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Nutrix

Edited by Rosy Colombo

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Michael Billington, *Affair of the Heart. British Theatre 1992 to 2020*¹

Abstract

This contribution offers a review of Michael Billington's *Affair of the Heart*, a collection of reviews by *The Guardian*'s lead theatre critic from 1992 to 2020. The collection allows for a reflection on the role of theatre reviews in today's theatrical scene, while highlighting some pivotal moments in the recent history of British Theatre, from the consequences of Thatcher's austerity policy to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In its overall, the book shows how theatre reviews may help to build a more aware and informed spectatorship, and hence to keep theatre alive through ever-changing times.

KEYWORDS: Michael Billington; *The Guardian*; theatre review; contemporary theatre; British theatre

Theatre reviews are a weird lot, an ephemeral writing for an ephemeral art: they retain a trace of the transient experience offered by a theatrical performance to its audience, but they are in themselves doomed to become quickly outdated, as the shows they write about close to leave the stage to the next one, and the next, and the next. Written for newspapers more than for specialized journals – and today more and more often for the diversified and complex landscape of dedicated internet websites and blogs – reviews have the hard task of offering a surrogate theatrical experience, of praising and/or criticizing full productions and individual performances; with theatre having now become just one choice among a plethora of entertainment possibilities – from cinema to streaming platforms and online gaming – they may also work as a way to entice or, on the contrary, repulse audiences not only from a single show, but from theatre in the overall.

What is the point, then, of making such a transitory form permanent by collecting and publishing reviews in a book? Sometimes, as in the case of Edward Said's *Music at the Limits* (2009), which collects the Palestinian thinker's writing on music including many reviews on operas and concerts, it is to shed light on the broader intellectual effort of the author – especially, as in this case, when published posthumously. *Affair of the Heart* works rather differently: not only

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because the author, Michael Billington, is still among the living, but especially because he has devoted his whole career to these Cinderellas of writing, theatre reviews – although his have been written for a lead newspaper such as *The Guardian*. The book, which collects a selection of Billington's reviews from 1992 to 2020, the year of his retirement, actually follows a previous one, *One Night Stands*, published in 1993 and reprinted in a revised edition in 2001, including reviews from 1971 to 1992 together with occasional pieces commenting on different issues in British theatre. *Affair of the Heart* follows the same structure, with a varying number of reviews per year (roughly from three to seven) and an introduction to each decade summarizing the main events in terms of politics and management.

In doing so, this work may attract a number of readers, from the theatre aficionado to the newbie, including the theatre scholar. While reviews are, indeed, as short-lived as the shows that are their subject, they also play a pivotal role in theatre scholarship, witnessing performances as they happen. In the age of compulsive recording when material on performances is more available than in previous centuries, one may be tricked into thinking that watching the video of a performance is comparable to experiencing it live; reading reviews reminds one that it is not. And this is not true only of performances such as the revival of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* in 2016 at the National Theatre, directed by Katie Mitchell, which made some of the audience members faint – as Billington mentions in his review (244). Even when fainting is not the case, reviews manage to register the impact of performances at the moment of their happening and offer a precious occasion to assess the effect of time on the reception of what have become canonical works and historical productions.

Kane is an interesting case in this respect. The period with which *Affairs of the Heart* is concerned saw, among the many pivotal events in British theatre, the rise and fall, in a span of a few years, of a playwright who has become, albeit posthumously, one of the most discussed and studied of the last decades. However, knowing that her first play, *Blasted* (1995), was poorly received is rather different than reading Billington's opening statement of his own review: "I was simply left wondering how such naïve tosh managed to scrape past the Court's normally judicious play-selection committee" (38). However, if readers wonder how the author himself feels going back to such a miscalculated response to a play which was bound to take British theatre by storm, they will not be left wondering: Billington's review is followed by *Letters to the Editor* by Martin Crimp and others defending *Blasted* from Billington's harsh criticism. The vitality of the cultural debate *Blasted* ignited is thus offered to readers in as much an unmediated form as possible; and the section closes with a note by Billington himself who, from the vantage point of the present, admits having been "hopelessly wrong" about his first assessment of the play (although, he is keen to add, "I was not entirely alone") (41).

Such a read allows to appreciate the layered experience that theatre reception, and theatre studies more generally, need to be: always aware that the pass-

ing of time prevents access to texts and performances in the same way as when they first appeared on stage, and looking for sources, such as theatre reviews, that grant us to catch a glimpse of that irrecoverable past. Hence one can read how it felt to watch the premiere of Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* in 2000, one year after her suicide, and the struggle to separate an assessment of the play from the shock that her death had been for everyone involved in British theatre at the time: "Judging *4.48 Psychosis* is difficult. How on earth do you award aesthetic points to a 75-minute suicide note?" (87). Today one may be able to look at this play from a different angle; reading Billington, however, also highlights how biographism is still rampant in studies on Kane's work, as if time had not passed at all.

I am focusing on reviews of Kane's work because she is one of the foremost, and most discussed, personalities in British theatre from the time span included in *Affair of the Heart*; she has also been the focus of some of my work as a theatre scholar, so reception of her plays is inevitably of more interest to me than other material included in the book. This is, I believe, one of the characteristics of this collection, which is not best when read front to back. On the contrary, inflicting on oneself review after review of sometimes very different works, grouped together on strict chronological criteria, may be the worst service any reader may do to Billington's writing. *Affair of the Heart* is, indeed, a book to peruse, looking for the stories emerging from the pages. One may follow a single author, and witness the emergence of new playwrights such as Lucy Prebble or debbie tucker green, or relish in the mature work of titans such as Tom Stoppard, Caryl Churchill and Harold Pinter; follow the complex trends of Shakespearean stagings in the years which saw the opening of Shakespeare's Globe (1997) and more and more successful film adaptations by directors such as Zeffirelli and Branagh which made traditional productions in breeches obsolete and opened the way for new approaches to Shakespeare on stage by even the more time-honoured establishments such as the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Billington's reviews also register trends such as theatrical adaptations of novels and film, and their uneven results, as witnessed by the scorching reviews of the musical version of *Moby Dick* (1992) or of the theatre adaptation of *When Harry Meets Sally* (2004). That these reviews made their way in the final selection for the book is in itself intriguing: the collection thrives on negative reviews, not only of works which have eventually become canonical, such as the aforementioned *Blasted*, but also of those which, as in these last cases, have disappeared from the stage for good reason. This makes one aware that not all performances make theatre history, but all productions, good or bad, make the complex palette of theatre at any given time; it also allows readers to enjoy Billington's writing which, although generally a pleasure to read, reaches peaks of ironic prowess when highlighting the shortcomings of a production, with bouts of sheer fun as in the opening of the *Moby Dick* review: "*Moby Dick* is the latest nail to be driven into the glittering coffin of the West End musical" (13). The show might not have deserved to survive, but Billington's delightful prose surely does.

This is also true for the opinion pieces which, in a more sombre tone, comment on the current affairs of British theatre. Among many obituaries (John Osborne, Harold Pinter and Shalegh Delaney among others) and celebrations of pivotal figures from John Gielgud to Caryl Churchill, one reads about the legacy of the Thatcher administrations, the complexities of Black theatre, or the rising trend for 90-minute plays. Billington has also written regularly to push for restructuring and transformation in theatre as an institution, the most recent time in the form of a letter addressed to Oliver Dowden, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in the Johnson administration, in July 2020; at the time, the effects of the pandemic had already started to weigh on performance venues, which had been abruptly closed until further notice, and even long-standing institutions such as Covent Garden were struggling to keep afloat. Another, maybe the most poignant lesson emerges from these lines: the fragility and powerfulness of theatre practice, which minutely registers economic, social, and cultural movements, and returns them to the audience. Theatre reviews may not substitute for the experience of performance, but may help to build a more aware and informed spectatorship, and hence to keep theatre alive through ever-changing times.