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Review

The Methuen Drama Anthology of American Women Playwrights: 1970-2020
edited by Wesley Brown and Aimée K. Michel
(London: Bloomsbury, 2020)

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In my experience, few early college students enter class with knowledge of more than a handful of playwrights. When asked, most name Shakespeare. Some point to one of the Greek tragedians—usually Sophocles. Others may have been introduced to American playwrights Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller. More recently, perhaps due to the streaming release of *Hamilton* and the movie adaptation of *In the Heights*, several students proudly identify Lin-Manuel Miranda as a familiar “playwright.” But rarely, if ever, do students answer with the name of a woman playwright. As someone whose list of favorite playwrights is dominated by women, I should find students’ lack of familiarity with women playwrights surprising. And yet, I don’t. Of the Introduction to Literature textbooks I have reviewed, I only recall Susan Glaspell and Lorraine Hansberry having been included with enough frequency to be considered standard issue.

Wesley Brown’s and Aimée K. Michel’s *The Methuen Drama Anthology of American Women Playwrights: 1970-2020* is an antidote to the lack of coverage women playwrights receive more generally and contemporary American women playwrights receive more specifically. As Brown and Michel note, a 2002 study “revealed that only 17 percent of all plays produced in theaters across America were written by women” (xxiii). Although no manuscript alone can right this wrong, *The Methuen Drama Anthology of American Women Playwrights: 1970-2020* offers a breadth of knowledge about the history of American women playwrights and a depth of knowledge about six American women playwrights of the last 50 years: Susan Yankowitz, Ntozake Shange, Beth Henley, Paula Vogel, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Lynn Nottage. The anthology does not include titles for which these playwrights are best known, which I find to be a strength not a weakness, as it offers both the novice and well-read student of American drama potentially rich learning experiences.

In the introduction, Brown and Michel make a case for the anthology and provide an overview that grounds the six playwrights within the history of

American theater. As Brown and Michel note, the canon of dramatic literature skews white male (ix-x). The six playwrights chosen for the anthology, the editors argue, “have brilliantly articulated the American psyche for the past fifty years, delving deeply into sociological and political issues while continuing to experiment with theatrical form . . . despite a continuing marginalization of women playwrights in this country” (ix). The bulk of the introduction is divided into distinct historical periods, each of which highlights the work of other American women playwrights, as Brown and Michel write, “to pay tribute to some of the many female playwrights . . . on whose shoulders we stand” (xi). The tightly crafted yet substantial history presents readers with avenues for conducting their own research and offers contexts for understanding Yankowitz, Shange, Henley, Vogel, Parks, and Nottage as belonging to a lineage of American women playwrights and not as unique exceptions to the male-dominated canon.

Taken together, the six plays develop timely themes related to violence and loss, sexuality and sexism, and racial identity and racism in surprising ways using different dramaturgical vocabularies. The nightmarish *Gun* by Yankowitz tells an unfortunately all-too familiar story of a mass shooting through the perspective of the shooter’s mother. The presentational and rightly confrontational *Spell #7* by Shange parodies racial stereotypes that sadly remain recognizable today even though the play premiered more than 40 years ago. Henley’s *The Jacksonian* unfolds in flash forwards and flashbacks through tense scenes haunted by racist and sexist ideologies. Paula Vogel’s *Baltimore Waltz*, a poignant yet humorous metaphorical play about AIDS, reverberates loudly during the COVID-19 pandemic. *In the Blood*, Parks’s riff on *The Scarlet Letter*, is prescient given ongoing discourse on sexual assault and unhoused people and legislation being passed in some states restricting women’s reproductive rights. Lynn Nottage’s *Intimate Apparel* rounds out the anthology in an appropriate way, as a meditation on women’s work and the “anonymous” women made invisible by archivists, curators, and writers of history. Notably, each play is preceded by the type of introduction needed to encourage understanding, independent analysis, and thoughtful discussion of the texts inside or outside of the classroom.

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