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Cochrane, Claire. *Twentieth-Century British Theatre. Industry, Art and Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 353 pp. £58.00. ISBN 978-0-521-46488-8.

Claire Cochrane's new history of 20th century British theatre is a tour de force of passionate and intelligent scholarship, and a book which almost bursts at its seams. In fact the material Cochrane discusses, and sometimes can only touch upon, is so rich that this project could easily have been turned into a two or three volume series. What is particularly fascinating is that Cochrane in a truly interdisciplinary manner manages to bring in theories from cognate fields to enrich her argument. Her ability to draw on cultural geographers, economists and cultural policy experts significantly adds to the overall quality of this volume, but it also presents one of its challenges.

Cochrane almost fails to contain everything she intends to discuss in this one book. Topics range from amateur dramatics, the changing demographics in the profession of acting, the challenge of television and cinema, to sometimes very detailed information about individual protagonists and companies. Readers might find it difficult to pinpoint the one underlying thread of this study. It focuses on regional activity, on structures and systems of theatre production, on the topography of theatre in a multi-cultural Britain, on social and economic factors of production, on the acting profession – plenty to deal with. And still, some topics get sidelined (e.g. the last section on theatre topography in 2000 is relatively short, and a stronger focus on audiences would have been great, too).

At the same time this approach means that Cochrane successfully avoids falling into the “canonical trap” of some of the established theatre historiographies. For example, she largely and deliberately neglects theatrical activity in London, nor is she interested in discussing the “signature” productions by the leading actors or directors of the time. She also spells out the possibly unwelcome truth that despite claims to the contrary “economic interests” have always been key for theatre in Britain (p.4) and that it needs to be discussed “as an industry” (p.8). Her discussion of theatre as business is in fact valid and in-depth. Particularly fascinating is Cochrane’s discussion of turn of the century theatres around as “retail outlets” (p.28), or the section on “ownership of theatre” (pp.52-64).

Although the set times of 1900, 1950 and 2000, which Cochrane uses to structure her investigation, seem a bit arbitrary at times, her findings are truly fascinating. Cochrane synthesises research from a significant number of disciplines, unearths relevant source material, and introduces innovative methodological approaches. Her volume adds significantly to existing scholarship in that it offers an alternative reading of British theatre in the 20th century.

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