UNDERSTUDIES: Theatre and Sexual Politics Michelene Wandor Eyre Methuen
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Understudies is published as one of the Methuen Theatrefile series on recent developments in theatre. As such it is brief, but nevertheless useful as a summary of developments in feminist and gay theatre over the last decade. In the book Michelene Wandor discusses gender representations and stereotyping in drama as well as the position of women workers in the professional theatre. Not surprisingly, through extracts from her interviews with individual theatre workers and through discussion of the theatre tradition, we discover that women have done pretty badly on both counts. The body of the book is, in fact, an account of attempts — largely within 'alternative' theatre — to confront both of these issues, often through work in women-only companies, and always through in some way subverting traditional stereotypes and expectations.

On the whole the book is informative, provocative and refreshing in its approach, especially in the chapter on Radical Plays before 1968:

The new class content of these plays was one of their most striking features, along with the development of a new social realism — the so-called 'kitchen-sink' school of theatre. This was actually a misnomer, with only a partial symbolic meaning; representing a move from the upper-middle-class drawing room to the working-class settings of urban England, *it very rarely turned its gaze on the woman who might have been at the putative kitchen sink* (p.73 — my emphasis).

But Michelene Wandor, with the benefit of feminist hindsight, does look at examples of such plays and the attitudes of women expressed within them. Thus, for once, we focus on Alison's position within *Look Back in Anger* rather than the conventional critic's more-or-less exclusive concern with Jimmy Porter, his anger and insecurities:

Osborne's treatment of Alison is not entirely unsympathetic; but her structural function in the play is as a punchbag for Jimmy's discontent. When she leaves him we stay with Jimmy, rather than following her. She is thus not allowed space to develop as a character in her own right . . . (p.74).

However, the selection of four post-war playwrights (Osborne, Delaney, Jellicoe and Wesker) for discussion leads me to one of my principal reservations about the book, which is that it largely discusses developments in theatre through reference to a few specific individuals. Clearly, the basis for developing an understanding of sexual politics lies in the sharing of personal experiences. Equally clearly, anecdotes about specific experiences — such as the rejection of Pam Gems' play, *Queen Christina*, by the Royal Court directors partly because they thought it would appeal more to women in the audience, a criterion never applied in reverse (e.g. Storey's *The Changing Room*) — are potent illustrations of the problems we face. But Michelene Wandor largely approaches these questions through the experiences of well-known (at any rate within the profession) theatre workers and, in fact, structures the chapters on theatre writing in terms of the work of individual playwrights. Thus the chapter on women writers is on Pam Gems, Caryl Churchill, and 'other women playwrights'. This, it seems, reinforces the emphasis on 'stars' and the cult of personalities which features throughout the commercial entertainment world and which, I feel, as feminists we might wish to question. Of course, if the work of individual theatre workers (playwrights or others) is under discussion then their names are relevant, but in terms of the book's structure, an emphasis on themes rather than individuals might have contributed towards affirming a focus on issues rather than personalities.

My other reservations both stem from questions about the nature of male dominance in theatre as an institution. The book is about theatre and *sexual politics* and thus takes on board the position of gay men as well as all women theatre workers. Michelene Wandor notes that theatre has always offered a 'refuge' for gay men. She also notes the dominance of men in theatre and the relative lack of women working in positions of authority and artistic responsibility (with a few notable exceptions such as Joan Littlewood). But she does not explore the relationship between these two features of theatre. Yet, I would suggest, the very fact that theatre welcomes gay men is itself a factor in the exclusion of women. In theatre, as in many fields, *who* you know rather than what you know is of paramount importance. In some theatres (such as the Royal Court, London, in the early seventies) there is a strongly established male gay social structure. Whilst heterosexual men may succeed in getting themselves included within this structure, women are on the whole excluded. In terms of sexuality this exclusion seems perfectly acceptable, but one of the effects of such exclusion from social circles is that we are absent from occasions when ideas may be up for discussion and potential work contacts established. Thus one effect of theatre offering a refuge for gay men has been to reinforce the limits on the influence of women theatre workers.

Another weakness lies in the London-centredness of the book. Michelene Wandor does offer a token apology for concentrating on the work most familiar to her, which means 'work done in London mainly by white theatre workers' in alternative rather than mainstream theatre. Fair enough that, given the brevity of the Theatrefile books (this one, only eight-eight pages), some work is inevitably excluded. But, as so often, it is work in the regions which is largely ignored. Aside from discussion of *Red Ladder*, one of the earliest socialist theatre companies which in fact moved north from London to Leeds, discussion is focussed on women working together in London-based companies which exclude men or which have men in the minority. Once again, metropolitan privilege is implicitly taken for granted. Out of London there is usually only *one* state subsidised touring company in any area. Opportunities for setting up women-only companies that are adequately funded are limited. Thus, in the regions, 'mixed' companies are the norm, and the messages carried within their work (roles played by women performers, presence of women technicians, explicit content of the play, and so on) are of crucial importance to the consideration of the impact of feminism on theatre nation-wide, especially since these companies may play to audiences which the London-based, women-only companies are less likely to reach. Furthermore, consideration of a variety of touring companies might have led Michelene Wandor to question the limits of feminist influence on so-called radical male theatre workers, not only in relation to contemporary male playwrights (which she does do briefly, and largely through discussion of David Hare's idiosyncratic attitudes to women), but also in relation to the institutional structures and attitudes still apparent in the work of some community — or even so-called socialist — theatre companies.

Reservations apart, there is much of interest, especially the documentation of developments in feminist theatre which must be of particular use to readers less familiar with what has been going on in London over the past few years. Theatrefile style, there is no further reading list, which is especially unfortunate since any previous discussion of theatre and sexual politics is largely tucked away in article-form in various theatre or feminist periodicals, or as sections of specific books on alternative theatre.

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