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Producing Early Modern London: A Comedy of Urban Space, 1598-1616 / Kelly Stage

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Kelly Stage. *Producing Early Modern London: A Comedy of Urban Space, 1598-1616*. University of Nebraska Press, 2018. 354 pp.

Reviewed by CASSIDY CASH

Kelly Stage's *Producing Early Modern London*, begins with the very correct statement that "we cannot access true authenticity by reproducing a building" (3). Her argument hinges on the idea that experiencing a play in the modern day is irrevocably a different experience than attending that same play in the 1600s. She calls attention to the "theater stage as a place, a building we can locate" arguing there is significance to a comedic play being set in London which transcends simply a place for the action to occur, and represents instead a larger commentary on London (18). Her analysis ignores that England's first purpose-built theater was constructed in 1597. The entire concept of using a specific building for a stage production was new to early modern society, and to London in particular. What it meant to have a stage was a source of almost constant experiment and innovation for early modern theater companies. Early modern productions were performed in a wide variety of locations, including out of doors, in courtyards, and at inns. Her analysis of London as a setting does not address whether that choice of setting might have been motivated by frugality, or the mere practicality created by a constantly changing performance space.

An essential element of live theater is the suspension of disbelief, which is accomplished far more easily if the audience is familiar with the setting. The use of London unburdens the production and allows the story to progress without lengthy explanations of location. In sheer practical terms, using London as a location saved money because the theater saved the expense of creating the isle of Illyria, the middle of the ocean, or other more fantastic locations the audience would need assistance to envision. Stage seems to assume a modern worldview, the idea that plays were always done on a physical stage, when in reality early modern productions – even the same play – could, and often were, performed at multiple locations within the city of London and without. Many early modern theater companies travelled outside the city, particularly during times of plague. It was the early modern period that saw the invention of venue for theater. Shakespeare's Globe itself, as an example of an early modern theater space, was not situated within London proper at all. Stage fails to address the fluid nature of performance space for early modern plays, and the reality that, in the 1600s, producing a play often meant improvising your surroundings. There are additional practical realities of designing sets on stage in a society that had previously never needed that technique. Her arguments are not so much incorrect as they are misaligned with the premise of examining the production of theater in early modern London.

Stage shifts her focus from commentary on London to using London as a character in the play. She begins by presenting St. Paul's Cathedral, in what I feel

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is one of the brilliant moments of her work, highlighting the fact that the playwright intentionally used societal stereotypes and reputation of the building itself to build some of the sarcasm, satire, and other dialogue tricks evident in the play. I expected her to delineate what we are to presume about early modern stage representations of St. Paul's and offer staging examples to support her contentions precisely, but this never happened. Instead, her arguments are from the text, the plot, and the characters as opposed to the location, setting, or scenery, which contradicts her argument that location is key.

As a result of Stage's heavy reliance on literary criticism instead of performance criticism, the significance of the location on an early modern production becomes murky and unclear. Had Stage consulted, and utilized, observations similar to the one made by Lucy Munro in her work *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theater Repertoire*, contemporary early modern theater professionals provide context for Stage's observations. Philip Sidney, as well as Ben Jonson, are recorded distinguishing a divide between laughter and comedy. For the early modern audiences, comedies did not require hilarity, or even amusement. As Munro quotes Sidney explaining "our Comedients thinke there is no delight without laughter, which is verie wrong, for though laughter may come with delight, yet commeth it not of delight, as though delight should be the cause of laughter."¹ The role of London as a character in a city comedy, would have been enhanced if it were contextualized in terms of defining the audience's understanding of comedy on the whole.

The *Records of Early English Drama: Patrons and Performances* (REED) outlines the performance history of the Bear Garden, where we can see that bear baiting arenas were often used as shared space with early modern theaters.² The reality of theater spaces rubbing elbows with lower class entertainment undoubtedly influences the reputation of the city of London, and defines the impact of placing that city on stage as a character in a play. Such realities of life, and the reputation of the entertainment industry specifically, in and of the city of London during this time period are not only relevant, but potentially vital, when evaluating the significance of using London as a character in an early modern production.

Stage further distances herself from a historical understanding of early modern society when she says, "the sense of audience as a group of spectators at a play is also current. The term recognizes the role of audience, observation, and presentation of social practices in the theater" (54). Stage misuses the idea of an audience in a 17th century context. Linguistically for the 17th century playgoer, the word audience meant to hear, not to observe. As Andrew Gurr points out in *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, for audiences of this time period, "being in hearing distance was far more important than seeing something in front of you. . . . Looking at the stage was secondary to hearing what was said."³ Early modern playwrights relied on conventions like prologues and soliloquies to convey where the characters were located, what was going on around them, and their emotions related to a scene. While there were sets, costumes, even props of sometimes-complicated nature as we see in productions of masques from Ben Jonson, or in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or *Cymbeline*, the audience's primary source of

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information regarding location and setting was the spoken language itself. The presumption that the audience was there to listen was fitting because most productions used minimal props and set design. This reliance on dialogue may be one reason Stage focused on the text of the plays so heavily, but not only did she fail to prove this point in her arguments, her very definition of “audience” indicates she expects them to rely on the visual, not the auditory, experience.

Stage sets up her arguments using the philosophy of modern experts like Yi Fu Tuan, whose humanist geographic conclusions about space and place are world renowned in the 21st century. Her analysis of his theories, and even her application of those theories to plays by Ben Jonson and others contribute value to the conversation about the plays themselves. However, these theories would have been wholly unknown to Ben Jonson and therefore impossible to employ strategically in his writings. Moving into later chapters, Stage cites a lot of data and plot devices, but leaves out significant social occurrences of the time period. She correctly states that “examining the bills allows us to trace plague as a social and spatial force and Londoners used the bills this way and tracked the infection’s progress across the city to assess the contagion” (103). Though she is correct that bills were used to trace plague, that use is unlikely to have impacted *Westward Ho*, which existed - unchanged - during multiple plague outbreaks.

Stage again omits relevant social events that were present when the plays were being performed, when she takes a look at Moll in *The Roaring Girl*. She points out the reference to “Virginia” as a nod to the “male space of merchant adventure and to a woman’s precarious place in that male space” as well as the significance of “sea-voyage imagery” without ever acknowledging the most likely reason for the use of “Virginia” – as a reference to the death of the first English baby born in the Roanoke Colony, Virginia Dare, who died in 1587 after a sea voyage to the new colonies (161). Not only was the term “Virginia” extremely specific to the time period, but the fate of Virginia Dare captured popular attention to such an extent that John Smith and other members of the Jamestown colony sought information and published reports on the colonists in 1607, the same year *The Roaring Girl* was written.

Stage acknowledges that *The Roaring Girl* is a biography about cross dresser Moll Cutpurse (1584-1689), who was a legendary figure of her own time. Despite claiming to examine production in early modern theater, Stage focuses on the plot and dialogue of Moll to the exclusion of theatrical production techniques. For example, her evaluation of the scene where Moll and Sebastian discuss Virginia is held up as an example of the play making a commentary on femininity and the body, saying that when Goshawk “responds to Moll’s physicality” with a statement that “emphasizes that Moll’s movements belie her singular physique,” followed by a phallic reference, Stage concludes that “despite ‘so much flesh,’ and Moll’s nimbleness, not her body, makes her feminine. Her grace lies in knowing how to walk” (161). Stage houses this evidence in an argument about femininity on stage in the early modern theater and how women are regarded in London society without acknowledging one very basic tenet of early modern theater – boys played the women on stage. Goshawk and Laxton’s conversation about Moll’s physicality and being able to recognize a woman by the way she walks is a joke on

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the nature of theater. It was qualities like nimbleness and grace when walking that allowed a young man to portray a woman on stage. Moll Cutpurse's entire existence is, to some extent, a theatrical presentation in real life; never more so than when her life is made into a play under the very specific theatrical conditions unique to the early modern period. Yet, *Stage* never brings the theater and performance aspect of this presentation into the conversation at all. Neither does she mention Moll's role as a performer herself on stage at The Fortune Theater in 1611.

The book consistently approaches early modern plays as literature instead of performance pieces. Relevant production techniques and staging methods are presented by *Stage* in the introduction as paramount to an exploration of producing early modern London only for her examination to leave these tenets all but briefly mentioned in her overall analysis. While her textual criticism is strong, if her intent was to present a look into the use of the city of London as a setting when producing a play in early modern London, the limited attention to actual stage history, production techniques, and staging methods to contextualize her observations leaves her overall conclusions about early modern production incomplete.

Notes

1. Lucy Munro, "Proper gallants wordes": Comedy and the Theatre Audience," in *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 55-95.

2. University of Toronto. "Bear Garden." *Records of Early English Drama* (REED). Accessed March 2019. <https://reed.library.utoronto.ca/content/bear-garden>

3. Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 197.

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