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Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America by Amy E. Hughes (review)

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Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America by Amy E. Hughes (review)

Comments

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***Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America.* By Amy E. Hughes. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012. Cloth \$75.00, Paper \$27.95. 264 pages.**

In *Spectacles of Reform* Amy Hughes advocates for “spectacle as methodology” (4), a means of interpreting spectacle in nineteenth-century melodrama, as well as a wide variety of other media, that rehearses and reforms concepts of citizenship and identity related to race, class, gender, and morality. Through this lens, Hughes seeks to answer the questions “where and how do activist spectacles appear before and beyond the theatrical encounter?” and “why is spectacle kept alive through reinvention, revision, and repetition long after the drama is over?” (5). Hughes traces her theory of the spectacular instant through three popular sensation themes of the mid-nineteenth century: temperance, abolition, and suffrage. Each chapter is devoted to a spectacle related to one of these issues and ends *à la* melodrama, with a *dénouement* rather than a conclusion, wherein Hughes shares “speculative, rather than conclusive, meditations on the broader significance of [her] discussion” (12). This rhetorical move opens up Hughes’s spectacularly constructed display of historiographic scholarship and dramaturgical analysis for further consideration and discourse.

The body *as/in/at* the spectacle, “how different individuals participate in performances of excess, whether *as* the spectacle (extraordinary bodies in freak shows), *in* the spectacle (actors in sensation scenes), or *at* the spectacle (people who witness performance),” is the framework of this project (14). In chapter one, Hughes renders the cultural landscape of nineteenth-century America, contextualizing the emerging concept of “normalcy” as a product of congruous scientific, philosophical, and practical trends. She defines spectacle as a radical, political event which relies on visual excess, intensity, and deviation from standardized norms of behavior, emotion, and corporeality. Hughes identifies bodies *as* spectacles of excess that appeared simultaneously in freak shows and plays. For example, the parallel presentation of black bodies in both Barnum’s “What Is It?” display of an African American performer presented as half man/half ape, and Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana* at the American Museum on the eve of the Civil War, created an intertextuality of enacted racial excess. Hughes argues these kinds of excessive presentations trained viewers to look differently, reinforcing cultural norms and expectations and “influencing the manner in which Americans perceived bodies both onstage and off” (19). In contrast, the body *in* spectacle speaks to audiences’ senses, engaging viewers with the collapse of the actor’s body and the character’s actions, such as the imminent danger experienced by both the actor *and* character attempting to escape a burning building. Hughes explains that to be sensational “a scene requires a virtual/actual body experiencing fictional/factual peril” (32). Finally, the body *at* the spectacle focuses on viewers’

reception of transmedia spectacles, which encouraged a visual literacy amongst audiences encountering not only spectacular theatrical performances, but also novels, advertisements, children's literature, and even stationery.

Subsequent chapters explore the ways that sensationalism and ideology converge in reform melodrama's signature spectacular scenes. The *delirium tremens* scene in W. H. Smith's *The Drunkard* (1844), an example of how "insanity is an ominous, omnipresent danger in American depictions of drunkenness" (48), is the focus of the second chapter. Hughes reads her meticulous historiographic research through psychological theory regarding the moral foundations of decision-making to reveal how the play text and productions, temperance lectures and ephemera, and previous scholars have engaged the spectacular stereotype of the insane male drunkard as sensational in his excess and failure to meet social standards for moral behavior. Chapter three elucidates theatre's role in abolitionist discourse through an examination of various productions and ephemera inspired by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Hughes's racial and gendered readings of Eliza's spectacular escape from her captors across icy river floes illuminates audiences' consumption of the scene as a political and ethical alliance with the plight of suffering mothers and captives. Suffrage and the debate over the nature of "true womanhood" is embodied in the railroad rescue scene in Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867), and is the subject of the fourth chapter. Hughes dissects the cultural milieu in which the heroine Laura uses the newly designed "American axe" to free one-armed Civil War veteran Snorkey from the railroad tracks, thereby spectacularly exceeding the parameters of "true womanhood" and complicating the image of US citizenship. The Afterword connects the nineteenth-century spectacular incident, which revealed a "paradoxical relationship between normalcy and excess, conformity and individuality, objectivity and subjectivity" with spectacle and reform messages circulated by artists, the press, and citizens themselves in new media in the twenty-first century (155).

Spectacles of Reform engages and extends previous scholarship on melodrama, citizenship, and reform through exhaustive research, which is on full display in insightful and accessible analysis and an array of visual artifacts featured throughout the text. Theatre historians and especially scholars of American theatre and popular culture will benefit from Hughes's new insights into theatre and activism's contributions to the development of a distinctly American moral code. While the project's emphasis on the idea that the "visual is visceral" complicates Aristotle's *Poetics* by privileging spectacle, it leaves the investigation of other sensory perceptions of melodrama and reform largely untended (15). Yet such an exemption is understandable and invites other scholars to contribute further examinations to the history and legacy of nineteenth-century theatre.

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