

Gene A. Plunka, *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 454 pages + Bibliography and Index. ISBN # 0521494257. Hardcover \$107.00

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Historian Yehuda Bauer argues that in the West the Holocaust has come to symbolize the complete devaluation of human life. Our ongoing remembrance of it reflects a strong contemporary desire to resist the kinds of crises that threaten to topple civilization.¹ Holocaust remembrance can include silent commemoration, erecting memorials, writing historical accounts and artful representation, among other means. While artistically rendering the Holocaust takes many forms, the theater has long been a site in which to wrestle with the messages and meanings of Germany's Third Reich and its attendant barbarism. Scholars are especially attentive to Holocaust drama because of the confrontational and emotive experience induced by the dynamic between actors and audience. Consequently, Holocaust theater is an effective gauge of what is being remembered and how that remembrance is communicated and received. Therefore, the body of work addressing Holocaust drama is sizable. To this genre, comparative literature professor Gene A. Plunka, currently at the University of Memphis, adds a well-written and well-rounded monograph.

Plunka's *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity* is especially useful for Anglo-American audiences with a cursory understanding of the Shoah and Shoah-based plays; it is a deft introduction to the topic for numerous reasons. First, the reader is made aware that some individuals believe that the term "Holocaust" fails to capture the unique destruction of European Jewry. Therefore, the Hebrew term "Shoah" is preferred. Plunka uses the two words interchangeably out of deference to the latter's sense of "destruction" or "catastrophe" while acknowledging that the "Holocaust" fully permeates Western collective consciousness. Plunka does not present himself as a Holocaust exclusivist though,

¹ Yehuda Bauer, "The Impact of the Holocaust," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 548 (November 1996), 15.

observing that non-Jewish individuals were also victimized by the Nazis. He likely sees the Holocaust as a unique historical genocidal event in which Nazi state-sponsored programs of oppression culminated in the systematic murder of eleven million individuals, of which five to six million were Jews. His expansive understanding allows room to analyze plays such as Martin Sherman's *Bent* (1979) about the Nazi persecution of gay men. But aside from *Bent*, there is a dearth of Holocaust drama about non-Jewish victims.

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Second, the reader is made to appreciate the perceptible growth of Holocaust studies and public knowledge about the Holocaust in the decades since Nazi Germany was defeated. Plunka singles out Israel's 1960 capture and 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, West Germany's 1963 to 1965 Auschwitz trials of Nazi war criminals, and the 1978 NBC mini-series *Holocaust* as events that provoked interest in the Shoah. Related to this is, of course, a marked increase in Holocaust-based dramas. Plunka claims that 257 Holocaust plays have been written between 1945 and the late-1990s. His scope, however, is limited to produced or published dramas dealing with Nazi genocidal events that occurred between 1933 and 1945. Of those, he privileges well-known Holocaust plays. Chapter eight, for example, is wholly devoted to a protracted analysis of Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*); Plunka believes that this 1963 play about Pope Pius XII's failure to act against the Holocaust "stands out as being the most controversial and the most cited twentieth-century Holocaust drama" (p. 170). Some less recognized works are addressed, too, such as French playwright Michel Vinaver's *Overboard* (1972). Plays that deal with the 1930s and 1940s broadly or that focus on historical personalities specifically such as Adolf Hitler or any one of his henchmen are not broached. The one curious exception to this is the inclusion of Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* in the final chapter. "Despite the fact that the play never mentions Nazis or Jews directly and history is referred to allusively, *Ashes to Ashes* evokes the Holocaust," Plunka writes (p. 321). If the Holocaust does indeed loom large in our collective consciousness as this book contends and other scholars agree, then I would think that many plays induce the Shoah; why *Ashes to Ashes*

merits particular attention as the best drama to make larger claims about Holocaust and shared memory is unsatisfactorily explained.

Third, the reader is made to realize that different social, cultural, political and generational factors affect how Americans, Britons, Israelis and Europeans understand, remember, and convey messages about the Holocaust. Nevertheless, by the final chapter, “The Holocaust and Collective Memory,” the reader is left with the distinct impression that today the Holocaust is understood less as a German anomaly and more like a Western phenomenon. In part, the compulsion to produce Shoah-based dramas is wrapped in the desire to understand what the historical genocide says about humanity writ large. The motivations behind the dramas *Eli* (1958) and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955) and others like them were in part to “transcend the Holocaust by universalizing the experience,” Plunka writes (p. 94).

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Fourth, the reader is made to understand the challenges that face Holocaust dramatists. Playwrights of the Shoah are confronted with a tension between a desire to silently memorialize the Holocaust so as to eschew trivialization and a contrasting impulse to “bear witness” to Nazi crimes. Theodor Adorno’s oft-cited claim that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric is used to introduce the concern of whether art in its myriad forms can accurately or appropriately render the seemingly incomprehensible comprehensible. Holocaust dramatists and their work are deemed good or bad in terms of whether they are historically accurate and whether their representativeness is respectful. Plunka unpacks the historical and moral burdens placed upon the shoulders of Holocaust dramatists by way of interpreting a few dozen Shoah-based plays in dialogue with and building upon the critical opinions of scholars of Holocaust theatre. The prominent academics Plunka engages with include Lawrence Langer, Robert Skloot, Vivian M. Patraka and Edward Isser, among others.

Fifth and finally, the reader is made to comprehend the unique insights into the Holocaust’s meaning afforded by theater. Plunka assesses productions in terms of theatrical execution, donning “the hat [of] a drama critic” to use his own words (p. 19). He argues that there is immediacy to theatre which other art forms lack. Playwrights at times

elicit certain audience responses to controversial effect. For example, Peter Barnes's *Laughter!* (1978) consists of two one-act plays, *Tsar* and *Auschwitz*. In *Auschwitz*, the audience is to empathize with the Nazi bureaucrats who ran the extermination camp thereby "mak[ing] us complicit in a carefully crafted web of evil" (p. 32); the result is indictment of the audience. Such ploys complicate our understanding of what Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil" in her 1963 *Eichmann in Jerusalem* report. Therefore, live drama in Plunka's estimate "seems to be an ideal medium to represent [the] eternal conflicts and dilemmas" the Holocaust provokes (p. 16).

Ultimately, the book's strengths lay in the last two points which together involve Plunka historically contextualizing Holocaust theater. He factually grounds his discussion of the theater's ability or inability to wrest meaning from ostensibly meaningless genocidal events and to communicate (or not) an understanding of the Holocaust to an audience. Furthermore, each chapter consistently relays relevant historical information about its topic. For example, a section about Shoah survivors first summarizes Jewish immigration to the United States and Israel immediately after World War Two. The book overall is organized into 14 thematic chapters; many of the themes used to frame the chapters will be familiar to scholars in the field. Plunka, for instance, covers subjects such as the persistence of Jewish culture inside Nazi concentration camps, physical and psychological defilement and degradation during the Holocaust, survivor memories, politics—particularly Marxism—and the Holocaust as well as culpability for the Holocaust.

While Plunka charts the rocky route from historical reality, so to speak, to representation, he at times does not go far enough in problematizing queries such as: Whose historical experience is to be rendered and why? What makes one Holocaust play more authentically historic than another? How might a play's claim to historical authenticity be undermined when fictional characters are incorporated? And what does it mean to use Holocaust theatre as an allegory to address pressing present-day socio-political concerns? When everything is taken into account, however, the fact that Plunka's book raises these questions to begin with and encourages deeper contemplation of these and other

enquiries makes this work a significant addition to the literature about Holocaust theatre. By firmly rooting his discussion in history while also offering his own reading of the plays, Plunka has something germane to say to laypeople and also scholars working in a variety of disciplines. He covers much terrain with reverence for the topic. This book is highly readable and is the recommended first stop for those individuals new to the subject. 108