

**Kitchen Sink Realisms: Domestic Labor, Dining, and Drama in American Theatre.** By Dorothy Chansky. Studies in Theatre History and Culture. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015; pp. xi + 291, 14 illustrations. \$55 paper, \$55 e-book.

**Rooms in Dramatic Realism.** By Fred Miller Robinson. New York: Routledge, 2016; pp. xii + 113. \$135 cloth, \$29.95 paper, \$44.95 e-book.

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Almost from its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, realist drama has met with varying degrees of critical and popular resistance, yet somehow it survives—even thrives—to this day. As with anything that survives any reasonable length of time, realism’s durability can best be traced to its adaptability, its ability to present situations and sentiments in a “realistic” way—from cultures as distant as nineteenth-century Scandinavia and twenty-first-century Southern California. The very idea of what it is to be realistic has changed during this theatrical age of realism, to the point that the initial cornerstones of fourth-wall illusion and well-made structures rarely surface in our more recent sightings of realistic theatre. In fact, it might be difficult for a nineteenth-century critic even to accept twenty-first-century realism as realistic for any number of reasons.

So what is “realism”? Fred Miller Robinson’s little book, *Rooms in Dramatic Realism*, and Dorothy Chansky’s *Kitchen Sink Realisms: Domestic Labor, Dining, and Drama in American Theatre* do much to provide us with a better understanding of what realism was and is, and to explain how its amazing adaptability makes it an instrument of entertainment, consciousness raising, and social change in ways few other forms have been capable of generating, much less sustaining. These two works on dramatic realism have two very different goals in mind, making them significantly different works of scholarship operating at different levels of complexity. But they both solidly remind us of exactly what realism can do and has done to convert theatre into an important venue for serious thought and occasionally significant cultural change.

*Rooms in Dramatic Realism* by Fred Miller Robinson is an engaging little book with the far-reaching goal of updating our understanding of an art form “kept alive in revivals of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov and others in theatrical spaces often not designed for the box set that was realism’s stock-in-trade” (x). Reporting that little has been done since the 1960s to update or revise our understanding of dramatic realism, Robinson embarks on a mission of reconsideration by first using Ibsen to discuss origins and exemplars and then generating a range of “short essays on individual plays . . . to get to the theatrical heart of these plays” (xii) and by extension the nature of realism itself. What appears an incredibly daunting scholarly task, however, becomes far less challenging as Robinson announces that the book is ultimately “directed to inquisitive theatregoers” (xii) and is written to be “stimulatingly enjoyable to read” (xii; emphasis in original). The result is an engaging introduction that jumps oceans, crosses borders, and

travels through time from 1867 (with T. W. Robinson's *Caste*) to 1997 (with Caryl Churchill's *Heart's Desire*, the first part of her *Blue Heart*), and actually up to 2012, with Robinson's curious Addendum discussing the 2012 film *Amour*.

Robinson's key point is that rather than set itself up in opposition to all new challengers, realism "absorbed some of the energies and dramaturgies of visionary theatre (as in *Death of a Salesman* and *Streetcar Named Desire*) and Epic Theatre (as in David Hare's *Plenty* and Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*), and was even subjected to parodic examinations of its own form (Pinter's *The Room*, Caryl Churchill's 'Heart's Desire')" (22). The book opens with the chapter "Rooms: An Introduction," in which Robinson discusses the realist convention of the fourth-wall illusion, touching on all the implications and repercussions of this style of theatre, including how structure informs meaning. How playwrights use the space of the room is central to Robinson's focus throughout. Chapter 2 offers a range of "Specimens," ordering the selections not chronologically but by the degree in which the specimens lock in the action and lock out the rest of the world. The backgrounds offered in the first two chapters are important, concise, and intriguing, but what truly impresses are the two chapters that follow. Chapter 3, "Variations," presents examples in which "the characters are . . . breathing the sharp air of what is beyond the walls, even if only in their minds" (61). Robinson argues that even in this adaptation the heart of realism remains intact because "the two-faced phenomenon of comfort and entrapment remains" (61). Chapter 4, "Interventions," presents works that "intervene in the conventions of realism" (81) and "show how the idealism and dreaming that mark the life in the rooms can fluidly extend the boundaries of what *is* real and make dramatic realism more adaptable to contemporary stage space" (81; emphasis in original).

Robinson's information is often not in chronological order, but this approach has its value. Chekhov, Lanford Wilson, O'Neill, Miller, Ibsen, Williams, Shepard—all stand one after another, demonstrating themes and motifs rising at different times and interconnecting as different opportunities arise. It could be said that what saved realism was the fact that no manifesto ever surfaced to define the term in a manner that would have restricted its evolution, and that the "evolution" itself was anything but controlled by some sort of linear agenda. In sum, *Rooms in Dramatic Realism* is a short, concise work that presents how and why realism has survived since the nineteenth century. Robinson nicely captures the crucial point that adaptability has been key to the continued effectiveness of this genre.

Dorothy Chansky's *Kitchen Sink Realisms* has a different agenda but feeds well off of the rich adaptability Robinson so deftly outlines. Chansky's work studies US theatre over the past century, presents a thorough cultural study of the place of women in the twentieth- to twenty-first-century United States, and analyzes women's roles on the popular American stage, as well as the interconnections between these roles and mainstream culture's shifting conceptions of domesticity. Chansky undertakes this expansive agenda through a series of decade(s)-specific studies on the evolution of domestic responsibilities, including changes in domesticity's assessed cultural values within a general middle-class ethos. The book is successful in both its breadth and depth, the combination of which has not been achieved in publications to date, even though domesticity and dramatic realism

have received scholarly interest for decades. The ability to see with singular but unbiased focus the flow of a major current in modern theatre—the rich tradition of kitchen sink realisms—marks this work as a necessary volume in the history of American theatre and drama.

Chansky is attracted to realist theatre for a number of reasons, the two most central being that it presents some version of a reasonable interpretation of reality and that, as mainstream theatre, its target audience is middle-class, middle-brow Americans. Some realist theatre implicitly endorses the status quo, whereas other offerings generate resistance to that status quo. Studying the audience's place in this theatrical exchange results in a complex dynamic that allows Chansky to explore the changing realities of domesticity and its evolving discontents in the theatre proper and, by extension, in US culture in general. What we see here falls nicely into the general realist motif Robinson himself summarized as “the two-faced phenomenon of comfort and entrapment” (61).

Chansky endorses Jennifer Fleissner's argument that post-well-made-play realism—often called naturalism—is particularly useful in “revealing the unhappiness of women as consumers” (9). Chansky adds: “Compulsive housekeeping becomes . . . a creative attempt at wholeness on the only terms available to the compulsive (woman)” (9). Crucial to this realist formulation is that background triviality metonymically highlights matters of domesticity and the implicit inequities that are commonly assumed to be acceptable cultural practices. Spotlighting certain kitchen sink subtleties along with the highlighted domestic conflicts that find their way onto center stage, Chansky reports: “If drama and performance have not offered solutions to large cultural problems manifest in the unremittingly gendered status of domestic labor, they have provided some of the most provocative, unforgettable, and multifaceted renderings of the problem” (28).

Chansky impressively manages to bring apparently peripheral ideas into the spotlight with the contextualizing, synthesizing skills that indicate just how long she has been living with and thinking about her material. The resulting book is divided into seven chapters, each covering a decade (more or less) from World War I to 2005, from the first Pulitzer-winning play, *Why Marry?* (1917, awarded Pulitzer in 1918) to Sara Ruhl's 2004 work *The Clean House* (awarded Pulitzer in 2005). Intervening chapters bear memorable titles, such as “Waiting for Leftovers” and “Death of a Dream” and include insightful analyses of myriad books and journals on domestic ideals, from *Ladies' Home Journal* to all things Martha Stewart, “the kitchen-sink idealist” (207). This is an outstanding work, certain to impress the theatre world, and given its insightful analyses of American cultural trends during the decades discussed, the book will likely also garner a good deal of applause from audiences interested in twentieth- to twenty-first-century US cultural history in general.

Chansky reports that her goal has been “to examine the multiple ways in which a too-often belittled but perennially popular realm of the American theatre can be fruitfully and seriously reassessed” (28). Like Robinson's, Chansky's study succeeds admirably in its goal of reassessing realism's form and genre.

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