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Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain
(review)

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Modern Drama, Volume 48, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 206-208 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2005.0003>

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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

politicized, uneven playing field on which the drama of the politics of the day found – and continues to find – cultural expression in contemporary theatre, performance, and theory. (1–2)

Griffin's work is invaluable because of the contextual and theatrical details it provides about the plays, the information on playwrights who draw on real-life events to tell gendered tales of their experiences, the multiple meanings underlying stage directions, cast of characters and actors, venues of performance and nature of audiences, and linguistic registers that frame the plays.

Of critical importance to all eight chapters is her discussion of the diasporic cultural redefinition of the self and of settled/unsettled identities for Asian and black women. To explore diasporic identities in all their complexities, she examines numerous topics that constitute and affect their multiply constituted selves: colonial history, sexploitation, teen pregnancy (a subject that received keen attention in the 1980s and 1990s), women seeking refuge and asylum in the 1990s, and stereotypical representations of black and Asian women through cultural commodification, media, art, and popular and political discourses. Chapter two, "Diasporic Subjects," provides close readings of Winsome Pinnock's West Indian play *Leave Taking* (1987) to show diaspora as a multi-focal condition and one that constitutes not merely a physical relocation and alienation but also "an internalized interior restlessness" (57) caused by the experience of racism, social isolation, and the "uncertainty that haunts the diasporized imagination as to its belonging" (59). Yet, in so doing, Griffin is attentive to the differences between the ways in which the first and the second generations experience their diasporic relocations: the first by comparison of their current lives with what they had been in homelands they left behind; the second through a sense of displacement and loss "without an identity they can inhabit" (59). This exploration is followed by a discussion of Trish Cooke's *Running Dream* (1993), which examines the experiences of West Indians who came to the United Kingdom between the 1950s and the 1970s and considers the effects of their migration on those who stayed behind. Of note in this chapter is the notion of the *entre-deux* condition – the in-betweenness – that is also addressed through the strategic use of local languages accessible to only a very specific audience. Chapter three addresses the meanings of *home* and returns to those homes for second-generation migrants through Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* (1991) and Maya Chowdhry's *Monsoon* (1993). The chapters that follow examine further the unsettling identities that women experience through cultural clashes, intra-racial and community tensions, the sexualization of the racialized female body in a white male-dominated economy, and the impact of living in a society fraught with racial politics and agendas. Because the representation of subjects such as arranged marriage and familial oppression faces the risk of reinforcing stereotypes, Griffin is particularly attentive to the social complexities underpinning these topics. To this

end, she carefully interweaves into her analysis a discussion of the ways in which Asian women interrogate how familial expectations regarding social codes of feminine behaviour, steeped in concepts such as *izzat* and *sharam*, complicate their identities in diasporic spaces.

Most fascinating is her discussion in chapter eight of plays about the experiences of refugees, a theme that deserves special attention in theoretical discussions of diaspora and the meanings of spaces and *home* in today's globally interconnected world. Through analyses of plays such as Amrit Wilson's *Survivors* (1999) and Tanika Gupta's *Sanctuary* (2002), Griffin amplifies the ways in which these playwrights problematize political debates on asylum-seekers and refugees to tell gendered narratives of their experiences. Situating the plays in the context of genocides and conflict in other countries that are linked to colonial pasts, she further complicates issues of home and belonging. The contextual specificity that we find in her discussion of plays is also visible in her terminology. As she charts out the terrain of black and Asian theatre since the 1980s in the introduction, Griffin is attentive to definitional work and explains the shifting discourses around the terms *black* and *Asian* from the 1980s until the present and the differences within and among the communities. Diversity among black and Asian populations, as much as between blacks, Asians, and whites, asserts Griffin, "is central to the diasporic identities they – we – inhabit" (12) and is especially relevant for discussion in Britain "where homogenization is the norm" (13).

The question "What does it mean to be Black or Asian in Britain today?" (232) underlies all the plays under review. And by addressing it, Griffin forces theatre scholars and those working on postcolonial migration to rethink the meaning of "British" theatre, and examine, in the process, its elisions and erasures, and its much-needed reconfiguration as a discipline of study. Convincingly arguing for the need for work in this area that has faced severe critical neglect, her insistence upon the inclusion of plays by Asian and black women in postcolonial, intercultural, or world theatre discourses – which, since the 1980s, have emerged as sites of critical debate and interrogation – serves as an important reminder that such inclusion is indeed long overdue.

JANE R. GOODALL. *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin: Out of the Natural Order*. London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xi + 266, illustrated. \$114.95 (Hb); \$34.95 (Pb).

Reviewed by Joseph Roach, Yale University

When choosing the title for her irreverent and readable book, which surveys the great panoply of nineteenth-century popular entertainment and moves