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Popular Culture Icons in Contemporary American Drama
(review)

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KONSTANTINOS BLATANIS. *Popular Culture Icons in Contemporary American Drama*. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003. Pp. 195. \$38.50 (Hb).

Reviewed by Robert Baker-White, Williams College

In this intelligent and well-written book, Konstantinos Blatanis interrogates the place of what he calls “popular culture icons” in a wide array of modern American dramatic fiction. The word *icon* in the title is somewhat misleading, as the phenomena that Blatanis investigates range from cartoon characters, to musical styles, even to geographical referents (“the west”). Even for Blatanis himself, the investigation seems a bit hard to define. The subject here is “the icon, the image, the simulacrum, [and] the visible sign” (10). And yet in the end, that is a good thing: the book’s strengths derive from the eclecticism of its breadth and scope of inquiry. The full list of playwrights addressed in the study is too long to produce here, but some of those who receive the most prominent treatment include Arthur Kopit, Sam Shepard, Jean Claude Van Itallie, Lanford Wilson, Terrence McNally, David Rabe, Thomas Babe, Michael McClure, Adrienne Kennedy, Marsha Norman, and Len Jenkin. Familiar texts from these writers form the core of much of Blatanis’ argument (*The Tooth of Crime*, *True West*, *A Movie Star Has To Star in Black and White*, *TV*, to name a few), but some other, less commonly cited (or produced) works also figure prominently, including Normans’ *The Holdup*, McNally’s *Where Has Tommy Flowers Gone?* and Guare’s *Kissing Sweet*. Within these and other texts, the complications of the parodic and persistently ironic nature of popular cultural reference are relentlessly hunted down. The book proceeds primarily through a series of close readings of many different plays. The chapters are organized by type of influence, rather than by any systematic grouping of playwrights, thus the subjects become “Hollywood and Rock Mythologies,” “Television,” “Pulp Fiction Iconography,” and “Images of the West.” Each of these general areas is introduced with a set of theoretical frames drawn primarily from the post-Frankfurt school postmodern lexicon that tends to critique popular culture as simultaneously pernicious and playful.

Blatanis effectively calls attention to the constant play of an “insider/outsider” dichotomy with respect to popular culture generally, and interrogates the degree to which the playwrights in question function as external critics or hip accomplices in their use of popular iconography. He convincingly concludes that both things are true, not in that such perspectives are employed serially over time, but rather in that contemporary playwrights essentially “have it both ways” through the force of their artistic deployment of iconographic figures, landscapes, tropes, and language itself. He frames the crucial questions early on: “To what extent do playwrights merely quote from pop and how are their own imaginative capacities employed? How are all aspects

of the dramatic field affected by this interaction? Does it also redefine the line of communication between the stage and the audience?" (19). His principal concern, eventually answered in the affirmative, is succinctly posed: "Do playwrights manage to establish a fruitful critique of the workings of popular culture as such?" (19).

This book insists throughout that a high-low split is inappropriate to the discussion, and specifically that the playwrights he investigates do not conceive of the popular imagery and milieu as below the level of their "art." Rather, he suggests that these artists move beyond such binary conceptions and into a series of idiosyncratic and important personal explorations of the place of pop in our cultural self-understanding through a delicate, "dialectical rapport" (172). As suggested above, Blatanis carefully demonstrates how the playwrights are "able to speak to their own culture from 'within,' but without being consumed by it" (22). Yet he does allow that, for many of these playwrights, "the theatre images they write in may function as openings and fractures in the contemporary cultural horizon" (22). This is not an unfamiliar trope in the postmodern vocabulary of resistance, and the idea that "fractures" move us toward a greater understanding of cultural phenomena certainly has an established critical-theory pedigree. But exactly which types of fractures or openings occur here is not always clear. Sam Shepard is by far the most commonly cited playwright within the study. That this is so attests to the idea that Shepard's dramas may present us with our most difficult test cases of "the place of the popular" in theatrical art. Blatanis reads Shepard as he reads many of these playwrights, that is, as an artist immersed in popular culture but not specifically above it, who nonetheless somehow uses the popular to create something that is inevitably other than, and almost certainly more than, popular. In Shepard's case, the question of how popular images are wielded has long been a contentious site, not insignificantly within the realm of feminist criticism that long ago called the writing to task for (perhaps) merely "playing the myths" of macho American identity, rather than somehow engaging in critical analysis of those myths. Blatanis for his part does not directly engage such questions (which are not confined to feminist inquiry, but also relate to questions of material culture generally, and other "political" arenas). Indeed he disavows that the works in his study evince "commitment to any specific political cause" (173). Perhaps that is not surprising, but the sidestepping of politics as such might make us wonder just which questions are being asked. Not all that long ago, such a lack of politics was almost always read precisely as a politics. In the postmodern world, Blatanis' study seems to confirm, everything is far more slippery than that. He does conclude fairly strongly that, in the aggregate, the playwrights investigated here produce a relatively sharp "questioning" and "overall critique of cultural capital production in postmodernity" (174).

There is a great deal to be admired in this study: Blatanis insightfully con-

trasts “the flatness of the visible” (174) with the uniqueness of the present stage moment; he convincingly explores similarities between Wild West Shows and tele-icons as simulacra; and he even evokes mythologized rock stars as those who would (quoting Barthes) “displace the subject’s topology” (64). The readings here energize many of these plays in new ways. If the “politics” in question are not always clear, certainly that is due to the state of our increasingly bizarre “pop” environment. Konstantinos Blatanis does much to show us how that environment is inexhaustibly recapitulated and, at times, transformed in the modern theatre.

ANDREA MOST. *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. Pp. xiii + 253, illustrated. \$29.95 (Hb).

Reviewed by David Krasner, Yale University

This cogently argued book examines the contributions of Jewish songwriters and lyricists in the golden age of Broadway musical theatre. Beginning with Samson Raphaelson’s *Jazz Singer* (1925) and ending with Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1951 musical *King and I*, *Making Americans* illuminates the conflicting issues experienced by immigrant Jews caught between ethnic pride and what the author calls the “assimilation effect” (9). Utilizing a New Historicist framework (a literary theory that examines texts through their historical contexts), Most borrows W.E.B. Du Bois’ well-known description of “double consciousness” in explaining competing cultural forces. Under the influence of these forces, prominent Jewish composers such as Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George and Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein II, Lorenz Hart, and Richard Rodgers helped define American musical theatre. They are credited with creating a popular style that incorporated Tin Pan Alley, jazz, big band orchestration, and vaudeville, and then turning it into musical theatre with coherent narratives and social commentary.

Most’s path through this material is poised and well-researched. The opening chapter lays the groundwork by examining musical theatre that became a place where Jews might “negotiate their emergence into modern, cosmopolitan, non-Jewish societies” (13). Chapter two concerns the relationship between cultural loyalties and show business success. While the author side-steps the issue of racism in the blackface performance of *The Jazz Singer*, she examines the protagonist’s confrontation with his Jewish-American identity. Most also takes up Gus Kahn’s *Whoopee* (1929) and George and Ira Gershwin’s *Girl Crazy* (1930), recognizing the feminizing male as portrayed by Eddie Cantor in *Whoopee*. The book also examines how Jewish authors, using