

Third, although in their introduction Biagini and Daly declare themselves opposed to the “insular, introspective paradigm of an Irish *Sonderweg*,” the evidence presented here confirms, as much as challenges, that paradigm (3). In his chapter, “Occupation, Poverty, and Social Class in Pre-Famine Ireland,” Peter M. Solar suggests that Ireland’s reliance on the potato really was unusual: it “had no counterpart in Europe” (34). Ciaran O’Neill, in his chapter, “Literacy and Education,” argues that “the topography of Irish education differs from much of western Europe owing to its persistent denominational division” (252). Even in the explicitly outward-focused part three, Kevin Kenny’s survey, “Irish Emigrations in a Comparative Perspective,” concludes that during the second half of the nineteenth century “the Irish case was anomalous” (413). Although this tone is by no means universal—several authors highlight similarities between Ireland and other European nations, particularly in the experiences of childhood, rituals and celebrations, and death—the volume would have benefited from a more explicit critique of Irish exceptionalism, such as that found in the work of D. H. Akenson.

Nonetheless, the editors and contributors should congratulate themselves on a work that fills an important gap in Irish historiography. Irish social history may have gotten off to a late start, but this volume suggests that the field has legs.

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JOHN BULL. *British Theatre Companies: 1965–1979*. British Theatre Companies: From the Fringe to the Mainstream. London: Methuen Drama, 2017. Pp. 320. \$29.95 (paper). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.59

Although chronologically the first in terms of the period covered, this is the last in a series of three books that seek to recover the histories and practices of some of the most innovative theater companies that flourished in Britain between 1965 and 2014 (and in some cases beyond). Arguably, the increased historical distance means this volume has the hardest and perhaps the most important task to fulfill. It offers a series of six chapters by individual authors, each focused on a different company, preceded by an extended introductory section that allows us to see those companies and their work within broader theatrical, political, cultural, and historical contexts. But the whole book is notably informed by the recently enabled access to the relevant and often revealing archives of the Arts Council of Great Britain. As we know, the late sixties and early seventies marked the beginning and rapid expansion of a burgeoning “alternative” (or “fringe” or “underground”) theater movement which was to a considerable extent funded with state money. Given that parts of this movement were actively seeking to challenge and undermine aspects of that state—or at least to offer alternative values and visions of art and society—the relationship between funders and funded were far from straightforward. Some companies were unwilling or unable to provide the detailed documentation of finances or record of performances that the Arts Council was bound to require—or even accurate information about where and when their performances could be witnessed and assessed. Yet, as this book demonstrates, they often had strong advocates within the council who championed their work and recognized its strengths and originality. Just occasionally, the authors’ eagerness to introduce material from this archive may seem to distract from rather than sharpen what is most important, but the show reports, the correspondence, the private memos, and the minutes of discussions offer rich pickings. They also remind us that important though the principles and visions and creative innovations were, they were not

necessarily more important than the day-to-day struggles and practicalities of company survival—which surprisingly might center on the state of repair of your van, and whether it would get you across the country to your next one-night stand without breaking down.

Inevitably, given the subject and the focus, Bull and the other authors faced the familiar difficulty of trying to communicate a history where performances survive mainly through traces and memories—reviews and reports and perhaps a few photographs or fragments of film. In some cases, there is not even a written script to consult, especially where performances were unscripted (and unscriptable). In any case, it is doubtful how relevant scripts would be, and some of the most valuable sections are those when the author successfully recreates in words what a fragment of a live performance might have been like. One easy criticism to make is that there might seem to be a certain randomness in the choice of companies chosen for detailed discussion—namely, CAST, The People Show, Portable Theatre, Pip Simmons Theatre Group, Welfare State International and 7:84 (both the Scottish and the English versions). Certainly, it would not be difficult to find another six (and more) who would repay equally detailed recovery. Yet, although Bull and the other authors offer no clear rationale for the choices and certainly make no claim that these companies somehow represent the full range of activity or stand as exemplars for others, they do take us into very different areas of work, and it would be hard to argue that any of them do not deserve to be here. John Bull's two contextual chapters take up nearly half the book, but they also give us an essential backdrop, and his insights into some of the broad categories of work that emerged and flourished (feminist and gay companies, theater in education, agit-prop, community performance, black and Asian companies) frequently and beneficially dips into the work of other companies. Regrettably, it has to be said that the early chapters contain some irritating mistakes that should have been corrected. For example, Bull rightly foregrounds the significance to the burgeoning alternative theater of the 1968 Theatres Act, which ended the legal requirement to submit scripts for official approval before they could be publicly performed; but he wrongly states that the control and censorship removed by this act had been carried out by the Lord Chancellor, when it was actually the Lord Chamberlain. Rather more significantly, he suggests this act marked the abolition of censorship; we only have to look at where we are today to realize that this is a considerable overstatement of what occurred. At one point, we are told that Ted Heath lost the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1965 (which is actually when he gained it) rather than 1975, and the most damaging effect of such errors is that we inevitably start to question the reliability of other details and claims.

But such complaints are relatively minor. Overall, this is an enormously rich book that opens windows and adds greatly to our understanding of the period. It is also an enjoyable one, which generally wears its scholarship lightly, rightly drawing our attention to the work being described rather than those who are describing it. But of course, it is not only a book about the past. There is no need for the authors to keep drawing our attention to the ways in which the work of these companies may have fed into later and current practices—we can think about that ourselves. On occasions, we might even want to ask why some practices seem to have disappeared, or perhaps been tamed, and in the end, that is perhaps the most important reason of all for bringing these companies to our attention.

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