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REFERENCES


1 While the role of violence in the works of male American playwrights has been widely explored, most notably perhaps in the works of Sam Shepard, the notion of violence against women in plays by female American playwrights has hitherto attracted too little attention. This remarkable volume remedies this lacuna, focusing on selected women playwrights from the past three decades. As such, it expands critical debates about the canon of contemporary feminist theater in the United States. In an astute reconfiguration of scholarly conventions, this book, authored by female scholars, is a cross between an edited collection (as the cover suggests) and a co-authored volume. The various critical voices merge so efficiently that this anthology could well be written by a collective sharing the sense of “female bonding” so often detected in the plays discussed here.

2 As the two editors, Noelia Hernando-Real and Barbara Ozieblo, argue in their introductory chapter, “this volume attempts to chart the ways in which American women dramatists have reflected the changing attitudes and the ever-more sophisticated techniques of portrayal of the reactions to suffering caused by both domestic and social violence at home and abroad” (2). In their feminist approach, the editors/authors do not only concentrate on established playwrights. They also consider a number of understudied women American artists. Recent writers such as Margaret Edson, Cherrie
Moraga, Lynn Nottage, Theresa Rebeck, Sara Ruhl, Heather McDonald, Julia Cho, Rebecca Gilman, Hether Raffo and Paula Vogel have devised plays in which women move beyond victimhood in their efforts to overcome their traumas. As the editors/authors show, these women playwrights often tweak conventional stage realism to avoid the gaze of male surveillance. Thus, they resort to Brechtian techniques and to Boalian theatre of protest devices in order to convey their feminist views.

The various chapters of this volume examine women playwrights’ treatment of gender violence from different perspectives. In Chapter 1, “Violence against Women: Forms and Responses” Marta Fernández-Morales, Inmaculada Pineda-Hernández, Miriam López-Rodríguez, and Barbara Ozieblo join forces to provide historical information related to the oppression of women in contemporary U.S. society. The authors understand “violence” in the broadest sense, as “inflicted by men, whether as individuals or as representatives of a patriarchal, hierarchical state or institution wielding power” (19). “Medicine, politics, universities, the culture, and the media,” they argue, “are all still controlled by a male gaze that privileges the male sex over and above all those who do not conform to its requirements” (19-20). “Gender violence” is a phrase coined by a new wave of feminism in the nineties, thus “incorporating the gender variable into the study of this global form of patriarchal subjection” (23). The chapter concludes with a note about medical discourse, from which the female perspective is excluded by a belief in male-constructed “objective truth” (25).

In Chapter 2, “American Women Playwrights and Violence against Women,” Noelia Hernando-Real and Barbara Ozieblo discuss how contemporary feminist theater in the U.S has unsettled the male-oriented paradigm of the well-made play. Like Elin Diamond, they argue that “the conventions of realism can be broken as part of a feminist strategy that aims to dismantle the male gaze” (37). This is a device of subversion that Elin Diamond calls “mimesis-mimicry.” In the ensuing chapters, concrete examples of this revisionist stance towards stage realism are provided.

In Chapter 3, “My Home, My Battleground: The Deconstruction of the American Family,” Noelia Hernando-Real examines gender violence within the sacrosanct American institution of the family, offering close-reading analyses of Marsha Norman’s ‘night Mother , Paula Vogel’s Hot ‘n Throbbing and Maria Irene Fornes’s Mud and The Conduct of Life. Her comparative perspective shows how “the family can be a domesticating device that aims to silence the rebellious woman” (60). Female characters, these plays suggest, must refuse to be victims if they wish to become independent individuals.

In Chapter 4, “The Role of Female Bonding on the Stage of Violence,” María Dolores Narbona-Carrión describes how female bonding transcends victimization in Lynn Nottage’s Poof! and Ruined and Heather McDonald’s Dream of a Common Language. In Chapter 5, “A Stalker, a Serial Killer, and the Women Who Survived Them: Psychological Abuse as a Form of Gender Violence,” Miriam López-Rodríguez focuses on portrayals of women who have suffered psychological abuse in Rebecca Gilman’s Boy Gets Girl and Julia Cho’s BFE. The author of this chapter demonstrates how Gilman and Cho manage to “make their audiences aware of the flaws of their political, legal, and social systems” (95).

In Chapter 6, “The New Breast Cancer (Im)patient: Female Revolt against Biomedical Violence in US Drama,” Marta Fernández-Morales considers how contemporary women playwrights enact the violent ways in which “the patriarchal medical gaze exerts symbolic violence on the female organism by fragmenting it, separating it from the female subject that it belongs to” (98). Concrete evidence of how these thereoretical
assertations manifest themselves in everyday life would have been welcome at this point. But this is a mere quibble. As a whole, this chapter is one of the most fascinating ones in the entire volume. Breast cancer is a particularly good illustration of this biomedical violence. Quoting the theories of Lerner, the author suggests that mastectomy is often decoded as an insidious way of asserting power by patriarchal society (102). Victims of this “androcentric” medicine can be found in Linda Park-Fuller’s A Clean Breast of It and Susan Miller’s My Left Breast. Miller even seems to celebrate mastectomy scarring as a form of empowerment (110).

In Chapter 7, “Survival Strategies in Recent Plays by African American Women Playwrights,” Inmaculada Pineda-Hernández deals with Cheryl L. West’s Jar the Floor, Suzan-Lori Park’s In the Blood and Pearl Cleage’s A Song for Coretta and Flyin’ West. Pineda-Hernández identifies four survival strategies in these plays: “hurting oneself, killing one’s offspring, tolerating violence, and killing the perpetrator” (98). This chapter offers a new interpretation of Park’s well-known use of the myth of Medea in In The Blood, usefully contrasting this play to works by less established playwrights. In all of the plays considered, African American women acquire agency through their endeavors to survive trauma (128).

In Chapter 8, “Documenting War: Theatrical Interventions by Emily Mann and Heather Raffo,” Ilka Saal, following in the wake of Susan Sontag, examines how the photographic essence of documentary theater can depict war and gender violence in unmediated ways. She argues that the poetic, indeed aesthetic elements of documentary theater “can open up various possibilities for agency” (133) in Emily Mann’s Still Life and Heather Raffo’s 9 Parts of Desire. Dramatizations of war trauma abound in American drama. However, by focusing on the Iraq War, Heather Raffo inflects this traditional pattern from a feminist perspective, as Ilka Saal skillfully demonstrates. The author insists that Raffo’s “documentary approach underlines the necessity and healing power of narrative reconstruction” (146). Engaging with trauma through an explicitly theatrical, stylized stance, Raffo’s “documentary theater ruptures our media-saturated indifference and arrests our attention” (152).

In the concluding chapter, “The Victim and the Audience’s Pleasure,” Barbara Ozieblo analyzes audience response to gender violence in Carson Kreitzer’s Self Defense and Stefanie Zadravec’s Honey Brown Eyes. Drawing from the theories of Anne Ubersfeld and Richard Foreman, Ozieblo argues that these plays, in spite of their dark depictions of gender violence, successfully capture their audiences’ interest. Indeed, spectators feel mesmerized by these grim plays, as they seek to decode the meaning of the material being staged.

All in all, Performing Gender Violence. Plays by Contemporary American Women Dramatists is a thoroughly researched book, which eloquently blends theoretical considerations with close-reading analyses of specific plays. By combining examinations of canonical and recent works, the authors contribute to enlarging our knowledge of the astonishing wealth of contemporary American drama. Therefore, this book will not only be useful to feminists: it will become an invaluable research tool for any serious scholar wishing to study new developments in contemporary US theater.
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