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VICKY ANGELAKI. *Social and Political Theater in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis*.

London: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. xii + 266. \$24.25 (Pb).

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Vicky Angelaki's *Social and Political Theater in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* is a hugely ambitious book, in both the large number and range of plays and playwrights it engages with and the wide scope of national and international social "crisis" contexts within which it sites them. It is also a surprisingly optimistic book. Written in dark times, it finds in the plays and their productions a lot of darkness and critique; but it also finds great capacities for hopefulness, especially in the affective communication which Angelaki persuasively argues this drama and theatre cultivates with its audiences.

The scope of the book is impressive. Organized into an introduction and eight chapters, it examines in detail selected twenty-first century works by nine important British (predominantly English) playwrights: Caryl Churchill, Mike Bartlett, Dennis Kelly, Duncan Macmillan, Nick Payne, Martin Crimp, Simon Stephens, Debbie Tucker Green, and Lucy Prebble. The analyses are rich, lucid, and insightful, both of dramatic texts and of productions. Production analyses often explore domestic British stagings but also Continental ones, paying close and helpful attention to such features as set design, directorial strategies, and the psycho-spatial dynamics of particular playing spaces. A good example of this is Angelaki's attention to productions of Bartlett's *13* in, first, the National's small Cottesloe (now Dorfman) Theatre and, then, its vast Olivier Theatre

(56-63). Textual analyses helpfully contextualize works within individual authors' broader oeuvres, then engage voraciously with selected texts' dialogue, characterization, structure, handling of time, stage directions, and more. Angelaki claims that though none of the works she examines practise standard audience participation, they all practise it by "acknowledg[ing] crisis as a collective concern" (3). She repeatedly notes her plays' emphases on the ways individuals' behaviours and decisions are circumscribed by the structures within which they find themselves. For example, Churchill's *Escaped Alone* positions Mrs. Jarrett's broader social and global perspective in relation to the intimate individualism of the other characters. Angelaki quotes Zygmunt Bauman in the context of analyzing Churchill's work: "Nowadays, precariousness is not a matter of choice; it is fate" (20; Bauman 154). Sometimes, the scale of what Angelaki covers left me wishing she was analyzing fewer plays in more detail and providing more description of plays. But those are minor complaints in light of the wealth of works Angelaki analyzes with insight and passion.

The social and critical contexts within which Angelaki places the works are vast and complicated, appropriately, given our contemporary crisis-ridden moment. "Already in the twenty-first century," she observes, "societies globally have had rather a lot to contend with: watershed political moments; major military conflicts; threats to public safety; a dramatic increase in surveillance mechanisms; the digitization of lives; a social media revolution; a major financial downturn; climate change – and the list continues" (1). This is recognizably the contaminated territory of contemporary times, and the territory of Angelaki's selected plays. The plays often focus on individuals, families and other smallish social units, but the landscapes they are situated in are usually much broader, from the company and market of Prebble's *Enron* to the cosmos of Payne's *Constellations*. Angelaki highlights how the playwrights repeatedly put

individuals and their crises in broader contexts of social crisis, contexts which are difficult for any single individual to influence.

Despite this pervasive, enduring, and often dark context of crisis, Angelaki finds hope in this drama – faith in the capacity of characters and people for resistance, resilience, creativity, and joy; and faith in theatre’s productive potential to redress social crises and urge collective action. She writes:

The possibility of social change in twenty-first century British theatre, certainly the kind that this book concentrates on, is accomplished by acknowledging the problem; by attacking it dialectically; by exposing the hues in humanity that render individuals more than the sum of their neoliberalist context and at the same time by addressing the conditioning factors which have limited our options. (2-3)

Angelaki’s hopefulness is supported by critical engagement with the likes of Richard Sennett and Bauman, and the research of organizations such as the charitable Rowntree Foundation. These voices are welcome. I might have expected to hear also from Janelle Reinelt, Jill Dolan and others, but I recognize the choice Angelaki has made to concentrate on extended close readings.

There are inevitably limitations to what Angelaki chooses to focus on, not least given how much she has already managed to cover. I look forward to more volumes on 21st-century British drama that go beyond such canonical writing to explore, for example, work by even younger writers (for example, Alice Birch and Sam Holcroft), more work by people of colour (such as Bola Agbaje, Mojisola Adebayo, Rachel De-Lahay, Inua Ellams, and Chinonyerem Odimba), and more work written outside of England (by, for example, Cathy Forde, David Greig, Rona Munro, Suhayl Saadi, and Owen Sheers). I would have loved to see “British” broken down a bit more. Most of these writers might be more precisely identified as English.

How significant, for example, might be Kelly's Irish immigrant roots? I am moved by Angelaki's optimism, and I would also welcome more on the darkness of these plays, these times, and the ways works such as these potentially support what she perceives them to be critiquing. For example, I'd love to see more on the economic and market models of this theatre, and on its ecological footprint. I recognize those things are beyond the scope of this book.

Those reservations aside, it is a genuine privilege to accompany Angelaki on her journey across the works and landscapes she analyses. Ultimately, she claims, "contemporary British playwriting is in one of the most dynamic stages of its history" (back cover). Her enthusiasm and voraciousness for her subject is infectious. I agree with her that Britain's playwrights are, in the vast majority, sincerely politically and socially committed to critiquing current injustices and to seeking better futures. In that I certainly find hope.

Work Cited

Bauman, Zygmunt. *The Individualized Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

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Abstract: This book analyses 21st-century plays by nine influential British writers – Caryl Churchill, Mike Bartlett, Dennis Kelly, Duncan Macmillan, Nick Payne, Martin Crimp, Simon Stephens, Debbie Tucker Green, and Lucy Prebble – in contexts of contemporary social crises, particularly economic crises, and finds reasons to be hopeful.