Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany (review)

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extracts are printed in the original language (usually Middle French) within the body of the text, followed by a translation in parentheses.

When The Medieval Theater of Cruelty delves into legal, linguistic, and rhetorical issues, however, it can be tough going for a reader new to these topics. Death by Drama is, first and foremost, easier to read. The connection to, and comparison with, modern urban legends is well thought out and provides a thread for the casual reader to follow through medieval theatre history and cultural studies. The writing is less dense and uses less specialized terminology. The index is friendlier, especially for the reader interested in a particular play or performance but not entirely sure of its correct title. Enders translates all extracts into English and includes the original text for short extracts in an endnote. For longer extracts, a 40-page appendix provides original documents in French and Latin. Enders conceives of this book as "a kind of hybrid form, situated somewhere between short stories and literary theory, in which the storytellers could tell their own stories and in which the telling itself would provide the 'key' to the interpretation—if there were one" (xxviii). Death by Drama is a near-perfect marriage of archival research, theory, and story telling, which Enders hopes will reach “medievalists, theater historians, cultural historians, performance theorists, fiction lovers, urban-legend mavens, and general readers” (xxviii). I say near-perfect because, in my opinion, it goes a bit too far in striving after reader-friendly prose. The thread that ties each story to the others is spun out of a repetition of details that I found irritating; however, this may well benefit a casual reader or a reader new to the subject matter. If you have not read Enders before and you are not already comfortable with either the history and theory of rhetoric or medieval theatre history, begin with Death by Drama. You won’t want to stop there.

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ETHNIC DRAG: PERFORMING RACE, NATION, SEXUALITY IN WEST GERMANY.

Katrin Sieg’s detailed account of ethnic drag as an index of the ways in which West Germans have engaged with, disavowed, and contested race in the post-Nazi period not only makes for fascinating reading but also expands and refines contemporary theoretical debates about masquerade and performativity. Working from concepts elaborated by critics such as Marjorie Garber and Judith Butler, but more cautious about claiming drag as an inherently subversive practice that challenges identity norms, Sieg shows the very complex relationships between performances of ethnicity and ethnicity’s collective construction in specific historical and social situations. As a result, she is able to deliver both nuanced and penetrating observations on ethnic drag that take into account radical differences in positions of access to cultural power.

The book’s analysis of ethnic drag’s variable ideological work unfolds through a series of case studies that emphasizes the need for contingent interpretations of this performative trope. Collectively, Sieg’s paradigmatic examples—drawn from theatre, film, popular culture, ethnographic representation, and recreational practices—suggest connections between specific ethnic masquerades across low and high culture in Germany, while sketching the complex substitutions, identifications, and disidentifications that drag entails. To contextualize her study historically, the author begins her case examples with an account of early-twentieth-century ethnic impersonation in Germany as enacted in Jew Farces (which derided attempts by Jews to assimilate and pass as German) and particular versions of Gotthold Lessing’s classic humanitarian play, Nathan the Wise (1779). These performances, Sieg argues, helped to establish both the state-approved representations of anti-semitism evident in such texts as the now-censored Nazi-era propaganda film Jew Süss (1940) and also various positive depictions of Jews in a post-war theatre anxious to put the shame of the holocaust behind it.

Chapters 2 and 3 posit intricate links between German impersonations of American Indians and the nation’s generalized failure to atone for the atrocities of Hitler’s regime. In the various adaptations of Karl May’s Winnetou westerns perennially staged at Bad Segeberg’s summer festival since 1952, Sieg discerns a cathartic purging of historical guilt via the theatrical transfer of genocide from Germany to the American frontier, where the fictional German hero can act as blood brother and sympathizer to the Indians whose traditions are at risk. This is a convincing argument, well supported by a close analysis of the festival performances and a masterful précis of relevant social and historical factors. The proposition that this kind of ethnic drag operates as a “technology of forgetting” (84) in Germany is subsequently elaborated in an entertaining account of ethnic masquerade within Indian hobbyism (a leisure activity involving the
study and/or quasi-ethnographic performance of Indianness), although Sieg takes a more positive view of this surprisingly widespread practice, arguing, unconvincingly in my view, that hobbyist impersonations demonstrate a form of ethnic competence that recognizes the limitations of biological concepts of race.

Moving to the processes by which the antifascist drag of the New Left attempted to examine race and ethnicity through depictions of foreigners migrating to Germany, Sieg identifies impersonation as a somewhat compromised pedagogical tool in texts that betray their authors’ self-positioning as spokespersons for the subaltern classes. The following section, which explores homosexual desire in dramas about colonial conquest and third-world tourism, reveals further aspects of the white subject’s investments in racialized cultural encounters. While both these chapters deliver highly sophisticated readings of the texts they discuss, they are missing the persistent awareness of theatricality that makes the earlier parts of the book so compelling. With the final chapter on ethnic travesties, Sieg’s critique regains its full force, particularly in the eloquent discussion of the ways in which the triangulation of actor, in-group spectator, and dupe distinguishes the performances in racialized cultural encounters. While both these chapters deliver highly sophisticated readings of the texts they discuss, they are missing the persistent awareness of theatricality that makes the earlier parts of the book so compelling. With the final chapter on ethnic travesties, Sieg’s critique regains its full force, particularly in the eloquent discussion of the ways in which the triangulation of actor, in-group spectator, and dupe distinguishes between mimetic and performative readings of identity. Her inclusion of Spiderwoman’s travesty, Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City (1988), as a case example in this section constitutes a satisfying coda to the earlier analysis of Indian impersonation, which, in turn, provides an instructive context for interpreting this native American play as more than simply a generic spoof of New Age spiritualism.

The dialectic between mimesis and masquerade is the central conceptual structure underpinning this book. Sieg describes her primary aims as to question the “assumption that masquerade challenges the social prejudices that mimesis confirms” (11) and to ask which performances of race and/or ethnicity are privileged as authentic—or not. These prove to be fruitful questions, particularly as they are conceived with a seemingly thorough knowledge of feminist and queer theory. Sieg’s engagement with postcolonial theory (also an important critical axis in a study such as this) is more tentative and less well informed, leading, for instance, to claims that Western postcolonialism maintains a strict separation of such binary identity markers as spirituality and materialism, primitivism and modernity, and so forth. This fails to acknowledge the extensive scholarly work done on hybridity within postcolonial studies, both in the Anglo-American academy and in non-Western contexts. My only other quibble with the book is that it largely neglects to discuss the reception of the texts chosen as case studies. A selection of reviews, or even anecdotal comments like the one quoted in the Spiderwoman section, would have added depth to Sieg’s otherwise impressive theorization of the ideal spectator.

Overall, Ethnic Drag makes a substantial contribution to contemporary theatre studies, offering simultaneously an original, highly readable account of West German performance practices and a range of productive models for interpreting drag in ever more complex cultural configurations.

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This eclectic array of essays, inspired by a Queer Theatre Conference at The City University of New York in 1995, is touted on the back cover as “a pioneering collection of articles by and conversations among a diverse range of leading theater academics and artists.” While offering some truly fine, thoughtful, and even provocative writings useful for both the classroom and theatre practice, the “pioneering” promise has perhaps faded since the collection’s catalytic gathering, and several of the dialogues published are not as effective as are the stand-alone essays.

Many of the contributors look at the debate around embracing or rejecting the term “queer” for their work and themselves, whether they are scholars or artists (and some regard themselves as both). Jill Dolan’s prefatory remarks, from her keynote address at the conference, aptly set the stage for the essays that follow. She argues that “queer” means multiplicity, and that to be queer “is not who you are, it’s what you do” (5).

Alisa Solomon, in “Great Sparkles of Lust: Homophobia and the Antitheatrical Tradition,” deftly links the Puritan fear of the performances of boy-actresses in early modern England with contemporary anxieties about queer performance in the historically antitheatrical United States. She points out that theatre is a place where “heteronormative master plots could be undercut and questioned through self-conscious performance styles, even as they were played out in the stories staged” (14).