The book reviews for our first issue of WiT look at books that describe some of the types of work that women are doing in the theatre.

Lisa M. Anderson, author of Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama, works as a cultural critic exploring the work of a cross-section of black women doing theatre in the United States today. And while Anderson’s writes about the work these artists are engaging in, she consistently places this work in the appropriate social, cultural, political and historical context.

Katie Mitchell, through her book The Director’s Craft, provides careful and detailed insight into her own process as a theatre director in the United Kingdom. She is clear that her process is certainly not the ‘be-all-and-end-all’ of how to direct theatre, but rather one way, her way. As we move forward with future issues, our aim through these book reviews is to provide WiT’s readers with a range of work that women do and write about in contemporary theatre, striking a balance between the practical and theoretical.

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Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama

Lisa M. Anderson’s book Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama, in a nut shell, is an accessible, thorough, thoughtful exploration of American black feminist theatre practices in the midst of the first decade of the 21st century. Anderson does an excellent job of placing black feminism in historical, political, cultural and social contexts while extending these ideas into her descriptions and analyses of several plays. The book explores the work of Pearl Cleage, Glenda Dickerson, Breena Clarke, Kia Corthron, Suzan-Lori Parks, Sharon Bridgeforth and Shirlene Holmes; a diverse cross-section of black women theatre artists in contemporary United States.

The book highlights a wide breadth of artistic and political perspectives speaking to the range and complexity of aesthetic styles of the artists, as well as the issues they are exploring. Through the range of plays and artists put forward by Anderson, Black Feminism engages with issues such as rape, social justice, birth control, abuse, violence, racism, sexual orientation and victimization.

In the first chapter, Anderson is especially adept at bringing the reader up to speed by thoroughly defining the term “black feminism” and placing it in context within American social and cultural
history. This was especially useful for me as a Canadian theatre practitioner and scholar who might not be as aware of many of the American specifics Anderson refers to. Anderson balances the task of giving just enough information to be supportive of the reader without overcompensating and leading the reader off-topic. While Anderson focuses on black feminist theatre aesthetics in the beginnings of the twenty first century, she stresses that the term “black feminism” and its following aesthetic fluidly shifts in meaning among the artists that align themselves with the term.

The book gets murky in the descriptions of the plays themselves. Anderson does an admirable job of closely investigating each play’s creation, carefully putting it in social, political, cultural and historical context. Additionally, she discusses the production of each play and how the production itself challenges dominant stereotypes of black women and all black people in America. However, often the plays descriptions are fragmented and sometimes hard to follow. And while Anderson’s efforts to place the plays (including their characters, the performance style, the plot, the writing, the creation process) in context are well done and detailed, the narrative of the analysis and description is problematic. This fragmented aspect is not consistent among the descriptions of various plays, and some descriptions are easier to follow than others; I do wonder if this fragmented aspect is in part due to the nature of the specific play being described than Anderson’s writing.

Overall, I commend Anderson’s achievement as a clear, critical analysis of black feminist theatre practices in contemporary America. The book offers a thoughtful perspective on an area of scholarly literature where there is a significant dearth.

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**The Director’s Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre**

Katie Mitchell’s book *The Director’s Craft* is a detailed, unique description of her process as a theatre director. Mitchell’s reputation as a British director is one who is adventurous, thoughtful, distinctive and well respected and her book lends itself well to this reputation.

Through *The Director’s Craft*, Mitchell provides exceedingly detailed and thoughtful information on many - and I might even argue ‘all’- aspects of directing a piece of theatre. This includes but is certainly not limited to articulating the ideas underpinning a play’s text, research and preparation of the text, building relationships with members of your team including designers and stage managers, building relationships and working with actors, managing the transition from rehearsal hall to stage, managing technical rehearsals and moving into performances. Throughout the book, Mitchell provides specific, practical things for the reader/director to move each stage of the work forward. Additionally, she uses examples from her own work, usually her production of *The Seagull* at the Royal National Theatre in the UK, in order to ground her description of process in practical examples. But Mitchell does not revel in her theatrical successes; rather, she finds a balance for readers to learn from her own mistakes and learning
process in addition to the successes. She is careful to point out her own weaknesses, not as a façade of humbleness, but as a thoughtful way to guide the reader to be self-reflective.

This is a ‘how-to’ book, but Mitchell is also clear that this is one version of ‘how-to’: her version. What is partly so refreshing about this book is that while Mitchell is so detailed and precise in her description of her process, she does not bombard the reader. She is confident in her writing style without being domineering or overbearing and provides the reader with enough space to envision his own working style within her frame. Based on this writing style and thorough detailed description of process, one can imagine that her directing style would hold a similar balance between confidence of vision and space for others to create.

That said, Mitchell several times throughout the book refers to ‘the scientific’ – she goes into more detail in the final section of the book when she describes her influences. She discusses how impressed she was in her first class with Lev Dodin, the Artistic Director of the Maly Theatre in St Petersburg, and his “scientific discipline” in his approach to working with actors. This admiration for the scientific is evident as her approach to directing does call for a certain distance and extreme thoroughness - or ‘rigour,’ to use a scientific word - which may not suit all readers or directors. Regardless, even as a point for discussion and learning, this book would do well in the hands of any emerging director looking for guidance or seasoned practitioner looking for new insights and possibilities.

Julia Gray