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Christopher Bigsby, Twenty-First Century American Playwrights

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Christopher Bigsby, *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pb. \$24.99. Pp. 220. 978-1-108-41144-8.

The latest book from Christopher Bigsby offers a comprehensive survey of the work of nine dramatists whose plays have been written mostly or exclusively in the twenty-first century. The chosen playwrights are Annie Baker, Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, Katori Hall, Amy Herzog, Tracy Letts, David Lindsay-Abaire, Lynn Nottage, Sarah Ruhl, and Naomi Wallace. In choosing these dramatists, whose work is stylistically quite varied, Bigsby notes that he “began with no agenda” (2) but discovered both a pleasing ethnic and geographical diversity and some commonalities among those he selected. Seven of the nine, for example, are women; many of them achieved early success in British productions prior to the American staging of their plays. Bigsby acknowledges that constraints of space meant that “many significant writers” (1) had to be omitted and he further avoids naming any of these others in an attempt to ward off complaints about such omissions. Undeterred, I put in a plea for Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, author of innovative, timely, and provocative works such as *An Octoroon*, a brilliant meta-melodramatic adaptation of Boucicault’s nineteenth-century play. Even if Bigsby had no “agenda” for his selection of playwrights, it would have been helpful if he had made explicit whatever criterion he used in making his choices—even if it was simply a matter of personal preference or familiarity with particular playwrights.

Bigsby devotes a chapter to each dramatist, providing pertinent biographical information, analytical summaries of each play, and, when necessary, historical contextual information, for example concerning the Venona project to explain the upsetting revelation in Herzog’s *After the Revolution*, based on her own family story, that a revered socialist grandfather was actually a spy. Bigsby comments perceptively on the plays’ major themes and dramatic strategies,

highlighting the distinctive qualities of each playwright—Baker’s use of silences, Ruhl’s metatheatricity, Nottage’s focus on stories of black women that are often “erased” in “larger narratives” (152). He includes also a wealth of illuminating observations about their work from the dramatists themselves and accounts of the plays’ often disparate reception in England and America. Wallace, for example, an explicitly political playwright, has found more sympathetic audiences in England, “where radical politics were not regarded with the suspicion they tended to be in her own country” (195). Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop*—about an encounter between Martin Luther King and a hotel maid who turns out to be an angel on the night before King’s assassination—won an Olivier award for Best New Play in England but opened to a disparaging critical reception in New York two years later. The discrepancy was variously ascribed to different levels of awareness of King’s life (by Chris Jones in the *Chicago Tribune*), to the conservative preference for realism of American theatre (by Michael Billington in the *Guardian*), and by Bigsby himself to the more congenial intimate theatre space in London versus the large theatre and star actors used in New York (58-60).

While sometimes Bigsby engages with broader cultural issues, *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights* is most admirable and useful to students and scholars for its comprehensive treatment of the chosen dramatists and for the kind of astute critical perceptions that one has come to expect from the doyen of scholarship in American drama. Notable, for example, is Bigsby’s discussion of Baker’s use of silence in her plays (at least a third of *The Aliens* consists in silence). Writing of the silences between KJ and Jasper, whom he calls the Vladimir and Estragon of *The Aliens*, Bigsby comments that they are “spaces left by those who understand one another and have no need to fill them. More often they reflect sudden caesuras forced by conversations that run up against emotional limits. At times they allow room for

interior worlds to become apparent” (19). And the book is studded with brilliant insights that succinctly capture the essence of an important theme or of the whole play. Letts’s *August: Osage County*, Bigsby remarks, is *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* “as full orchestra rather than mordant quartets” (108). And he gets at the heart of Lindsay-Abaire’s *Rabbit Hole*—about a couple living with the grief of losing a child to a banal road accident—commenting, “If irony is the conscious use of understatement, here emotional understatement serves to underscore the fact that nothing is commensurate with a loss that blots out all sense of coherence” (133).

It is a pity, then, that Bigsby has not been served well by his publisher. Despite the excellence of sentences such as those just quoted, the book is also full of stylistic infelicities: pronouns far removed from their antecedents, participial phrases that appear to be haphazardly attached to their sentences in order to pack in as much information as possible, awkward constructions and typographical errors that should have been caught in proofreading. These irritations mar an otherwise excellent introduction to the newest generation of American playwrights.

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