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Review: Cathy Leeny’s Irish Women Playwrights 1900-1939: Gender and Violence on Stage

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Cathy Leeny’s book *Irish Women Playwrights 1900-1939: Gender and Violence on Stage* explores the work of five Irish playwrights working in the early decades of the twentieth century: Augusta Gregory, Eva Gore-Booth, Dorothy Macardle, Mary Manning and Teresa Deevy. Leeny’s book recovers and explores women playwrights who have been left out of earlier accounts of the development of Irish theatre in the twentieth century. In this way she counters what Elizabeth Grosz calls the ‘strategic amnesia’ that underlies the formation of the canon. In this gendered analysis, Leeny argues that the work of these women changes the paradigms used to describe the development of Irish theatre from its early formation.

*Irish Women Playwrights* explores the ways in which Irish history and the struggle for independence powerfully impacted not only women’s lives but also their creativity in the theatre. Leeny analyses these playwrights against the historical backdrop of Irish independence and is careful to take into consideration the special political-cultural role played by theatre in Ireland at this time; its aim was to establish a separate national identity. Leeny offers well-written, clear and insightful commentary on the cultural and political value of each woman’s work and explores how each playwright created images of violence in a gendered world on stage.

The book is divided into five chapters, each taking a different playwright as its focus. The chapters cumulatively show how these writers come into their theatrical inheritance in addition to how they challenge it by strategically manipulating theatrical traditions and conventions. For example myth and folklore were used to critique and re-invent patriarchal representations; these playwrights used space and dramatic language to stretch and sometimes break theatrical forms and conventions allowing them to say what they wished to say. The book discusses the plays, their theatrical techniques, limits and potentials as well as the way in which they use theatrical construction to question social construction.

Leeny defines performance in the anthropological sense as a ritual enactment of transformation, moving from a state of liminality through change to a new state of being. According to anthropologists, this transformative process involves violent action, either symbolic or actual to mark that process. Leeny also investigates women’s relationship with the role of violence in the theatrical element of ritual form.

http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wit/index
This book will be particularly interesting to students, teachers and practitioners of women’s theatre and performance. Leeny details the variety of ways in which these women went against the cultural, political and theatrical grain. Contrary to the prevailing tradition at the time, the playwrights highlighted represent women’s worlds on stage. Leeny looks carefully at the gender subtext at work in each play and assesses its challenge of contemporary narratives of Irishness and so would be useful for anyone interested in performance and identity. This book is highly accessible and leads the reader through each playwright’s work in a clear, concise way.