

**Christina Wald. *Hysteria, Trauma and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.**

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1 Christina Wald's book is an ambitious, well-researched and meticulous study focusing, according to the jacket blurb, on "the interaction of theatrical performance, psychiatric and psychoanalytic theory, and the theory of gender performativity." Wald's interdisciplinary approach covers substantial ground indeed, as she conducts a detailed analysis of ten recent Anglophone plays underpinned by an expert application of an impressive array of secondary sources, ranging from Karl Abraham to Slavoj Žižek. Structured into three substantial chapters preceded by a theoretical introduction that clarifies methodological issues, technical terms and introduces the key framework of performativity theory, the book places the three maladies under a historical and conceptual focus and establishes firm connections between these and theatrical case studies.

2 In fact, addressing the status of hysteria, trauma and melancholia as powerful tropes in contemporary culture, the author highlights their extensive presence in the world of theatre and calls attention to correspondences between playwrights' aesthetical concerns and established theoretical frameworks. Thus, Wald not only posits "The Drama of Hysteria," "Trauma Drama" and "The Drama of Melancholia" as recurrent conceptual and analytical categories in contemporary Anglophone theatre but also launches them as distinct dramatic genres; and ultimately conceptualises hysteria, trauma and melancholia as "performative maladies."

3 It is the latter agenda that constitutes the book's most immediately relevant concern for readers located in the field of theatre and performance studies. Initially, they are likely to be puzzled by the juxtaposition of playwrights as diverse as Anna Furse, Kim Morrissey, Terry Johnson, Victoria Hardie, Sarah Daniels, Phyllis Nagy, Claire Dowie, David Auburn, Marina Carr and Sarah Kane, especially since Wald chooses not to elaborate in detail on the criteria she utilised towards the inclusion of these particular authors and the exclusion of others. It is apparent, however, that Wald is firmly pursuing thematic connections, and that her selection process is filtered through her definition of what constitutes "performative maladies". Crucially, in all three sections, Wald makes clear that her case studies are representative samples from a broader range of other potential examples. Ultimately, despite the author's decision not to

elucidate matters of provenance and cultural context (e.g. North American as opposed to British), plays such as Furse's *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* end up sitting comfortably and convincingly alongside the Irish Carr's *Portia Coughlan* or the American David Auburn's *Proof*.

4 Wald's bibliography is remarkable in its sheer breadth alone. As the author herself reveals in the acknowledgements, the book is a revised version of her recent doctoral thesis completed at the University of Cologne - a fact apparent in the comprehensive approach to documentation that characterises the book. In other words, Wald engages with a broad range of theoretical perspectives, all carefully chosen with relevance to her chosen thematic enquiries (e.g. French feminist theory on hysteria, Seltzer and Bronfen on trauma, Schiesari on melancholia). To counterbalance this somewhat ambitious strand, she dedicates ample space and energy to an in-depth focus on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity that constitutes the backbone of the book and its key intellectual merit.

5 Wald is careful to equally situate her intervention within the context of debates in theatre studies. She engages with the work of leading scholars such as Elaine Aston, and stresses that although most of the plays she has chosen for scrutiny in her book have already been analysed elsewhere, hers is a fresh perspective. In fact, she regularly contrasts her own readings with interpretations by other critics, and occasionally, with the views of playwrights discussed (cf. Wald's notion of hysteria as a performative malady versus Anna Furse's view of hysteria as a genuinely female mode of expression, p. 7)

6 Overall, this a welcome contribution to the Theatre and Performance list at Palgrave, and a noteworthy work as far as the meticulous integration of psychoanalytic and gender theory and performance analysis is concerned. The study is an invaluable survey of how "disorders" such as hysteria, melancholia and trauma have been represented in Anglophone theatre from the mid-nineties onwards. I warmly recommend the book to readers interested in exploring the interdisciplinary connotations of hysteria, trauma and melancholia, and to scholars and students in theatre studies, gender studies, cultural studies as well as the social history of medicine.