

thoughts on the performances themselves as she picks them apart in order to shed light on a particular theatrical-emotional problem, especially when it comes to arguments against the anthropocentrism of emotions and observations on the presence of emotion related to nonhuman animals (she uses this syntagm in order to emphasize that humans are also animals) in theatre. Reading *Forms of Emotion*, one certainly gets a rich picture of both the issues and discussions in a wide field of affect studies, and of their particularities when dealing with emotions in theatre and performance studies fields.

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Aleks Sierz

**Good Nights Out: A History of Popular British Theatre, 1940–2015**

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Aleks Sierz's book is built on an exploration of a selection of plays that were popular on commercial London stages from the 1940s to 2015: these all ran for 1,000 performances or more. The other underpinning premise for the choice of works deemed worthy of attention is that they answer to an industrial drive for which 'entertainment is enjoyment', servicing the 'manufacture of fun'. The book rather relies on such generalizations in its framing for inclusion, which is a pity, as much of the work it does enables a welcome challenge to the canonical approach where a history of British theatre is limited to plays produced at the Royal Court Theatre, or plays produced in the subsidized sector. Such plays, he notes, can come from a more 'militant' ideological position about the purpose and function of theatre. Again, however, the notion that such playwrights or theatre-makers are ideologically homogenous or that they don't cross (especially in historical terms) between one sector of the industry and another is a little of an oversimplification. While we in the UK are not as versed in embracing the commercial theatre sector for our analyses as our US colleagues, it is important to contextualize this resistance in a more nuanced manner.

There are many positions about what 'popular' or 'populist' theatre are, and as the book's useful appendices show, fewer plays nestle in among musicals as the century progresses: even so, Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* just about outshines both *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. Similarly, the plays of the 1940s (where fewer plays were produced during the war, but many ran for longer than 'usual') are replaced by musicals from one end of the decade to another. The criteria for

inclusion, then, are not methodologically sound in and of themselves, but the book is doing important work in bringing these plays and productions back into view as significant contributions to an expanded notion of what a history of British theatre might look like at one end of the commercial-subsidized spectrum – even if, as Sierz admits, the authors are largely male and largely white.

Sierz divides the plays and productions thematically, and the framing for each chapter – War, Crime, Sex, Family, Class, History, Fantasy – brings together a number of plays in chronological order: so 'Class', for example, takes us from an analysis of *Charlie Girl* (1965) to *Billy Elliot: The Musical* (2005), while 'Fantasy: Whimsy, Camp, and Sci-fi' takes the reader from *Salad Days* (1954) to *Matilda the Musical* (2010). Such authorial curation might have offered a more socio-cultural perspective on the shape, reception, and longevity of the 'mega-hit', and how it has transformed over time, but this is not Sierz's intention: he is more concerned to understand in broad terms how these 'hits' reflect 'who we are as a people, how we feel as a society, and what we might become in the future'. While not wishing to be cynical here, or questioning his notion that the commercial theatre is somehow 'essentially democratic', I'm pretty sure that the 'society' reflected in the majority of the works he writes about is more exclusive and more monocultural than he might wish to suggest.

While *Good Nights Out: A History of Popular British Theatre, 1940–2015* has to be read positively in its aim to shift the fairly inflexible boundaries that determine what is included in our 'histories' of theatre, it is written for a non-academic market and works as an introductory text that goes some way to changing the aperture on British commercial theatre. It is a pity that a more rigorous critical framework – one that reached across to the social sciences, perhaps – was not made good use of here. Historiographically, it would have been useful to see more analysis of the relationship between the rise of the musical and the interrelationship between new work and the subsidized sector, for example, or the shifts in audiences and demographics around musicals. So when we are told that in 'popular theatre, crime sells', we might wonder how this impacts on the fact that we are also told that in popular theatre, 'sex sells', 'family drama sells', and 'fantasy sells': the exploration is more descriptive than it is analytic, and at times given to generalization and oversimplification. Even so, and despite its methodological faultlines and exclusions, this is a unique and at times useful study of plays and productions in London (rather than in Britain) that reflects on what audiences actually went to see in numbers over time.

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