

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

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Jordana Cox

Staged News: The Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers in New York

Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2023. 168 p. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-62534-679-7.

This book's title might lead readers to expect a fairly conventional history of New York's New Deal-era Living Newspapers. As the flagship programme of the Roosevelt administration's Federal Theatre Project (1935–39), these large-cast documentary dramas have been extensively discussed by theatre historians. Yet Jordana Cox brings a fresh and enlightening perspective to the subject by emphasizing the extent to which these plays were indeed 'staged news' – in the sense of having been written by journalists as much as by playwrights.

Newspeople, like theatre workers, struggled for employment during the Depression, and needed the support of workfare programmes. Thus, as Cox explains, New York's Living Newspapers boasted a newsroom staffed by professional journalists, working to briefs assigned by editors and sub-editors. Their reporting wound up on stage rather than in print but, just as with any regular newspaper, the reporters gradually learned to write to a house style. It is the evolution of this 'news sense' that most interests Cox. She thus eschews the tendency of theatre historians to focus primarily on those Living Newspapers that performed best with audiences. Instead, she asks what it took for a story to make it to the stage in the first place.

The key framing chapter of *Staged News* thus looks in detail at *Ethiopia* (1936), which no audience ever even saw. Its planned production was cancelled by federal authorities shortly prior to opening for fear that its depiction of foreign leaders – including Benito Mussolini and Haile Selassie – might cause an international incident. This much is well known, but Cox is also interested in the research underpinning the play's script. This drew heavily on reports in the African American press, which had paid closer attention to the Abyssinian crisis than had mainstream news outlets. Even so, this material was translated through the 'news sense' of the Living Newspaper into a script oriented towards a presumably white audience, which completely overlooked African perspectives on colonialism.

The state censorship of Ethiopia had a chilling effect on subsequent Living Newspaper reporting, which thereafter concerned itself only with domestic issues. Yet these, too, begged questions about their

imagined audiences – as Cox makes clear in her chapter on *The Events of 1935* (1936). Often dismissed in historical accounts as a mere 'highlights reel' of the titular year's events, this Living Newspaper was in fact held together by an intriguing dramatic conceit. An onstage 'jury' responded to each news item as if speaking for 'the court of public opinion'. The intention seems to have been to beg questions about how jazzed up or dumbed down a news story had to be to catch the public's attention. Yet the all-white jury depicted onstage appeared fickle and easily distracted – and this satirization of the play's presumed audience may explain why 1935 did not enjoy much success at the box office.

A more positive, engaged conception of 'John Q. Public' is apparent in *One Third of a Nation* (1938) – the only 'successful' Living Newspaper to which Cox pays substantial attention. She carefully analyzes the presentation here of two recurring Living Newspaper conventions: the Loudspeaker and the Little Man. The former was the unseen 'voice of God' that provided a vital narrative thread connecting often-episodic scenes. The risk of this voice becoming crudely didactic was countered by the development of the 'Little Man' – a character representing an ordinary member of the public, who would climb onstage to question the Loudspeaker's account and insist on relevant, common-sense reporting. The dialectical interplay of these two (male) voices in *One Third of a Nation* epitomizes for Cox the resolved 'news sense' at which the Living Newspapers had arrived by 1938. These non-fiction dramas gave theatrical expression to the progressive, liberal ideals of the New Deal era, but also embodied its major blind spots around gender and race.

Staged News is engaging and incisive throughout. Cox acknowledges and builds on the work of other scholars, while developing a distinctive take of her own. This book is strongly recommended to anyone with an interest in 1930s American drama, or in documentary theatre forms more generally.

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David Linton

Nation and Race in West End Revue 1910–1930

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 197 p. £59.99. ISBN: 978-3-030-75211-8.

This is a much-needed and timely book on an under-appreciated yet transformative genre of

early twentieth-century performance culture in the UK, and specifically in London. Revue was central to innovations in the commercial entertainment offerings to growing numbers of late post-Edwardian city audiences, especially in the run-up to the First World War. David Linton also deals with its development into a more focused (or possibly constrained) formula for performance through the 1920s. Originally borrowing from European practice, early revues were a true and topical gallimaufry of the latest in variety acts, expressive dance, comedic turns, sketches, and bioscope interludes, and they offered a kind of pick-and-mix West End evening for a multi-class audience. While there is an amount of scholarly coverage of dance and revue – the Ballets Russes were introduced to London audiences via revue – and of the notoriety of some revue performers and performances, David Linton's study offers a different perspective. Taking the period from 1910 to 1930, he places the lenses of nation and race over the materials on which he focuses. For Linton, revue had the potential to 'critically express and reflect' on the growing challenges of colonial rule in the run-up to the First World War: indeed, revue, while seemingly commercial and populist, crucially 'captured a feeling of decline'.

Divided into chapters which read the West End revue as a cultural form in a constant state of flux (and in relation to, for example, 'National Identity', 'Degeneration/Regeneration', 'Black Internationalism', and 'Class Identity'), Linton

takes us away from a focus on the theatrical entrepreneurs behind revue. Rather, he frames revue as the performance form exemplifying most explicitly the hybrid possibilities of a process of reflecting a state of anxious modernity which relied on colonialist perceptions of the 'Other'. Revues such as *Eightpence a Mile* (1913) and the later imported *Blackbirds* (1926) provided locations for both the affirmation of racist tropes as well as their critical undermining. Just as revue embraced populist traditional performance forms, so too it played host to (as well as critiquing) the emergent avant-garde, and Linton shows how it critiqued the British colonialist class system on which it also relied so heavily for its own cultural markers.

Nation and Race in West End Revue 1910–1930 often focuses on the networks of cultural theory we might apply in order to both contextualize revue as well as read its historical significance. Sometimes this focus is at the cost of a more detailed critical description or analysis of revue shows, the scripts and evidence for which are largely archive bound, rather than easily available. Nevertheless, Linton's book is the first to take the phenomenon and cultural-historical significance of revue seriously, and it makes a genuine intervention into our conceptualization and construction of performance and cultural history in the early twentieth century.

MAGGIE B. GALE