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The Censorship of British Drama 1900-1968 (review)

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after 1922 it could be argued that the lack of overt legislative control over Irish theatre was an aspect of the internalized self-control, policed by a Catholic social order, that governed so many facets of Irish society in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

It must be said, however, that there is much in *Riot and Great Anger* that is new (particularly twentieth-century material), culled with obvious care and effort from the archives. The book is at its best when the author makes full use of her detailed research by analysing individual instances of stage censorship in their rich contexts. So the chapter here dealing with the tumultuous response to George A. Birmingham's *General John Regan* in Westport on 4 February 1914 is arguably the strongest in the book, weaving a vivid account of the micro-politics that made a particular group of people, on a particular night, decide to break the social contract between actors and audience (in this case, by throwing chairs at the stage). Equally successful is the section of the book dealing with Lennox Robinson's *Roly Poly* in 1942. The book is less successful when it attempts to hammer this kind of detail into lasting patterns of Irish identity – patterns that the specificity of the individual theatrical event constantly resists.

#### WORK CITED

BROOKE, HENRY. *Poems and Plays of Henry Brooke, Esq.* 2nd ed. 4 Vols. London: John Sewell, 1789.



STEVE NICHOLSON. *The Censorship of British Drama 1900–1968*. Vol. 1. Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2003. Pp. 350. £39.50 (Hb).

*Reviewed by Nadine Holdsworth, University of Warwick*

This is the first of two volumes that will chart and analyse the Lord Chamberlain's theatre censorship in Britain from 1900 until 1968, the year of its abolition. This volume, which covers the period 1900 to 1932, offers a highly readable, intelligent, and good-humoured account of the complex intersection of historical, political, social, and cultural forces that influenced censorship during this period. The writing is lively, authoritative, and full of wonderful detail acquired during Nicholson's meticulous research into the Lord Chamberlain's theatre and correspondence archives that include internal reports on every play submitted, alongside numerous exchanges with powerful agencies such as the government, the monarchy, the church, the armed forces, foreign embassies, and the aptly named Public Morality Council. The scope of Nicholson's research is admirable for many reasons, not least for the months

he spent reading every file in the Lord Chamberlain's Collection. But it is more than this. By refusing to limit his study to the "great and the good," Nicholson reveals much about the overall character of British theatrical life during this period, about the themes and issues that preoccupied the censors, and the political implications of how a powerful elite exerted both overt and covert pressure on such a vital component of cultural practice. What is staggering is the extent to which figures of state and the censors accorded power to theatre to influence, corrupt, seduce, and degrade by the mere presence of an unclothed body or mention of alternative ways of thinking and living to the established status quo. An interesting line of investigation that runs throughout the book is the extent to which the "liveness" of theatre and its place as a public communal event influenced these concerns. And presumptions about the class, gender, and ethnicity of audiences reveal a great deal about ingrained social structures during the first part of the twentieth century.

Nicholson divides the book into two sections, covering the periods 1900–18 and 1919–32. Section one outlines the principles and practices governing theatre censorship in the early part of the twentieth century and the reliance on notions of public morality, decency, and "acceptable" standards. It covers the age of empire, the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the campaign for women's suffrage, the controversy over the white slave trade, and high-profile debates over Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession*, and the trial relating to Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. It details the numerous campaigns to abolish or reform theatre censorship led by prolific playwrights such as J.M. Barrie, Harley Granville Barker, and George Bernard Shaw, and the last's witty and sharply satirical correspondence points up the confusions and anomalies embedded in a deeply flawed system. Chapter two provides detailed analysis of the debates, controversies, proposals, and recommendations that emerged during the 1909 government enquiry into censorship. The remaining two chapters of the first section look specifically at work that emerged during the First World War and attempts by the Lord Chamberlain's office to encourage positive propaganda and hinder performances of plays that were deemed detrimental to the war effort and public morality. The second section investigates the censorship of specific themes and issues. Separate chapters tackle horror and religion; sexual relations including marriage, abortion, homosexuality, cross-dressing, incest, and promiscuity; and the portrayal of domestic politics through representations of the British army, monarchy, the class structure, industrial unrest, and Irish nationalism. The final chapter, entitled "Foreign Bodies," explores the Lord Chamberlain's approach to works that touch on international politics through the portrayal of other nations, races, and cultures. Touching on specific campaigns such as the Turkish-Armenian conflict, the depiction of various religions such as Islam and Hinduism, as well as wider concerns with mixed-race relationships and any representations likely to undermine the British Empire or to provoke a diplo-

matic incident, this chapter continues to provide the same incisive commentary, detailed examples, and shocking revelations that characterize the rest of the book. For example, Nicholson is quick to express his own discomfort with the fact that the “rape of a white woman by a black man was potentially less disturbing and more acceptable than consensual sex” and quotes a report from the Lord Chamberlain’s office that claims “it is not disgusting as it would be if the women were willing” (290–91). Throughout the book, Nicholson probes the implications of decisions to endorse, cut, rewrite, restrict, and censor lines, characters, speeches, and themes and establishes how these decisions interrelate with the wider political climate. The result is an excellent book, which both illuminates a vital period of theatre history and reveals a great deal about the internal mechanisms, shifting agendas, intricate negotiations, compromises, and revisions overseen by the Lord Chamberlain’s office. It leaves a vivid impression of the culture and prevalent political discourses that governed theatre censorship during this time and provides a powerful indictment of a pompous and insidious agent of repression that attempted to preserve the veneer of a polite, unquestioning society. Together with the second volume, this work provides a welcome end to the trilogy that includes L.W. Conolly’s *The Censorship of English Drama 1737–1824* and John Russell Stephens’ *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901* and should be welcomed as a long overdue account of the role and function of British theatre censorship during the twentieth century.



GABRIELE GRIFFIN. *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 291. US\$65; £45 (Hb).

*Reviewed by Nandi Bhatia, University of Western Ontario*

As “the first monograph to document and analyse the plays written by Black and Asian women in Britain,” this is a much-needed book that makes a timely appearance in theatre, feminist, migration, and colonial and post-colonial studies, which, as the author correctly points out, have been slow to pay any sustained attention to this area of high activity. Aided by the works of cultural, feminist, and theatre theorists such as Avtar Brah, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Paul Gilroy, Helen Gilbert, and Joanne Tompkins, Griffin provides a comprehensive and detailed analysis of plays that

bespeak the histories from which these theatres have emerged, histories of colonization, of cultural appropriation and commodification, of cultural exchange, curiosity, transformation, and international engagement, mostly on a highly