its relationship to other dramatic art forms of the period.

The performance section covers seven productions of *The Birthday Party* and six of *The Caretaker*, arranged by the portrayal of each character. While this arrangement points clearly to the various interpretations inherent in each character, it fails to

reveal the overall effect of each individual production, and so many stagings are covered that some confusion mars the purpose of the book.

William Tydeman's study of *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party* traces the unlikely development 'by a predominantly cerebral route' of T. S. Eliot into a playwright as well as his struggle to revitalize verse drama on the modern stage. In five sections on doctrine, ritual, realism, personality, and poetry, Professor Tydeman shows how Eliot's rigid esoteric aim 'to expose the deeper, more permanent aspects of life by releasing drama from the strangle hold of the material, the concrete and the everyday in order to reassert its ancient right to bring to our consciousness the immaterial, the intangible and the everlasting' accommodated the palates of contemporary theatre-going audiences.

By limiting the scope of the performance discussion (three productions of *Murder in the Cathedral* and three productions of *The Cocktail Party*), Tydeman allows for a thorough examination of the stagings. Eliot's genesis as a playwright is linked to the creation of the Canterbury Festival of Music and Drama, and a lengthy discussion on the development of *Murder in the Cathedral* on the Canterbury stage initiates the performance section. Part II is then divided into sections according to the roles played by the author, the directors, the players, and the critics.

Forthcoming volumes in this Text and Performance Series promise to be invaluable to every student of the dramatic arts.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

S. ANNE STASCavage

Freud and Nabokov. By GEOFFREY GREEN. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press. 1988. x + 128 pp. £15.15.

Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures. By LEONA TOKER. Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press. 1989. xiv + 243 pp. \$30.25.

With all talk of an 'escape into aesthetics' now transferred from Nabokov to his narrators, few 'revisionist' interpreters find it more than temporarily profitable to take on trust the novelist's various essays in self-definition, especially in interviews and prefaces. In the past decade the tide of opinion has moved towards the view forcefully expressed by the philosopher Richard Rorty in his 'Nabokov on Cruelty' (collected in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989)): '[Nabokov's] best novels' — and by implication the moments that matter most in the others — 'are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas.' In *Freud and Nabokov* Geoffrey Green registers his own inability to believe Nabokov's highly specific, but no less persistent, contempt for the 'Viennese witch-doctor', without, however, gravitating towards Rorty's essentially Bloomian notion that 'resentment of the precursor' might account for it. Nothing so questionable, but at the same time nothing so challenging, emerges from Professor Green's opening gambits; having stated that 'at the same time as I affirm Freud, I assert the unique importance of Nabokov', he immediately co-opts Borges and Beckett, thereby rendering Nabokov correspondingly less 'unique', to form 'a triad that has changed the way we think about literature — and about life'. Borges and Beckett are not subsequently invoked, but the shift of focus here is of a piece with Professor Green's decision to permit neither Freud nor Nabokov to occupy the limelight for very long, and to write in sections (twenty of them) rather than real chapters. His method compartmentalizes what he seeks to 'affirm' and 'assert', at best adducing a few promising parallels, at worst proceeding as if it does not really matter whether (or where) they can ever be said to meet. The account of Nabokov's revision of his initially positive response to Stanley Kubrick's film of *Lolita* — an interesting topic adequately handled — contains only the briefest of references to *The Ego and the Id*; and Freud