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Alexis Greene, *Emily Mann. Rebel Artist of the American Theater*

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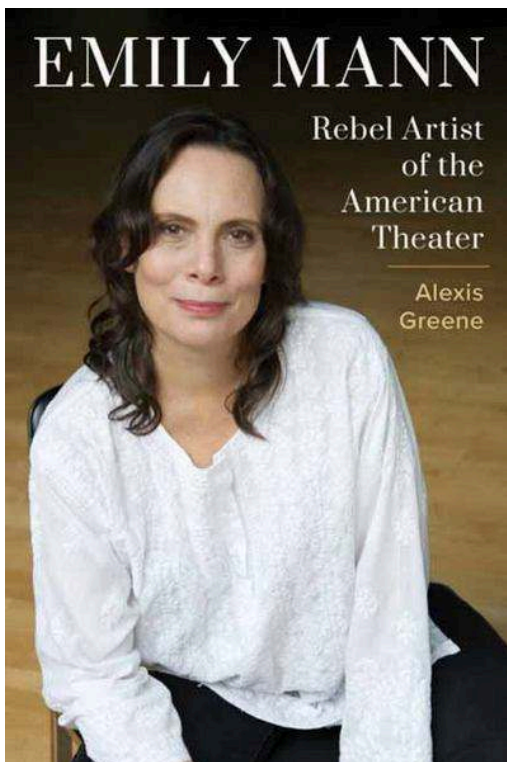
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REFERENCES

Alexis Greene, *Emily Mann. Rebel Artist of the American Theater*, Guilford: Applause, 2021, ISBN: 9781493060320



- 1 Alexis Greene’s riveting and richly documented biography of American playwright and director Emily Mann opens with a seemingly anecdotal prologue entitled “Emilyville”, in which Greene recalls an episode from Mann’s childhood:

[Emily] is often locked out of the bedroom she shares with Carol, who does not want to play with her younger sister. So Emmy is given the guest bedroom for her very own private space. She is also given a set of bedroom furniture that her mother used when she was a girl, as well as a rocking chair and a vanity table, which Emmy uses as a desk. And along one wall and on the floor she arranges large, cardboard boxes, out of which she fashions stables and homes for a town she creates and calls Emilyville. (1)

- 2 At the tender age of seven, Emily Mann was therefore offered a “room of her own”: no reader will miss the underlying reference to Virginia Woolf’s feminist assertion that a woman needs a space that is hers entirely if she is to create. And we cannot help but assume that “Emilyville” encouraged and unconsciously nurtured Mann’s incredibly prolific career in the theatre. The subtitle of Greene’s biography, *Rebel Artist of the American Theater* hints at Mann’s norm-defying status in the recent history of American theatre. Greene’s is the first monograph on Emily Mann to ever be published – and it entirely fulfils its author’s desire to “bring one more woman’s life into light” (ix).
- 3 Mann can indeed be deemed a “rebel” in more than one aspect: the first woman to direct at the Guthrie (Minneapolis, Minnesota) and the first woman to be appointed artistic director at the McCarter Theatre Center (Princeton, NJ), she challenged patriarchal institutions and helped champion women’s visibility in the American theatre world. Her documentary theatre, also named “theatre of testimony”, her favored term (158), adopts a political stance that has confronted the American society to some of the most sombre pages of its history. Her numerous fallouts on Broadway and its commercial, business-like approach to theatre have unwittingly made her an artist of the margins, as she managed to make the McCarter, a regional stage, one of the most privileged sites for the production of new American plays. Moreover, she crossed paths with many other rebel women, in and out of the theatre – Ntozake Shange, with whom she co-authored the musical *Betsey Brown: A Rhythm and Blues Opera* in 1989; Winnie Mandela, whom she met in South Africa and interviewed on three occasions as she was working on a screenplay for a TV documentary; feminist and activist Gloria Steinem, for whom she created *Gloria: A Life*, which premiered in 2018.
- 4 Throughout fifteen chapters, framed by a prologue and an epilogue, Greene’s account of Emily Mann’s career unveils a life entirely devoted to making theatre. One particularly striking characteristic of Mann’s implication in the theatre world is the multiplicity of roles she has taken on: a playwright, a director and an artistic director, she emerges as a relentless and committed worker and artist, despite suffering from multiple sclerosis – a subject Greene touches upon with great tactfulness, especially since Mann herself was reluctant to open up about the diagnosis for many years.
- 5 From Mann’s childhood to the more recent projects she conducted in the early 2020s, the book relies on a great amount of archival material drawn from Mann’s personal files and archives, as well as interviews of Mann and her collaborators, friends and family. The intent focus on the genesis of Mann’s best-known plays is paramount to understand the “theatre of testimony” for which Mann became famous. *Annulla Allen: the Autobiography of a Survivor* (first produced in 1977) sprang from Mann’s desire to reconnect with the history of her Jewish family and is the dramatized form of hours of interview with Annulla, a friend’s aunt, whom they both visited in Poland in the

mid-1970s. But it is *Still Life*, first produced in 1980 at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, that brought Mann international recognition: in 1984, *Still Life* was translated and adapted by Jean-Pierre Laville and produced at the Avignon Festival – making Mann the first American playwright to have her work performed at the Festival. Only five years after the end of the Vietnam War, the play explores the violent psychological trauma the war has inflicted on a veteran, his wife and his mistress. Based on the real words shared by the real protagonists of the events, not only does the play adopt a critical stance towards the war, but it also highlights the pervasive violence that contaminates gender and domestic relations. Greene quotes from Mann herself: “I found a form [...]. I found a way to work that thrilled me. I loved the idea of making plays from the words of real people and helping give voice to them. I started it with *Annula*, but it went [to] another level with *Still Life*.” (149)

- 6 For Mann, more than a recollection process, the word “testimony” takes its full meaning when it gives marginalized characters the opportunity to have a voice. According to Mann, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years*, first produced at the McCarter Theatre Center in 1995, is “almost the definition of [theatre of testimony], [...] because they’re having their say.” (259) *Greensboro (A Requiem)*, first produced in 1996 at the McCarter, is also read by Greene as a “memorial service” (275) insofar as it gives victims of the Greensboro massacre a collective voice. Perhaps Greene’s approach to the form wants links and comparisons with verbatim theatre: the resemblance between the two forms might have questioned established categorizations and may have allowed to reframe Mann’s influence on contemporary theatre.
- 7 The last chapters most notably evoke her 21st-century creations such as *Mrs Packard* (a historical fiction first produced in 2007), *Hoodwinked (a Play inspired by Real Events)* (2016), *Gloria: A Life* (2018), *The Pianist (A Play with Music)* (first public reading in 2018) and even briefly mentions Mann’s two online works produced during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The great body of plays studied by Greene reveals recurring themes to which Mann returns time and time again:

The Holocaust forms the background of the entangled, sometimes desperate love affairs in *Meshugah* (1998) and is the horror at the forefront of *The Pianist* (2021). The dire effects of hatred of “the other” emerge clearly in *Execution of Justice* (1985) and *Greensboro (A Requiem)* (1996). (79)
- 8 And of course, gender dynamics and the violence of the patriarchal system are explored in most of Mann’s plays – *Still Life*, *Having Our Say*, *Mrs Packard* or *Gloria*.
- 9 Greene constantly relocates Mann’s work within its context of production: this very aptly echoes Mann’s attachment to documenting and reflecting upon the present and upon theatre’s unique immediacy, its constantly renewed commentary on society. One of the most compelling passages deals with Mann’s high school years in Chicago, followed by her college years at Harvard (Chapters 3 and 4). Following her discovery of theatre, which is also concomitant with the revolutionary excitement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mann’s political inclinations and her experience of the world as a woman resonate with the more general contextualization of the American society at large. Chapter 4 also provides us with a (perhaps too rare) glimpse of Mann’s literary and theoretical influences, like Artaud’s ritual theatre (60) or, even more fascinating, Jacques Lecoq’s approach to acting via clown work, which Mann directly experimented when she joined a clown troupe in 1973 (73-74).

10 Greene does not forgo Mann's position as a director and artistic director. The book shows how her tireless work ethic successfully restored the McCarter Theatre Center's financial situation, thanks to a balance between innovative avant-garde productions and classics that would appeal to more traditional audiences. Indeed, apart from her own plays, Mann also directed classic American and European plays such as Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Ibsen's *A Doll House*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* (turning Prospero and King Alonso into Prospera and Queen Alonza in her gender-bending production during the 2002-2003 season). Perhaps the most striking aspect of Mann's directorial style is her relation to actors: their interviews reveal a demanding yet profoundly humane director who includes them in the elaboration of a production. About *Gloria*, actress Christine Lahti explains: "As an actress [...] I've never been allowed, invited, to participate in the actual creation of the play. [Here] I was able to offer ideas." (315) Not only does this highlight Mann's collective vision of theatre, but it also underlines her understanding of theatre as an ever-evolving art that is shaped through the voices and bodies that occupy the stage. As Mann herself states:

you finish a play in rehearsal. I do anyway. So when I'm working on a play of mine with actors, I'm constantly analyzing whether a moment works or doesn't work. [...] I just keep honing a text while I'm working on it, when I'm directing it. That's why I like directing the first productions of my plays. (271)

11 In literature classes, students are often warned not to fall into the trap of the biographical fallacy. However, Greene weaves with much nuance Mann's personal story with a general overview of the themes, structures and aesthetics that pervade her plays. It powerfully demonstrates how relevant the form of "theatre of testimony" remains today and how deeply attuned to the undercurrent of violence that structures the American society Mann's plays are – albeit always exhibiting Mann's profoundly humane and emotional perception of the world. In that respect, Greene's exhaustive yet passionate approach to Mann's work is not dissimilar to the playwright's own methods. Most importantly, *Emily Mann. Rebel of the American Theater* is a much needed and long overdue biography of a playwright who has not only scrutinized American society but also shaped new trajectories for American theatre.

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