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Jody Enders, *Murder by Accident: Medieval Theater, Modern Media, Critical Intentions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xxii + 285pp. Appendix, notes, works cited, and index. ISBN-13:978-0-226-20783-4 (cloth), \$45.00; 978-0-226-20785-8 (e-book), \$5.00-45.00

Review by Helen Solterer, Duke University.

With this book, Jody Enders aims to give theater its full due in criticism today. Her goal is especially ambitious since she pursues it by focusing on the earliest known performances in Europe. For scholars of the French-speaking world, the choice is unusual. The gold standard of theater remains the tragedy of Racine, the comedy of Molière, or the drama of Sartre and Camus—all pieces that inspire experimentation in classrooms and playhouses. For cultural critics in our academy, Enders's focus is even more surprising since they continue to work largely through films, novels, or T.V. shows in English. On the rare occasion when they take a theatrical example, they too turn classic, enlisting Shakespeare. It is no mean feat, then, for Enders, a medievalist, and theater historian, to argue for mystery plays and their performance as a tool of critical thought.

To do so, she returns to the agents—actors, crews, audiences—and their intentions. If we are interested in art's deep influence, how do we account for what these agents intend to make happen? In Enders's estimation, this question has largely disappeared from criticism of the last several generations. Her history of theory highlights those critics whose text-centrism led them to abandon it.

Bringing theater back into critical debate means vindicating intentions as worthy of attention. Once we reckon with all those involved in theatrical action, we cannot easily discount what moves them to act in this or that fashion. In fact, Enders contends, these artists performing live, their breath and sweat upon us, make it impossible. This is equally true for the mass spectacles of religious drama produced in Paris and Flemish cities during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as it is for *mises-en-scène* of dramatic literature across Europe and America ever since. By considering medieval performances a medium of intention, Enders issues a timely provocation.

In the Introduction, she lays out two grids of analysis: the different ways actors commit their intentions to action, and the ways their audiences receive them. Can an actor ever do something without intending it? Can an audience respond unawares? Enders zeroes in on types of intentions: the mental process or actual intention; the physical manifestation or achieved; their spoken form or declared; and the audience's reception of them or perceived. Throughout Enders makes her inquiry easier to follow by capitalizing the intentions—ACTUAL, ACHIEVED, DECLARED, PERCEIVED—and using them to organize four cases.

A special effects man who created the sound and fury of Hell for a Passion play ushers in the first case. When Guillaume Langlois fired his cannon, injuring and leading to the death of a fellow stagehand, did he intend to harm Jehan Hemont? Examining the plight of the two men reveals whether people's actions in the theater, as in life, can ever involve accidental murderous intentions. Here is the crux

captured by the book's title, and Enders analyzes it in the legal terms provided by the inquest into Hemont's death in late fourteenth-century Paris.

Another fatal incident spurs Enders to reflect on the ethics of intentions. When a certain Ferrin, like Guillaume before him, fires on a bystander, this time while rehearsing the miracle play of Théophile, is he morally accountable? Even in rehearsal, prior to public performance without any audience, theatrical action never happens by chance. Ferrin working his machines, Perrin witnessing the playing: these two interlocking sets of intentions make for theater—whatever the destructive effect. In this line of reasoning, such theater elicits judgment. Both observer and actor are bound by their actions, even in the tragic face of the technician firing in the wrong way, and the onlooker standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This ethical investigation of theatrical action challenges us to gauge its potential for modeling behavior. All of us can think of examples where people identify with a *dramatis persona* to such an extent that it imprints their own lives. The trouble with this truism, Enders maintains, lies in the question of intention. Two rapes linked to productions of a Passion play help her to examine it. When an unidentified actor who had played a devil proceeds to rape his wife in costume, and speak of his deed in diabolical terms, what distinguishes theatrical from real-life action? By this third chapter, readers can anticipate the direction of Enders's analysis. Theater certainly creates opportunities for criminal action. Yet it is the agents and, in these episodes, their declared intentions, that go a long way in explaining its formative ethical influence.

Enders dramatizes audiences' intentions through the case of a festive dance known as *Le Grant Turdion*. The performance double binds one Henry d'Anoux whose gyrating, a knife at his belt, ends up wounding him seriously. For the spectators, his actions are no less fraught. They perceive the actor's cries for help—for far too long—as an intended part of play. In early sixteenth-century Metz, a theatrical understanding was so engrained that even suffering did not persuade people in the moment to think again and dispense with it. For Enders, d'Anoux's death epitomizes the mesmerizing force of the public's role.

In her last book, *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends* (Chicago, 2002), we find such freak incidents of performance as building blocks of analysis. We also see the letter of remission, the legal genre that she uses in the spirit of Natalie Davis, as a source of evidence. *Murder by Accident* perfects that way of proceeding. More than the anecdote, a touchstone for New Historicist critics some twenty years ago, Enders's cases yield both general principles about theatrical art, and memorable people who show us how they take effect.

Yet it is her juxtaposing such medieval incidents with those in today's America that brings her method into full relief. Side by side with the accidentally killed stagehand in 1380 Paris, she places a Los Angeles driver whose suicide on the freeway some ten years ago was broadcast live on television. The juxtaposition is jolting. Chronology breaks apart, and with it the logic of causality that underwrites much historical writing. The analogy it offers is more radical than those common to poetics. Enders works through a kind of montage that is part of her campaign to integrate medieval theater into critical thinking. Why should critics focus on the here and now alone, or in the search for relevance, pair it only with classics? Whether fellow critics agree with this method or not, they should recognize it as her innovative forte.

Thanks to such medieval/contemporary juxtapositions, Enders goes the next step of debating certain "chestnuts" of criticism. J. L. Austin's theory of the performative is an obvious choice since it does not allow for theater. So, too, Erving Goffman frames analysis separating reality from art. Under Enders's

scrutiny, both arguments come up short for the simple reason that they do not take into account the intentions of those engaged in theatrical performance.

At the heart of the book lies her critique of what she deems the biggest chestnut, the Intentional Fallacy, as it is known in the Anglo-American academy. Elaborated in the post-war by W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, it authorized generations of brave New Critics to demote authors and their intentions as the chief criterion of aesthetic judgment. Enders's rejoinder: don't dismiss the actors. Her rejection of the fallacy is clear: we cannot take the full measure of performance without weighing people's intentions to undertake it. Enders likes to provoke her readers, but she likes even better to tackle the orthodoxies *du jour*.

In the second half of the book, she presents three inventive notions so as to push criticism further. The theatrical contract, she argues, is an important rendition of the social. Locked together are those who intend to perform and those who accept their actions as such. Their tacit agreement does nothing to diminish the artfulness of what they make collectively. On the contrary, as Enders outlines their various interlocking obligations, the aesthetic value is only further enhanced. So profound is this contract in her view, that when those proverbial murders by accident break it, the civilizing process is in jeopardy.

In *flagrante theatro*: with Goffman's term of the delict, the misdeed, in hand, as well as the legal 'in flagrante delicto,' she develops this notion to test the limits of theater. Once again, extreme cases drive her thinking. She moves through a dizzying array of scenarios that revolve around misfires of the actor, or misperceptions of the audience, including a prank in her own town of Santa Barbara. All are marshaled in an effort to discern whether simulations in real life constitute theatrical acts or not.

With her third notion, Enders loops back one final time to the role of the audience. Theater nullification asks us whether spectators can reject a performance as it is unfolding. Turning off the T.V. or refusing to rent the latest film D.V.D. does not disrupt these arts in the way that an audience member rushing the stage does. Enders takes us on another tour of accidental and deliberate breakages, and of different disruptive figures. "Real and True Theater," a London-based collective, exemplifies the problem: when their actors allegedly asked audiences to witness them assaulting someone on stage, did the public perceive and accept the violence as theater or stop the show, render it null and void? Enders confronts us with a dilemma that is moral, one that brings us to the ultimate limit of her project--determining if such theatrical action *in vivo* constitutes art.

Readers will encounter in this book an engaging style. Enders enjoys sparring with many partners, among them, Jean-Paul Sartre and Constantin Stanislavski on acting, Stanley Cavell and Aristotle on making meaning. She places most every idea in a *longue durée* of thinking about drama, as well as newer televised media. This style is Enders's signature trait. The fruit of years of debate, and several books on theater, it enriches her challenging method. There is nothing surprising that she expects others to dispute her reasoning and carry on the discussion. The coda of the book, entitled "Talk Back," extends an invitation to consider her arguments in relation to telejournalism.

Reading *Murder by Accident* gives you a front-row seat at a mock trial of sorts. Point for point Enders takes us through arguments with prosecutorial zeal and rhetorical punch. In a tour de force of cross examination, she comes in the end to define the living arts in intellectual terms: theater as "the movement from thought to action," as "the business of accomplishing thought" [pp. 14, 74]. As I let the debate settle, I found myself wanting some greater commentary on one element: the emotions that color intentions and are stirred by performance. What happens if we also consider the fear that may have moved Langlois and Hemont, the anger of the LA driver, the joy of other actors and scenarios?

As a whole this book offers a bracing corrective to movements in theater and media studies where performance, and the prevailing notion, performativity, is analyzed in the absence of agents, the medium being the major message in town. Enders asks her readers to think logically long and hard about why we make art--without flinching before the issue of its moral value.

For those who work in French, it serves another important function, calling us to consider again how best our thinking contributes to criticism in a framework that is neither defined by discipline, language, nor national tradition.

There is much to be gained by grappling with Enders's latest as she works to invigorate paradigms in the academy. Her thinking deserves to travel far, especially to the European continent where critics rarely give the question of intention pride of place.

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