

ECUMENICA

JOURNAL OF THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE

fall 2017

volume 10 . issue 2

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR DAVID V. MASON	5
ESSAYS <i>Sexual Perversity in a Feminist Biblical Play: Florence Kiper Frank's Jael</i> KARI-ANNE INNES	7
<i>An Anthropogenic Upheaval: Edward Bond's Bingo, Shakespeare's Enclosure, and Terrocentric Identity</i> BABAK ASHRAFKHANI LIMOUDEHI	19
PRACTICUM ESSAYS <i>The Holy Land Experience: 'Step Right Up' to Experience the Crucifixion</i> AARON BROWN	29
<i>Sacred Spaces: Experiencing the Supernatural at Lourdes</i> KRISTIN O'MALLEY	35
PERFORMANCE NOTE <i>Missa Leiga (Lay Mass)—a cry for freedom</i> REGINALDO NASCIMENTO	43
BOOK REVIEWS Henry Bial, <i>Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage</i> JOSEPH R. D'AMBROSI	47
Craig R. Prentiss, <i>Staging Faith: Religion and African American Theater from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II</i> ANDRE JOHNSON	
Edna Nahshon, ed., <i>New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway</i> KYRA SMITH	
PERFORMANCE REVIEWS <i>Panchajanya</i> ARNAB BANERJI	53
National Puppetry Festival, 2017 ADAM FRANK	
<i>Inherit the Wind</i> SHELBY-ALLISON HIBBS	
CONTRIBUTORS	65

BOOK REVIEWS

Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage. Henry Bial. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0472052929. Pp. 260.

Adaptations of biblical narratives have been produced on the Broadway stage since the end of the nineteenth century, garnering mixed receptions from both audiences and critics alike. In his book *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage*, Henry Bial compellingly applies dramaturgical and historiographical lenses to explore several biblical “hits” and “flops” on Broadway. Taking into account the political and social atmospheres of the times in which the plays were written and produced, Bial offers provocative insights into the differing success levels of these productions inspired by biblical texts.

Throughout the book, Bial ponders the following questions: How do theatre artists use biblical and religious texts in service of the theatre? Is biblical drama to be understood as a theatrical experience, a mode of religious practice, or both? The various answers to these questions lead to the differing levels of critical and commercial success of the productions he explores. The author develops his argument over seven well-organized chapters, each covering a particular theme or genre of biblical drama. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and lays the ground for subsequent examinations of these themes or genres. Bial argues that the response to a biblical play on the Broadway stage is often informed by an audience member’s intention for seeing the show. To critically analyze the biblical plays at hand, then, and to suggest reasons for their success or failure, Bial offers four “performance strategies” to explore the religious and commercial components of these productions: spectacle, authenticity, sincerity, and irony. Spectacle, similar to the category used by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, refers to the elements of a performance that “exceed the written text, with a particular emphasis on those elements that convey magnitude or exoticism.”¹ Authenticity “refers to an element of the performance that is perceived as real rather than representational.”² Sincerity is “the freedom from hypocrisy, that is, consistency between one’s professed beliefs and one’s actual behavior.”³ Finally, irony “prizes contradiction. Irony at its most basic can mean saying one thing and doing another, often as a form of humor or critique.”⁴ The multiple combinations of these strategies applied to a theatrical performance, Bial argues, constitute the indices for evaluating its level of success on the Broadway stage.

In chapter two Bial begins to apply his performance strategies to specific plays, starting with some of the earliest biblical adaptations produced on Broadway in the nineteenth century. While other plays explored throughout this book are sourced directly from stories recounted in the Bible, the plays covered in this chapter are merely *inspired* by the Bible and adapted from biblical source material. The central problem presented in this chapter, and consequently throughout this entire study, is how to “stage the divine presence without committing blasphemy.”⁵ At a time when the relationship between American Protestantism and the theatre was problematic, many spectators were concerned with how a performance

1. Bial, 27.
2. Bial, 28.
3. Bial, 29.
4. Bial, 29.
5. Bial, 31.

might portray biblical texts and broach moral themes. Furthermore, a fundamental issue for the ethics of the era involved how a human could responsibly portray Jesus on stage without committing what amounted to blasphemy. Bial suggests that since these plays were loose adaptations of Biblical narrative, audiences might have viewed the plays using something akin to the anachronistic concept of fan fiction—or fan-created narratives inspired from a single source or collection of works—to navigate how to stage sacred content in a secular art form.

Chapters three, four, and five move away from biblical narrative as inspiration for text and into biblical narrative as the source of text, specifically Old Testament stories such as The Creation, Noah and the Flood, and the trials of Job. Within these chapters, Bial explores the ethical responses of American (mostly Protestant) Christians to actors playing the role of God on stage in shows such as Connelly's *The Green Pastures*. He discusses race relations and national identity at work in productions such as Obey's *Noah*, which was produced on Broadway two years in a row, once with a white cast and once with an African American cast. He also investigates the biblical narrative of Job that naturally lends itself to dramatic interpretation such as MacLeish's *J.B.* Throughout these chapters, Bial demonstrates how the balance of spectacle, sincerity, authenticity, and irony—while it differs for every production—allows the audience to connect to biblical narrative in individualized ways.

In chapter 6, arguably Bial's most intriguing chapter, as it explores some of the most widely produced musicals of recent history, the author discusses *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. Bial argues that while *Godspell* is more of an authentic and sincere approach to biblical narrative, *Superstar* combines irony and spectacle and is thereby more successful in the commercial theatre circuit; as evidence, he references the number of Broadway revivals and tours for *Superstar*, compared to those of *Godspell*. Ultimately, this chapter supports Bial's argument that while there is no foolproof combination of these four performance strategies, the way they are prioritized makes a difference in the lasting success of a production.

In chapter seven, Bial opts out of a traditional conclusion and instead ends his book with a look at a few notable Broadway flops, in an attempt to theorize why these shows were not as successful as the productions he explored in the preceding chapters. The musicals he primarily explores, *I'm Solomon* and *Hard Job Being God*, also highlight "some of the key characteristics of more successful adaptations."⁶ He writes that the negative response to these musicals "highlights the degree to which Broadway continues to regard even successful adaptations of the Bible as aberrations."⁷ Reflecting upon the history of the Broadway stage in the past two centuries, Bial demonstrates that producing a show with a biblical narrative is a gamble in respect to its critical and popular reception. Bial's offering of the four performance strategies is a sound means of analyzing why some of these shows were successful and some were not.

In all, Bial's work is cleverly organized and thoroughly researched, and his argument is well supported. He provides performance and rehearsal images throughout the book and offers detailed descriptions and synopses of the biblical plays he discusses. By examining a topic not often studied in theatre history, theory, and literature, Bial offers theatre scholars

6. Bial, 174.

7. Bial, 181.

and practitioners an opportunity to apply a critical lens to commercial productions derived from biblical narratives. As an approachable text appropriate for the undergraduate—and graduate—level classrooms, as well as for scholars and dramaturges engaged with the subject, *Playing God* is useful to both novices and seasoned veterans interested in biblical drama and in the marriage of sacred text with secular aesthetics.

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Staging Faith: Religion and African American Theater from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II. Craig R. Prentiss. New York: New York University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0814708088. Pp. 23.

While scholars in many disciplines have studied race and religion as discrete topics, other scholars are now seeing the value of examining them as intersecting objects of study. In his book, *Staging Faith: Religion and African American Theater from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II*, Craig R. Prentiss wed these topics of race and religion together, arguing that black playwrights of the period saw conservative religion embedded throughout America, and especially in black churches, as the cause of the racial oppression against which many fought. In his examination of forty plays, Prentiss maintains that these works frame religion around themes of “Christian life judged counterproductive to the advancement of the race... occasionally these scripts explicitly promoted a humanistic worldview, and in a few rare cases, a post-Christian perspective... even questioning the very existence of God...”¹ While doing this, these African American playwrights created the black theatre movement in America.

In accord with the title of his first chapter, “Setting the Stage,” Prentiss begins with an overview of black life during the early twentieth century. He gives particular attention to the class dynamics among African Americans, along with the regional distinctions produced by the Great Migration of southern African Americans to northern cities. He argues that the class dynamics of the period fostered a small group of educated writers who made these plays possible.

In chapter two, Prentiss focuses on works that were critical of Christianity, generating a distinctive brand of humanism. However, in this African American version of humanism, playwrights needed to stay relevant with their African American audiences of the era. Therefore, Prentiss draws upon the work of scholar Anthony Pinn, arguing that most playwrights, while agnostics or atheists, still had “an appreciation for African American cultural production and a perception of traditional forms of black religiosity...”² Prentiss suggests that plays of this era moved “from concern with false morality and hypocrisy in the earlier years toward a deeper questioning of the value of Christianity to African Americans at all.”³

In chapter three, Prentiss examines plays that focus on theodicy through the anti-lynching plays of the era. Prentiss argues that playwrights were frustrated at Christianity’s trust in God at all costs, and he classifies their works under four major themes: refusal of

1. Prentiss, 6-7.

2. Prentiss, 43.

3. Prentiss, 43.

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La Parra, *A Revolta* by Santiago Serrano, *El Chingo* by Edílio Peña, *Pigmaleoa* by Millôr Fernandes, *Cala a Boca Já Morreu* by Luis Alberto de Abreu, *A Boa* by Aimar Labaki, *Vereda da Salvação* by Jorge Andrade, and *Homens de Papel* and *Oração para um pé-de-chinelo* by Plínio Marcos. While working with *Teatro Kaus*, Nascimento edited two publications about dramaturgy and Hispanic language, *Cadernos do Kaus – O Teatro na América Latina* and *Hysterica Passio*. In August 2009, Nascimento organized with Teatro Kaus and the Instituto Cervantes the *Um certo Arrabal* conference, an event that brought to São Paulo the important playwright Fernando Arrabal. Nascimento has been Drama Director in Teatro Escola Macunaíma since September 2010.

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