

**Ellen Redling, and Peter Paul Schnierer, eds.
Non-Standard Forms of Contemporary Drama and Theatre. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher, 2008. 257 pp.**

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The present book is volume fifteen appearing in the series “Contemporary Drama in English” (general editor: Martin Middeke), for which papers from the sixteenth annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English have been selected. It is a society during the history of which volunteering members have organized well-attended and professionally memorable conferences at respective universities across the German-speaking countries every year. Appropriately, according to the established practice of the society these meetings always host experts of drama and theatre from Britain and/or Ireland whose discussions of aspects of the field provide the program with the insiders’ points of view. Beside the works of some English scholars the present volume naturally includes contributions from Germany, from one or two other European countries and from the United States, offering an attractive range of approaches and opinions.

The phrase “non-standard forms” in the title of the book sounds like a broad umbrella term yet one that at the same time provokes questions: can we make generalizations about what is so diverse and elusive in its manifestations? What standard is kept in mind, measured against which forms of contemporary drama in English prove to be markedly different, deserving the attribute “non-standard”? John Bull’s (University of Reading) article “Spectacular Reconstruction: Innovation and Appropriation,” coming as first in the book, posits a continuity between brand new phenomena and the mainstream theatre world. Not surprisingly, in order to deal with the nature of “innovation” in the field the author looks back to the late nineteenth-century, as far as the shocking première of *Ubu Roi* in 1896, to compare the responses it elicited then (for instance from W. B. Yeats) and later, confirming his earlier formed idea that “yesterday’s avant-garde is tomorrow’s mainstream” (19). Following the author’s train of thought, it seems that like “tradition” in T. S. Eliot’s essay, the mainstream, in fact, perpetuates itself by absorbing what it needs from the “individual talent” and ends up becoming enriched by the tactics so shockingly new at first sight.

The tone having been set by Bull, there follow some essays which look at what might come under the heading “non-standard,” analyzing highly experimental plays like Martin Crimp’s 2005 *Fewer Emergencies* or theatrical ventures that take non-dramatic material as their springboard. Vicky Angelaki (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) regards the play by Crimp as “subtractive” in its form, because the author removes elements from it “that have come to be taken for granted in the theatre.” In her analysis Angelaki points out that the striking formal innovations of *Fewer Emergencies* all but function to support a strong political topicality and

persistent concern with current affairs. With its deviance from the norm represented by the realism of Howard Brenton, David Edgar or David Hare, this play intervenes in what is widely considered to be the tradition of political or engaged theatre in Britain (32). Christina Wald's (University of Augsburg) contribution addresses the ways in which the leading British performance group Forced Entertainment adapted a museum exhibit for the stage, thus creating a characteristic example of postdramatic theatre. The exhibit, Sophie Calle's *Exquisite Pain* itself is unique, offering the visualization of segments of a painful narrative about a traumatic experience. Transmitting this work of art to the stage gave voice to the stories and involved the audience by exposing them to "the length and slow development of each narration" and forcing them to discover the changes which signal steps in the process of healing (85).

The work of indisputably non-mainstream companies like The Wooster Group is also discussed in the book. Johan Callens (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) writes that The Wooster Group uses "paradoxical formal operations" to create postmodern versions of canonical dramatic texts (100) without their practices ever "amount[ing] to a set or authoritative model" (110). Another essay, Mark Berninger's (University of Mainz) "A Fantasy Epic as a Theatrical Event—*His Dark Materials* at the National Theatre," defines non-standard form in terms of its difference from both conventional and avant-garde drama and explores a work based on "a text that was not originally written for the theatre and thus defies dramatic standards concerning length, structure, and content" (155). The number of such productions having increased on the stages of the world, it is justly laudable that a scholar engages in unraveling the phenomenon if not actually theorizing it.

Other essays in the volume revisit well-known authors who have exported innovative forms into mainstream theatre. D. Keith Peacock (University of Hull) offers a fresh approach to Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* and *The Skriker* from the 1990s by emphasizing the presence of visual and physical theatricality in them. Connecting these pieces with surrealism and Artaud's ideas, Peacock claims that *The Skriker* has "moments of visual and verbal chaos" created in it, "intend[ing] to tap into the audience's psychological insecurities . . . and challenge its perception of the ecological state of the contemporary world" (122). Obviously, Churchill seeks to subvert form in correspondence with the avant-garde tradition whereas the play depicts the unspeakable terror at the heart of the postmodern experience by deconstructing "surface reality rather than interpret it" (126). The master of postmodern theatre in England, Tom Stoppard features in the collection on account of his trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), which Holger Südkamp (University of Düsseldorf) looks at from the point of view of the structure of its parts in relation to the impression made by the whole. A mixture of documentary material and fictional elements, according to the critic, *The Coast of Utopia* sets the conventional and the non-standard form into creative play resulting in a dramatic work with a "well-made macrostructure [standing] in contrast to the three individual microstructures of each play" (223).

Graham Saunders (University of Reading) has the “last word” in the volume with his “The Persistence of the ‘Well-Made Play’ in British Theatre of the 1990s.” The paper represents a comprehensive view of the prevailing subject of the book and manages to convince the reader that although superseded from time to time and with some strength by the “in-yer-face theatre,” the well-made play has remained “remarkably resilient” and basically unshaken on the British stage (228). It seems to be a phenomenon that keeps on returning: there must be some mysterious need for it in the way there is for Philip Larkin’s church and its hidden meanings. One feels tempted to conclude that it is the ongoing, unpredictable yet subtle co-existence of the established and the provoking which has kept the art of drama and theatre criticism so much alive and kicking, as is demonstrated by the present book. All in all, the 2008 CDE volume provokes questions and stimulates further research, thanks to the expertise and intriguing scope of analysis chosen by its international group of contributors.