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Susan McCready. *Staging France Between the World Wars: Performance, Politics, and the Transformation of the Theatrical Canon*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016. xviii, 157 pp. Acknowledgements, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 (hb). ISBN 978-149852278-6.

Review by Timothy Scheie, Eastman School of Music.

In *Staging France Between the World Wars: Performance, Politics, and the Transformation of the Theatrical Canon*, Susan McCready sheds light on the highly exposed relationship between theatrical esthetics and politics in the unsettled social and political climate of France between the wars. The title's evocation of the French theatrical canon in the 1920s and 1930s is intriguing. Surveys of twentieth-century French theater are more likely to be weighted towards the following decades when the plays of Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, and Aimé Césaire, often presented in landmark productions, entered the canon not only of French theater but of modern world literature. With few possible exceptions (Giraudoux, Claudel) the names of interwar playwrights are generally consigned to the footnotes of theater history. However, McCready's project is not to rescue interwar authors from relative obscurity. Instead, she examines a group of directors, Jacques Copeau and the four members of the *Cartel des quatre* (Gaston Baty, Charles Dullin, Louis Jouvet, and Georges Pitoëff), who embraced a new style of directing and acting and collectively advocated for the *mise-en-scène* (staging) as an art in its own right. This shift in creative agency from the playwright to the director opened the repertoire to texts that had previously been rarely produced. McCready charts the ascendant regard for these figures, their directing styles, and their choice of plays as they negotiated the response of the public, the press, and the changing political regimes that held the keys to the state theater institutions during the turbulent years of fascist *ligues*, the Front Populaire, and impending war. What began as independent modern theater ultimately conquered the mainstream, culminating for all but Pitoëff (who was not French) in productions at the Comédie Française, to which Copeau was appointed director in 1940, and official sanction of the changes these directors wrought upon the French stage.

The opening and closing chapters of *Staging France Between the World Wars* provide the historical frame for this transformation. The first chapter situates the "bare stage" esthetic of the Cartel in the pre-war lineage of its predecessors (André Antoine's punctilious realism, Copeau's earlier work at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, the *avant-garde*), and the second establishes the tight bond between theater, government, and the promotion of national interests in French theater productions that toured America as patriotic propaganda from 1917-1919. The bookend closing chapter situates the success of Copeau and the Cartel in contrast to a more revolutionary contemporary, Antonin Artaud, as their ideals prevail and they assume artistic leadership on the national stage.

The three internal chapters constitute the heart of McCready's study in more than placement. Each is devoted to a slice of repertoire that underwent transformation at the hands of the five directors. Analyses of emblematic productions and their often-contentious fallout illustrate a tangle of artistic and political interests. For today's spectator, who may be inured to the novelty of directorial interpretation, the chapter on Molière conveys how provocative (for some nearly treasonous) it was to impose a personal artistic

stamp on the revered text in the *langue de Molière*, a term often used for the French language in its ideal classical purity. The directors often chose repertoire that had been considered more farcical or “lesser” (*Les fourberies de Scapin, L’école des femmes*), a gesture that softens the outrage of displacing interest from the text to a *mise-en-scène*. The following chapter on Shakespeare’s growing appeal vividly illuminates the stakes of broadening the canon with a comparison of two productions that met very different fates. A steady drumroll of interest in the bard had been building since Stendhal’s *Racine and Shakespeare*, but in France Shakespeare’s drama retained a lingering reputation for ramshackle plots, unseemly genre mixing, and vulgarity compared to the refined unity and precision of Racine; in a time of nationalist fervor he bore the further stigma of being foreign. McCready’s discussion of a 1934 production of *Coriolanus*, a work virtually unknown to French audiences at the time, stands out. Emile Fabre, then the administrative director of the Comédie Française, takes center stage as a prescient but hapless figure who despite caution found himself swept into a maelstrom of events. The production opened a few weeks before the failed fascist coup, and as Fabre feared it resonated strongly with fascist sentiment. The performances became a flashpoint of debate, incited demonstrations at the theater, and triggered government reprisals: funding was reduced, Fabre was fired, and the run was suspended. The pace of McCready’s study here relaxes (this slim volume covers a lot of ground) and the pages devoted to this episode permit a finer-grained study of sources for its production and reception compared to the hasty accounts of some productions in other chapters. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to Dullin’s 1937 *Julius César*, a play fraught with potentially incendiary political resonance that met a mixed but comparably tame reception. McCready aligns Shakespeare’s acceptance into the canon of great universal works for the French stage with the five directors’ move into the established mainstream, a confluence that effectively took Shakespeare from timely to timeless. The following chapter recounts the reshaping of the romantic canon: instead of the unwieldy dramas of Hugo, Dumas, and Vigny that had been enshrined in official repertoire for a century, the Cartel found rarely performed plays of Musset and Mérimée richer in possibilities for the creative work of the *metteur en scène*. When the directors were invited into the Comédie Française they brought their newly favored pieces with them. That Musset is today the most performed playwright after Molière, Corneille, and Racine attests to the directors’ enduring influence on the institution.

The lines of McCready’s argument respect disciplined bounds, perhaps a necessary concession in a study of this length. However, at times the confining purview is palpable. The observation that of all the productions by Copeau and the Cartel “only 53 percent were contemporary French plays,” and that another 27 percent were by contemporary foreign authors, serves as unconvincing proof for the “scarcity” of contemporary plays that justifies the nearly exclusive focus on texts written over a century earlier (p. 70). In a more comprehensive review of the Cartel’s work one might strain to discern the profile McCready traces: Jouvet championed Giraudoux’s new plays year after year, Pitoëff favored modern Russian drama, and the Cartel produced a rich slate of Shaw, O’Neill, Ibsen, Strindberg, and (assiduously) Pirandello. The dimensionality of French theater is further constrained by the focus on one group of directors. The reader catches fleeting glimpses of a more complex theatrical landscape when, for example, the name of Firmin Gémier occasionally surfaces, usually in reference to a previous generation. An unknowing reader would have no inkling that contemporaneous to the Cartel’s formation Gémier, an imposing figure, was producing and performing in plays both at the Théâtre de l’Odéon, the eminent second national theater in Paris after the Comédie Française that he directed from 1922 to 1930, and as the visionary founding director of the Théâtre National Populaire in its first incarnation housed at the 4500-seat Trocadéro theater (after the war the Théâtre National Populaire would be revived to legendary success under Jean Vilar). Gémier produced Shakespeare as well, and Baty and Dullin, who worked on some of these productions, considered him a mentor; Baty dedicated his 1929 treatise on the *metteur en scène* to “Gémier, mon maître.” However, Gémier’s “more-is-more” esthetic, bid for vast popular audiences, unsteady finances, and mixed critical reception do not square with the spare esthetic, intellectual appeal, and less mitigated success of the theater profiled in McCready’s book; his place in this account is confined to passing reference.

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In this respect, the passage devoted to Artaud's *Les Cenci* (1935) in the final chapter may initially seem something of an anomaly: recognition of a contemporary whose vision was immensely influential as a theoretical ideal, but whose theater in spirit and practice was remote from the successful institutional mainstream to which the Copeau and the Cartel directors acceded. However, Artaud's radical assault on theatrical convention, on the very idea of the dramatic representation of a text (and therefore of any canon), puts into eloquent relief a distinction that McCready underscores in this concluding chapter: the fortunes of Copeau and the Cartel rose alongside and sometimes in concert with the Front Populaire, but the association is complex, more an imbrication than a synthesis of their esthetics and progressive politics. The directors were not revolutionaries bent on overturning an institution, nor were they avant-garde assailants of theater's constitutive foundations as an art form. They were true believers whose modern stagings and expansion of the repertoire renewed and reinvigorated French theater, and who ultimately found themselves stewards of French culture, language, national patrimony, and theatrical tradition. *Staging France Between the World Wars: Performance, Politics, and the Transformation of the Theatrical Canon* offers a focused perspective on this trajectory.

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