PROJECT MUSE®

Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli's
Plaster (review)

James S. Moy

Comparative Drama, Volume 41, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 129-132 (Review)

Published by Western Michigan University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2007.0009>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/215772>

only the content but also its function within the institutional process of its production. He identifies the power of the writer's work in the "productive tension between the private and the public paradigms" (263), an idea that runs through many essays in the volume. He also questions the common idea that sees the artist's engagement with politics as conferring an unquestionable compromise on the quality of the work. The critic treats Friel as producer and product of Irish culture and politics, moving beyond the unfruitful distinction between political and psychological drama. How mature can a political play be is demonstrated by Michael Parker's reading of *The Freedom of the City*, one of Friel's most committed plays. Drawing upon Bakhtin's notions of "parodic stylization" and "carnival" (274), the critic meticulously studies the writer's deviations from naturalistic representation and claims that the play's "concern with broader issues of authority" (273) pushes it beyond the specific historical moment of its composition. Parker implies that partiality should not be seen as equivalent with propaganda, which is actually the play's object of attack, as it dramatizes the attempt of authoritarian discourse to silence the disparate voices the play represents. Mária Kurdi's interview with the distinguished Friel scholar, Richard Pine, functions as a paradoxical epilogue: though placed at the end, it triggers even more questions, renewing our interest in Friel, as Pine himself constantly does. Notions that resonate in Friel's oeuvre run through the interview: home, storytelling, music, politics, spirituality, memory, but also Friel's relationship with Chekhov as well as other Irish writers, his Irishness, and internationalism. *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* is a book that "has value." These creative and insightful essays raise broader questions about Friel's work, demonstrating that as Friel's oeuvre becomes more established and classic, it loses nothing from its initial ability to stimulate debates and be reread in so many ways by so many critics.

MARIA GERMANOU
University of Athens

Oдай Джонсон. *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli's Plaster*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. x + 322. \$69.95.

Oдай Джонсон's *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli's Plaster* is an engaging rumination on the persistence of memory, the creation of history, and the many perspectives that different ideologies can bring to the inscription of that history. Through a series of focused case studies, Johnson brings to visibility a network of theaters long absent from the American landscape.

He argues persuasively for the persistence of organized theater in the face of antitheatrical prejudice. And, interestingly, he blunts this steadfast trajectory by noting the tenuous nature of the eighteenth-century theatrical memory, which ultimately reflects the desire of a tiny percentage of the American public, the overwhelming majority of which consisted of “menials,” slaves, and others who were economically excluded from the theater during the colonial era.

Throughout the text, Johnson makes problematic the desire that informs colonial memory. Accordingly, he offers historiographic tension to the overarching desire that has produced what we regard as history. He argues that theater thrived because purpose-built structures could be found throughout the colonies, and theater company records offer a picture of a compellingly successful enterprise. Playbills, high ticket prices, successful managers parading about town in extravagantly constructed conveyances staffed by slaves, and accounts of famous colonial political figures documenting almost daily attendance at theaters all speak to the high level of success enjoyed by the colonial theater. Indeed, Johnson maintains that the overt opposition to theater in certain areas of colonial America testifies to the success of the theater. He demonstrates how even religious opposition was subverted by the political support garnered through the advent of fraternal organizations like the Freemasons.

The study highlights the provisional nature of history and society’s desire to engage the theater’s history despite evidentiary supports that are often contradictory. At one point, Johnson estimates the theatergoing population of Philadelphia in the 1750s at around 1,500 (one-tenth of the total population of 15,000), and earlier in the book, the theater capacity is set at 300 seats. Accordingly, then, perhaps 1 to 2 percent of the entire population of Philadelphia was in attendance on a good night. Against this backdrop, Johnson maps out an absolute dearth of material substantiating the presence of theater. Thus receipts for printing playbills appear to far exceed capacity. Still, income was sufficient in 1770 Williamsburg to afford theater manager David Douglass a periwigged lifestyle with an elegant four-horse phaeton.

The awkward tension between desire, memory, and history is dramatically expressed in Johnson’s treatment of T. Allston Brown’s record of “a company of actors performing in New York from 1732 to 1734” (201–4). Johnson reminds us that the only documents substantiating Brown’s claims in 1869 for this early eighteenth-century theater company went up in smoke in 1872, when the Lena Edwin Theater burned to the ground. Accordingly, left without proper documentation, George C. D. Odell omitted this bit from the historical record, and we are duly reminded that historians “listen for voices in the rubble and when we do finally hear something, it proves to be only the slipping of the wreckage” (204–5). Still, just as we are prepared to return to the rubble, a few pages later,

six lines in an obscure diary of a young woman named Elizabeth Ashbridge, indentured to serve in New York during the years in question, emerge to support Brown's history, and this piece of the record is restored.

Those left out of the historical record because of social bias or benign neglect offer a compelling glimpse of yet another piece of social text long absent but here brought to light. Johnson reminds us that the vast majority of the population remained silent on the subject of the theater, simply put, because they were socially and economically excluded. Alexander Hamilton's servant ("my boy," "my man," "my negro Dromo") does not voice his own presence, but achieves historical visibility through the words of his master (227). Another account of slave trafficking recalls the presence of a young acrobat likely to be sold into a life as a performer. Johnson's account of Attakullakulla, a Cherokee native who attended a performance at the John Street Theatre in 1767, is fascinating, as he speculates on what the Indian might have made of the entertainment he witnessed. Whatever he thought of the theater remains unclear, but Johnson notes that Attakullakulla and his warriors eventually returned to the theater to perform a war dance. All this before wars would alter forever the path of the American enterprise.

Johnson has produced an important text that offers a fresh new look at the theater of colonial America. In addition, his close reading of eighteenth-century archival materials reminds us that much more can still be gained from further research. Johnson's study moves between the social text and the text of theater history. Key to Johnson's project are the diaries, household and business account books, lodge minute books, newspapers, clippings, playbills, broadsides, and other fugitive materials available in archives such as the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. That his work emerges out of this category of evidence serves to anticipate another type of absence that will significantly impact the future of the historical enterprise. The potential for a comprehensive perspective owes its visibility to the minutiae of life that have been preserved. Indeed, older archives such as the American Antiquarian Society, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the Newberry Library, and the British Library built their eighteenth-century collections at a time when libraries' acquisition policies aimed to be comprehensive. Storage space was plentiful, and this type of material seemed to be relatively inexpensive to maintain. If scholars listen for voices in the rubble, then the wreckage is getting smaller even as the site enlarges. Space, staffing issues, and overall maintenance costs are driving libraries to narrow their accession policies to acquire only those materials that will interest the greatest number of potential readers. Given the desire for greater relevancy, rare is the collection now willing to purchase, catalog, store, and maintain hundreds of cubic feet of material in the hope that a

few lone scholars might someday chance to encounter the six lines of diary text that will substantiate the existence of a playhouse two centuries earlier. That said, the same documents could confirm the genealogical range of a family name under investigation. Ultimately, that is the point. Not only do we listen for voices in the rubble, but many with different interests do. Perhaps the voices one might hear will not enable a specific project to proceed, but could provide evidence for something even more significant.

JAMES S. MOY

City University of Hong Kong

Matthew Isaac Cohen. *Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theatre in Colonial Indonesia, 1891–1903*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii + 473. \$30.00.

This book is a vivid description of popular theater that developed in Indonesia during the late nineteenth century. It is also a thorough analysis of social change and emerging identities in both colonial and postcolonial Indonesia. Through an exploration of the popular theater company *Komedie Stamboel*, which developed in the hands of Auguste Mahieu, the text conveys a sense of what it was like to live through these specific times as it simultaneously foregrounds what may be seen as universal characteristics of human life such as greed, envy, and need for success and recognition. The story is presented in vibrant language through more than four hundred pages and constitutes an historical documentation of a theater that heavily influenced and continues to influence the art scene in Indonesia.

To fulfil this demanding task, the author has conducted impressive archival and detective work. By following the daily press in *Komedie Stamboel*'s contemporary Indonesia, Cohen pieces together factual movements of the theater as well as developments in the theater organization and paraphernalia. However, what is perhaps even more interesting, through these sources emerges a sense of a newly created public space where morality, social norms, and social behavior are scrutinized. Through this space we learn about gossip and conflicts that develop around the phenomenon of *Komedie Stamboel*.

The book is divided into seven chapters, starting with an introduction that sets the scene of popular entertainment in Indonesia at the time when *Komedie Stamboel* enters the stage. The following five chapters take the reader on a chronologically ordered journey through the initiation, establishment, the success, and the end of *Komedie Stamboel*. In the final chapter the legacy of Mahieu is