
Milly S. Barranger’s biography of Margaret Webster (1905–1972) is a straightforward, detailed reportage on the mid-20th-century director/actor’s hardworking life in the theatre. The only child of British actors Dame May Whitty and Ben Webster, Webster was a product of the “born in a trunk” upbringing common to theatre families. She launched her career as a young character actress in Britain. After a series of fortunate if somewhat accidental events, Webster landed her first job as a theatre director in Britain, and went on to gain prominence as a director of stage classics in the United States. In the 1940s, her productions of Shakespeare’s less-produced history plays (Henry VIII, Richard II), as well as the more popular tragedies (Macbeth, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet), attracted the attention and approval of mainstream audiences and critics across the U.S.

Webster made her name directing for the Broadway stage, the Metropolitan and New York City Operas, as well as for numerous “bus and truck” touring companies, including the short-lived Margaret Webster Shakespeare Company. She was pioneering in her risky, radical choice to cast black actors in classical productions in the early 1940s (including Paul Robeson as Othello); in the late 1940s, with Eva Le Gallienne and Cheryl Crawford, she established the ill-fated American Repertory Theatre, which was dedicated to producing seasons of classics. Throughout her career, Webster took on challenging acting roles in addition to directing and producing.

Interestingly, it is not until the very end of Barranger’s book, in an excerpt from Le Gallienne’s obituary for Webster—her longtime friend, sometime lover, and frequent collaborator—that we learn that Webster’s greatest passion in the theatre was acting, not directing (306). This fact drops onto the page without comment or response from Barranger, which is often the case in the book. Indeed, although Barranger takes scrupulous care in reporting on Webster’s accomplishments and correspondence year by year, and the book is a veritable encyclopedia of the big names in 20th-century British and American theatre history, Margaret Webster: A Life in the Theater lacks a critical or theoretical framework of any kind.

This is especially surprising, since the book is the latest volume in the University of Michigan’s esteemed Triangulations Series, which focuses on the interconnections between lesbian/gay/queer studies and theatre/drama/performance. The biography contains little insight on the impact of Webster’s lesbianism on her life and work. Webster’s relationships with Le Gallienne and with British novelist Paula Frankel are simply reported on; the most useful analysis of the power struggles in Webster’s relationship with Le Gallienne are gleaned in excerpts from Helen Sheehy’s biography of Le Gallienne (1996).

Webster was one of many theatre and film artists investigated, interrogated, and blacklisted during the McCarthy era. This is the most interesting chapter of Barranger’s biography, where the author offers an astute interpretation and analysis of Webster’s choices at this difficult time, challenging Webster’s own account of the period in her memoir, Don’t Put Your Daughter on the Stage (1972). It is disappointing that Barranger’s narrative does not sustain this sharper edge, however. No mention is made, or critique offered of the fact that Webster, who was renowned for championing black performers in her productions of Shakespeare in the U.S., chose to produce and direct all-white productions in apartheid South Africa (1961/62). Similarly, the section covering Webster’s work in the 1960s in the U.S. (some productions took place on college campuses) lacks any discus-
sion of the director’s attitudes about or involvement in the political upheaval at the time, when many theatre artists were becoming politicized.

Barranger’s biography begins with a clear, concise chronology of “high points” in Webster’s life and work; the book also contains a few black-and-white photographs of Webster’s family, friends, and theatrical productions. Although Barranger’s bibliography includes numerous primary and secondary sources with accounts from those who worked with Webster, the biography relies heavily on Webster’s own published memoirs. The first three chapters in Barranger’s book are drawn largely from Webster’s account of her parents,’ grandparents,’ and great-grandparents’ lives in the theatre (The Same Only Different: Five Generations of a Great Theatre Family, 1969) and the remaining nine chapters in the biography rely principally on Webster’s wry and self-effacing Don’t Put Your Daughter on the Stage. In Webster’s memoir, the warmth and charm of the author’s voice, and the wit and poignancy that infuse her stories energize the narrative and compel the reader’s interest. Barranger’s attention to detail and chronological accuracy notwithstanding, A Life in the Theatre often lacks the boldness and spirit of its subject.

—Cindy Rosenthal

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Theatricality. Edited by Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; 243 pp., 2 illustrations. $55.00 cloth, $23.99 paper.

Before performativity, there was theatricality. As Janelle Reinelt (2003 [2002]:153–55) has shown, the rise of terminology derived from performance rather than theatre resulted from three developments: the desire for a critical term to distinguish certain forms of aesthetic performance (e.g., performance art) from theatre; the development of the category of cultural (as opposed to aesthetic) performance in anthropology and its connection to the definition of performance studies as a field; and the interest of a number of contemporary philosophers (e.g., Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler) in J.L. Austin’s linguistic concept of performativity. Although there has long been resistance to the expansion of the category of performance and its seeming usurpation of theatre as an object of intellectual inquiry, only recently has the concept of theatricality come back into focus.1

Theatricality shows that there is life in the old concept yet, if its ability to generate interesting discussion is a measure. In a very useful introduction that outlines the twists and turns the concepts of theatre and theatricality have undergone since the Renaissance (to put it crudely, theatricality is one of those terms that has also been used to mean the opposite of any of its attributed meanings),

1. For a strong critique of the performance metaphor, see States (2003 [1996]).
editors Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait define their intent to “identify, with historical and theoretical rigor, what some of the interpretive possibilities and critical problems are that pertain to the idea of theatricality” without pinning the concept down or limiting it (3). The six case studies that follow the introduction take up these challenges with clarity and élan.

Two of the essays focus on the ways in which understandings of theatricality are negotiated across cultures. Using Brecht’s comments on the Beijing Opera as a point of departure, Haiping Yan demonstrates that Confucian aesthetics do not assume that audiences identify or empathize with dramatic characters unless prevented from doing so, but entail a notion of theatricality that always already includes the idea of a responsive, ethically engaged audience. Jody Enders also emphasizes the importance of cultural context to understanding theatrical representation in her study of the mystery play at Valenciennes, France, in 1547, which involved either the production or a reproduction of a miracle. In a playful and subtle theoretical speculation on the equivocal historical record, Enders brings out the ways that historical discourse depends on what we think other people very different from ourselves must have thought.

Postlewait also engages with the question of how we characterize the thought of distant others in his consideration of modern and postmodern scholars’ descriptions of Elizabethan society alternately as antitheatrical or thoroughly theatricalized. He argues that the documentary evidence of an antitheatrical bias has been greatly overvalued. He is equally skeptical of contrasting claims that Elizabethan England was a theatricalized society on the grounds that this broad use of the term seems to void it of any specific meaning. While Postlewait’s critiques are well supported and persuasive, they lead primarily to a generalized call for a more rigorous historical method.

Shannon Jackson also takes scholarly discourse as her subject in a consideration of how the performativity/theatricality debate and the feminism/queer theory debate mirror, shape, and overlap one another. In addition to tracing the history of this intellectual conjuncture and the positions taken by various participants, Jackson shows how disciplinary and theoretical commitments can lead to mischaracterizations of different positions and how advocates of one discourse may shore it up at the expense of other discourses.

Davis and Jon Erickson bring the concept of theatricality into the political realm. Davis explores the etymology of the word theatricality, whose coinage the OED attributes to Thomas Carlyle. Carefully rereading Carlyle and some of his 18th-century predecessors, Davis argues that the OED’s equation of theatricality with inauthenticity is incorrect, and that Carlyle viewed theatricality as the opposite of sympathy. For Davis, theatricality is essential to the functioning of civil society, as it is the affective state that allows us to dissociate ourselves from the particulars of a situation to make an acritical assessment of it. Erickson, too, is concerned with the relationship of theatre to social process. In a complex but lucid discussion, he aligns the binary oppositions realism/theatricalism and dialogue/monologue with one another to question the privilege accorded to the reflexive practices of the avantgarde as the only valid strategies for political performance. Erickson argues that realist and theatricalist styles both serve a realistic purpose (that is, an effort to show things as they are) and, further, that the monological tendencies of the theatricalist avantgarde may be counterproductive to achieving real political change, which must be based in dialogical encounters among competing interests.

*Theatricality* efficiently encompasses considerations of that concept as an aspect of performance, a relationship between performance and audience, an affective state, and a unit of discourse. It is a bracing read that should provoke fresh discussion of fundamental issues in theatre and performance studies.

—Philip Auslander

There are particular challenges to writing about the history of puppet theatre. As a popular culture form that is not text-based, puppet theatre does not offer itself easily to theatre histories focused on dramatic literature. In addition, historians of puppet theatre often feel compelled to convince the reader that their subject is, in fact, worthwhile; and that the taxonomy and the world history of puppetry must be explained before the reader will be able to follow.

The Victorian Marionette Theatre finesse these challenges in an expansive study of a specific area: string-operated puppets in 19th-century England. John McCormick arrived at the study of puppetry after extensive writing on 19th-century theatre in general (including a study of French popular theatre and a biography of Dion Boucicault), and this understanding enables him to see marionette performance as an important element in the plethora of Victorian performance forms including panorama, picture performance, hand-puppet theatre, peepshows, pantomime, harlequinade, and music hall revues, as well as the “legitimate” theatre of actors’ dramas.

Another daunting challenge for puppet historians is the multivalenced quality of the subject. The historian must write not only about what human beings do in performance, but also about some combination of the following elements: the design, construction, typology, manipulation techniques, and costuming of the puppet figures; the design and construction of stages; the sociology of the puppeteers and their way of life; and, if the writer is adventuresome, the theoretical and aesthetic questions connected to playing with objects as performance.

McCormick does this well; for example, in the following passage where he deftly connects the mimetic style of marionette theatre with the different varieties of contemporary actors’ theatre, in terms of theories articulated by Henry Siddons in his 1822 Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action:

Siddons distinguishes between “picturesque” acting (more concerned with the sculptural beauty of the attitude and gesture) and “expressive” acting (more concerned with conveying meaning). He comes down heavily in favor of the latter. Siddons was thinking in terms of the legitimate drama. The expressive style was also endemic to both pantomime and the
melodrama, forms of theatre that did not meet with his approval. The expressive acting of the marionette stage was probably closer to pantomime and melodrama than to the legitimate theatre. (77–78)

The arc of McCormick’s story involves the century-long rise and demise of marionette theatre as a popular English art form, from itinerant family-based companies that toured the fairgrounds of rural England in the early 1800s, with a repertoire largely based on the romantic and melodramatic actors’ theatre of the age; to companies appearing on urban stages (music halls and variety theatres), with a repertoire of pantomimes, harlequinades, and plotless collections of trick transformation puppets and variety acts; and finally, to shows that increasingly incorporated film until the new technology eventually superseded the puppets.

Sometimes McCormick methodically lists puppeteers’ names and the dates of their performances in mind-numbing rhythm (although the utterly unusual character of the puppeteers is consistently enthralling) as he lays the groundwork for his reading of Victorian performance aesthetics. But mostly he is succinct and lucid, and also enlightening in scope. The reader comes away from this book with an utterly clear image of what transpired on the Victorian marionette stage. An extensive collection of black-and-white and color photographs is quite helpful.

The more one considers the nature of the 19th century, the more one realizes it to be a crucible of the central issues of the 20th: industrialization, mechanization, imperialism, globalization, and the increasing momentum of new performance technologies. McCormick’s study often stops short of connecting marionette theatre to these larger issues. For example, questions of race and ethnicity repeatedly appear as central elements of Victorian marionette performance, in the ubiquitous black-face minstrel characters and exoticized “Turk” figures that were indispensable elements of the form. However, McCormick refrains from a sustained analysis of these aspects of marionette performance in a larger context, something which could be particularly helpful to us now as we ponder the imagery of race and Orientalism in the 21st century. But perhaps such analysis would constitute another book. McCormick does such a deft job of explaining so many different aspects of Victorian marionette theatre that you barely notice the effort involved, and the richness of his book definitely clears the path for future scholarship and investigating a multitude of fascinating questions.

—John Bell

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**Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China.** By Li Ruru. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003; 305 pp.; illustrations. $45.00 cloth, $24.95 paper.

Adopting Clifford Geertz’s methodology of the interpretation of cultures, Li Ruru’s book *Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China,* does not set out to offer readers a linear narrative of the history of Shakespeare performances in China, but to examine the levels of “filtering” that any Shakespeare production in China undergoes and to discuss how these filters, as Patrice Pavis calls them in his *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (1992), reflect the constantly changing political, social, and cultural practices. The author succeeds in providing what Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* calls “thick description” ([1973] 2000:6) by supplying readers with a rich scene in which intricate inter-cultural exchanges take place. The book makes it amply clear that Shakespeare in China is as much a story about Chinese society and culture as it is about Shakespeare’s plays.
Chapter 1, “Shakespeare in China: Between His First ‘Arrival’ and the Cultural Revolution,” gives an overview of the decades from Shakespeare’s first introduction into China in the early 20th century to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Although the first professional Chinese production of Shakespeare took place in 1913 in Shanghai, Shakespeare only really caught on during the 1980s (nearly 90 percent of all Chinese Shakespeare productions were staged after 1979, as shown in “Appendix 1: A Chronology of Shakespeare Performances in China”). Li, therefore, devotes the subsequent five chapters to a discussion of Shakespearean plays produced in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing in detail on 11 Shakespeare productions in varied forms of mainstream modern huaju (spoken drama), traditional xiqu (music theatre), and experimental theatre.


The concluding chapter, “Old Man Sha: Dead or Sleeping,” considers the current state and future of Shakespeare productions in China. Li assumes a “generally pessimistic outlook” because in China today, “Shakespeare productions do not enjoy consistent financial support, nor is the cultural atmosphere receptive to him” (230). She places her hope in the universities and theatre academies where a tradition of studying and staging Shakespeare has been kept alive. In fact, one of the most lively and well-attended conferences in China in recent years was “Shakespeare and China” held at Fudan University in Shanghai in December 2004.

Li comes from a famous theatrical family in China: her mother, Li Yuru, was a leading jingju performer; her stepfather, Cao Yu, was the foremost playwright of modern spoken drama, whose translation of Romeo and Juliet is discussed in chapter 1; and her husband, Jiang Weiguo (also known as David Jiang), is a prominent theatre director, whose Huangmeixi Much Ado About Nothing and English-language Macbeth are reviewed respectively in chapter 4 and chapter 6. Li unabashedly shares her intimate knowledge, both personal and professional, of Chinese theatre and society. Her writing defies conventional scholarship in that she does not strain after “objectivity” and shows striking honesty and directness, and her enthusiasm about her subject is quite contagious.

In addition to 14 well-chosen production photos, this book includes two valuable appendices: “A Chronology of Shakespeare Performances in China” and “Dramatis Personae and Role Types of Five Sinified Productions,” as well as a very helpful glossary of Chinese names and terms given in both Chinese characters and pinyin (romanized Mandarin Chinese). The book’s references and index are also useful and adequate.
Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China by Li Ruru is no doubt the most up-to-date research available in English on staging Shakespeare in China.

—Faye Chunfang Fei

Faye Chunfang Fei is Professor of English and Drama at East China Normal University. She received her PhD in Theatre Studies in 1991 from the Graduate Center of City University of New York. Among her numerous publications, she edited and translated Chinese Theories of Theatre and Performance from Confucius to the Present (University of Michigan Press, 1999).


Biodun Jeyifo’s Wole Soyinka is the ninth study (and eleventh volume) in the Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature series. Under the general editorship of Abiola Irele at Ohio State University, this series is committed to detailed studies of the entire corpus of major literary figures from the African and Caribbean regions (including to date Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, Édouard Glissant, V.S. Naipaul, Aimé Césaire, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, J.M. Coetzee, and Jean Rhys). Jeyifo follows the Cambridge protocol, linking literary analysis of Soyinka’s extensive writings (35 titles, beginning in the 1950s) both to Soyinka’s own radical political activism and to a broad range of postcolonial discourses. Given the extent of Soyinka’s writing and the controversies that his sometimes irreverent activism has generated, this volume is ambitious. Building on his own edited anthology (Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity, University Press of Mississippi, 2001), Jeyifo has overall made a valuable contribution to the already extensive bibliography of secondary studies on Soyinka’s work.

As a Nobel Prize–winning Nigerian writer with a tendency to satirize what he simultaneously portrays as deadly serious, and as a writer of essays as well as plays and fiction, Soyinka has himself polished the critical lenses through which scholars inevitably view his work. Frequently compared to authors and modes ranging from the high tragic poesis of Aeschylus to the alienating intelligence of Brecht, Soyinka foregrounds the irony of his role as a Yoruba author and playwright who ultimately writes in English. Living and studying in England or the U.S., periodically in a state of semi-exile from Nigeria, Soyinka’s main source of identity derives from his African roots. Because of his own cosmopolitan experience, this sense of what constitutes the essence of Africanness is both intensely specific and yet utterly nonparochial. He gets to the universal through the local.

Jeyifo captures the essence of this process within the apparently conventional framework of a critical survey that tackles Soyinka’s writings genre by genre, chapter by chapter. He tracks and evaluates what he calls “Soyinka’s self-expression” within conventional genres, even as he defines the “radical extensions of genre” that characterize “the paradigms of the representative and the unrepresentable selves” (40).

Whether dealing with “tragic mythopoesis as postcolonial discourses” in Soyinka’s critical writing (chapter two) or what he calls the “visionary mythopoesis” of both the fictional and nonfictional prose (chapter five), Jeyifo finds the essence of the larger vision within the Africanness of the individual work. This study, thus, has a holistic perspective lacking not only in, for instance, Derek
Wright’s earlier 42–page monograph Wole Soyinka: Life, Work, and Criticism (York Press, 1996) but also in impressive recent studies such as Onookome Okome’s Ogun’s Children: The Literature and Politics of Wole Soyinka since the Nobel (Africa World Press, 2003). Taking into account the useful chronology of Soyinka’s life, running through 2002, this volume is one of the best as well as most comprehensive surveys of the Soyinka canon to date.

Reading this book, one can easily understand why this most African of writers has generated critical volumes written in Portuguese, German, French, and Chinese. Jeyifo places Soyinka on the world stage, within the frame of Graeco-European playwrights and authors whose works have defined what we sometimes call the Western “classical” tradition, without losing sight of his seminal role in the broader African sphere. He argues, for example, that Soyinka “insists on the enormous impact of the ethnocentric epistemology of European discourses on race and culture” on Africans as well as on Europeans, even as he is “at pains [...] to recuperate an ‘African world’ whose self-constituation precedes and survives the Eurocentric epistemological onslaught” (61).

Despite this considerable achievement, however, Jeyifo’s book finally disappoints as well as rewards its readers. The necessity to summarize and make a central point about virtually every piece of Soyinka’s writing, which gives the study its sense of overall inclusiveness, periodically runs against the desire to establish the larger arc of Soyinka’s work. Among the many biographical, theoretical, and critical balls that Jeyifo is juggling, his own cultural materialist approach rarely but significantly both enriches and slightly confuses the study. There are at times too many points of view vying for place in an analysis that perforce is tied to summaries and comments about many specific works. This is perhaps an inevitable tension in a volume that takes seriously the mandate of the Cambridge series while at the same time establishing the critical authority of the author. It may be a small price to pay for the degree to which Jeyifo reaches beyond the simple mandate to a larger perspective.

—Milla Cozart Riggio

Milla Cozart Riggio is the James J. Goodwin Professor of English at Trinity College. Her books include Teaching Shakespeare through Performance (MLA, 1999) and Carnival: Culture in Action—the Trinidad Experience (Routledge, 2005).

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