

# NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

doi:10.1017/S0266464X24000228

Adam Alston

## Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance, and the Ends of Capitalism

London: Methuen Drama, 2023. 248 p. £76.50.  
ISBN: 978-1-350-23704-9.

In Adam Alston's deeply researched book, decadence is framed as the cultivation of bad tastes, which acts as a method for critiquing conservative delimitations of pleasure. Arguing that the political significance of decadence lies in concepts of uselessness, transgression, waste, and outmoded practices and ideas, Alston makes a compelling case for reading decadence in performance as a radically expansive and unwieldy futurity encoded in theatrical materialism. Investigating the political valency of decadence from a theatrical perspective marks an important departure from the concept's association with the aestheticism of late nineteenth-century literature. The 'ends' of capitalism refer to the activities and values of 'productivism': the relentless drive for efficiency and innovation and the remote control of labour through the erosion of leisure time engendered by mobile technologies.

Case studies of decadent artworks from the UK, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, and the USA pivot around this concept of (anti-)productivism. Each of the five chapters returns to the central claim that the refutation of work constituting the optimal means of self-actualization signifies – evoking cultural theorist Mark Fisher – 'the cancellation of a cancelled future'. Alternative futurities of late capitalism are tempted into being, in the work of both Julia Bardsley and Marcel-lí Antúnez Roca, through the use of bio-techno aesthetics to distort the normative body. Using technology in unproductive ways produces 'counterpleasures' to the respectable pleasures that conservatives insist are the only legitimate responses to art. Further, the Afrofuturist and Afropessimist performances of jaamil olawale kosoko and The Uhuruverse stake a claim to new futures for Black people in their positioning of the figure of the sci-fi alien, whose very absence of humanity – which in the colonialist enslaver's imagination is a synonym for whiteness – may enable resistance to, and escape from, commodified narratives of progress. The alien breaks the Cartesian binaries of primitivism and modernity that continue to inflect debates about the 'positives' of imperialism. As the chapter on the current 'anti-woke' right-wing culture war makes plain, the so-called degeneracy of theatre that refuses to

affirm neo-colonial, cisheteronormative, and patriarchal western hegemony constitutes a vital reaction against the logocentric bias endemic to political notions of value.

One of the recurrent strategies employed by decadent artists is an excess of energy not directed towards a specific goal. Martin O'Brien, for instance, marries his bodily excreta with dystopian text to evoke an infected landscape of zombies for whom death is behind and inside them, rather than a destination they are moving towards. As someone with cystic fibrosis who was told he would die before he reached thirty years old, O'Brien theatricalizes his 'ana-chronistic' experience of time to produce a new temporality for other bodies to shed the encumbrances of 'chrononormative' time. Alston also makes a convincing case for recognizing the liberatory power of surrendering to desires for frivolous uses of time, space, money, and labour in relation to the work of Toshiki Okada and Toco Nikaido, where gestures and objects are used in excess of any proscribed function. Alston's discomfort with Nikaido's exploitative working practices with her actors, and the environmental impact of her show *Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker*, could be developed into a more extensive critical reflection on the contradictions (*à la* Marx) inherent in transgressing cultural presuppositions of value whilst working inside institutional frameworks that enable such transgressions to occur.

Alston has written a provocative and critically nuanced book exploring the contours of decadence in theatre and live art. It injects an invigorating rush of hedonism into the occasionally worthy discourse of socially engaged practice.

JOSEPH DUNNE-HOWRIE

doi:10.1017/S0266464X2400023X

Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Aloysia Rousseau, eds.

## The New Wave of British Women Playwrights: 2008–2021

Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023. 262 p. £82.  
ISBN: 978-3-110-79622-3.

Over two decades have passed since the publication of Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt's *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), which, in addition to identifying key themes underpinning women's playwriting, examined the barriers and constraints that women in the theatre encountered during the long twentieth century.

Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Aloysia Rousseau's timely new collection is concerned with women's playwriting in Britain in the early twenty-first century, covering a shorter – albeit a prolific – period of time which roughly coincides with the twenty-first-century resurgence of feminism in the theatre. *The New Wave of British Women Playwrights*, which developed from a 2020 conference of the same title, celebrates the contribution of women playwrights in contemporary British theatre by applying pressure to several themes and aesthetics. Borrowing Polly Stenham's phrase 'Are we not over that?' for the title of their introduction, the editors argue that gender continues to be a necessary lens through which to consider twenty-first-century women's work because of the ongoing constraints and gender biases that still plague women's position in the British theatre industry.

The book is organized thematically into four sections. The first three focus on the topics 'Ecodramaturgies and Global Crisis', 'The Politics of Intimacy', and 'Experimenting with Form', while the fourth closes the book with interviews with playwrights Ella Hickson and Lucy Kirkwood. The eleven essays, written by scholars working across the fields of theatre and literature, discuss plays by Alice Birch, Alecky Blythe, Maud Dromgoole, Vivienne Franzmann, Zinnie Harris, Ella Hickson, Florence Keith-Roach, Ellie Kendrick, Lucy Kirkwood, Mona Pearson, Lucy Prebble, Debris Stevenson and debbie tucker green. The chapters amplify extant approaches to women's theatre work, and the chosen topics show both a continuity with

twentieth-century women's drama and a shift towards the contemporary moment in terms of the plays' content and form. For example, Alex Watson discusses the theme of reproduction and fertility through the lens of 'demopopulationism' and climate crisis, and Verónica Rodríguez highlights connections between ecological violence and gender-based violence. Hannah Greenstreet interrogates the binary between form and content in understanding the politics of women's playwriting; the personal and political dichotomy is also questioned in both Vicky Angelaki and Angel-Perez's chapters.

The essays draw on such well-known methods of dramatic analysis as the application of conceptual vocabularies borrowed from sociology and philosophy, and the consideration of ethics and spectatorship, but also navigate new territories such as the relationship of women's playwriting with the literary genre of auto-fiction.

There is an urgent need to develop knowledge about and capture the twenty-first-century archive of women's theatre-making, and the book works in this direction, adding new knowledge to the field of women's writing for the stage, and about women and theatre more broadly. The direct inclusion of the voices and detailed reflections of playwrights Hickson and Kirkwood enrich both the study and our understanding of women's theatre in Britain. It would be equally useful to see a growth of publications examining more of the roles occupied by women in the theatre industry.

MARISSIA FRAGKOU