

Review of Thomas Fahy's *Staging Modern American Life: Popular Culture in the Experimental Theatre of Millay, Cummings, and Dos Passos* (Palgrave Macmillian, 2011)

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It continues to be a little more than a critical footnote that a number of American modernist literary giants known for their prose and poetry also wrote drama: not just Gertrude Stein and T. S. Eliot, but also Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Edna St. Vincent Millay, E. E. Cummings, Djuna Barnes, Ezra Pound, H. D.—and as this volume by Thomas Fahy reminds us, even John Dos Passos. The critical neglect of such a large body of work is the result not only of the precarious position of drama in literature studies but also of the supposed anti-theatricality of modernism itself. Fahy's *Staging Modern American Life*, an examination of the merging of popular culture and experimental theater in plays by Edna St. Vincent Millay, E. E. Cummings, and John Dos Passos, is therefore a welcome consideration of normally marginalized writings that offers a challenge to some of these long-held positions.

Like *Poets at Play*, the recent anthology of modernist drama by Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole, Fahy's book makes an important intervention into our understanding of the history of modern American drama. Whereas Bay-Cheng and Cole focused exclusively on modernist poetic drama—including two of the three playwrights that Fahy discusses here—Fahy's attention to poetic drama is only incidental. His real focus is modern drama's combination of popular culture and experimental theater into critiques of mainstream cultural fantasies of race, class, and gender. Wedding American cultural studies with theater historiography, Fahy argues that “the presentation of fantasy in . . . [the] hybrid theatre [of Millay, Cummings, and Dos Passos] would both entertain and warn against the complacency, sociopolitical apathy, and materialism endorsed by popular culture” (2). His previous book *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006) argued in part that freak shows humanized the unfamiliar in a way that caused spectators to question the cultural boundaries between normal and abnormal, and he brings his expertise in American popular culture to work here as well.

The book's introduction discusses the escapism sold by early twentieth-century popular entertainments such as theater and musical comedies, domestic melodramas, nickelodeons, picture palaces, cabaret, and vaudeville. From the lush interiors of cabaret dinner theaters such as Murray's Roman Gardens to the unregulated environments of speakeasies, and from the legitimate theater of Broadway that reinforced its socialite audience's self-image to burlesque and vaudeville that gave lower- and middle-class audiences the experience of being social elites for an evening, popular entertainments marketed status and power through escapist fantasies encouraged through sexist, primitivist, and exoticized images and performances. It was in this context that the American Little Theatre Movement emerged—both, Fahy argues, in response to the insatiable appetite for theater entertainments of all kinds and as a critique of the mass cultural fantasies they supported and perpetuated. Millay, Cummings, and Dos Passos attended and often enjoyed a huge range of popular entertainments while at the same time participating in the Little Theatre Movement and believing in art's powers of social transformation.

Drawing on letters, reviews, and published and unpublished manuscripts, each of Fahy's individual chapters places specific plays within a broader biographical, thematic, and aesthetic context. But the book's greatest contribution is its weaving together of aesthetic and thematic concerns with a political critique of popular media and cultural values. In his discussion of Millay's *Aria da Capo* (1919), for example, Fahy traces Millay's ongoing interest in the cultural rituals of food and its consumption to the play's use of food as a diversion from moral and political action:

While the banquet, along with Pierrot's and Columbine's posturing, dramatizes this contemporary obsessions with class mobility, Millay began, as World War I continued, to perceive such forms of escapist entertainment as reckless. When Woodrow Wilson launched the Food Administration (alongside the Committee on Public Information), food became part of the government's propaganda efforts to manipulate people into action and / or inaction. Millay weaves this aspect of government coercion into both narratives of the play. (50-51)

Fahy finds in *Aria da Capo* a critique of mindless leisure rituals, consumer culture, and avoidance of critical thinking itself, and he demonstrates how

Millay distorts the *commedia dell'arte* form in the service of this critique. Millay did not condescend to her audience, Fahy argues. After all, she, too, enjoyed many of the same amusing pastimes and popular values. Her shrewdness therefore lay in her agile use of popular entertainments that offered both amusement and a critique of too much frivolity as a retreat from the real world.

Fahy finds in Cummings a similar use of popular culture, especially circus spectacles and freak shows, in the service of critical engagement. Focusing primarily on Cummings's play *Him*, Fahy argues that, like Millay, Cummings joined popular art to formal art in the service of cultural critique—in this case, a critique of the political passivity encouraged by mass spectacles. Cummings' works tended to thematize the audience's relationship to the spectacle, turning the audience's gaze back on itself and its own role in accepting the fantasy on offer. As Fahy writes, "For Cummings, the willingness among all audiences to be manipulated by humbug parallels a dangerous willingness in America to buy into socially accepted behaviors and norms. They both promote image over authenticity" (66).

The chapter on Dos Passos differs a bit from the other two chapters, both in tone—which is more historical and less literary—and also in argument. Dos Passos employs fewer popular entertainment forms in his plays, but like both Millay and Cummings, he critiques the cultural myths promoted by these entertainments. His dramatic trilogy about suburbia, *The Garbage Man* (1923), *Airways, Inc.* (1928), and *Fortune Heights* (1933), offers a point of contrast to his focus on urban America in the U. S. A. trilogy. His specific target is suburbia's promise of economic success, cultural integration, and social cohesion, and his explicitly political drama, Fahy argues, goes beyond merely challenging the vapidly of Broadway through noncommercial theater to "confront the rampant social and economic inequalities inherent in America's capitalistic system" (129).

Overall, this slim volume makes a wonderful contribution both to drama and theater history and to American cultural studies. Students of American theater will appreciate the detailed discussions of plays by three modernist writers set in concrete thematic and formal relation to their cultural and historical contexts. Students of American cultural studies will benefit from the broad examination of American theatricality and its politics, though my one critique here is that a non-specialist audience may need a brief gloss on the terms "spectacle" and "authenticity" to understand the full stakes of these arguments. Nevertheless, Fahy skillfully demonstrates,

with keen attention to the rhetoric of dramatic form itself, the ways in which Millay, Cummings, and Dos Passos—three writers who normally sit in the wings of American theater discussions—addressed the tensions surrounding mass cultural entertainments in the first half the twentieth century.

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