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**Sally Debra Charnow**, *Theatre, Politics, and Markets in Fin-de-Siècle Paris: Staging Modernity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. ix + 268 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-4039-7041-6.

Review by Jeffrey H. Jackson, Rhodes College.

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That the French theatre would be at the center of a series of heated debates in the last years of the nineteenth century perhaps comes as no surprise. Since at least the time of Voltaire and Rousseau, the theatre has polarized politicians, writers, and thinkers in France because of its perceived ability to shape minds and mold social convictions. What Sally Debra Charnow reveals to us in her new book are the intricate ways in which the particular concerns of late nineteenth-century French society were filtered once again through development in the theatre broadly defined to include directors, writers, critics, and government agencies. Charnow's central insight is that a new generation of playwrights, actors, and theatre directors in the 1880s and 1890s not only gave birth to a new style of theatre in Paris and the provinces, but in doing so repositioned once again the place of theatre itself in French culture to confront questions of Third Republic politics and society. As theatre makers did so, they grappled with both how to represent an increasingly complex modern life and how to change the ways in which audiences might respond to the world around them. Charnow therefore places *fin-de-siècle* theatre—or more specifically modernist theatre—at the center of a series of interconnected debates in France about the promises and perils of modernity.

Given that modernity is the central theme, the book's title and subtitle might well be reversed. The staging of modernity to which Charnow refers in the subtitle is the concept that holds this work together, especially at times when the many threads of this complex argument pull in several directions. "Modernity" for the theatre meant both the social and psychological conditions of late nineteenth century life, thus the seemingly contradictory aesthetics of André Antoine's realism and Lugné-Poë's symbolism, both of which Charnow analyzes nicely. But theatre constituted modernity as much as it reflected it by recasting questions of the day in new terms for the audience to consider.

Along with modernity, the other main theme in this story is "authenticity," the struggles of modernist theatre makers to balance their goals of creating a meaningful form of art outside the strictures of more traditional or official state theatres while also making that art commercially viable. Here, the men Charnow focuses most closely on—André Antoine of the Théâtre Libre, Lugné-Poë of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, and Maurice Pottecher of the Théâtre du Peuple in the regional town of Bussang—were caught in the dilemma of every bohemian artist: making art or making money. It is into this part of the narrative that Charnow's discussion of the markets and economic forces that constituted modern life most clearly connects. Recognizing that the artists' authenticity was frequently, but rarely only, an assumed stance to bring attention to their work, Charnow charts how these directors marketed their outsider art precisely for its authenticity while honestly struggling to maintain their integrity. In doing so, she demonstrates that they lived out the dilemma of modernity that they often depicted: how to engage with the world, especially by presenting challenging works of social commentary and psychological insight, while making people want to watch it. This struggle was certainly not unique to the theatre, and Charnow does connect this story more broadly within a historiography of artists grappling with the marketplace, although she might have done more to help us see what was unique about the struggle of modernist theatre. She mentions the other center of *fin-de-siècle* experimental performance, the Montmartre cabaret, both as a source of inspiration for modernist directors and as an

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example of combining art and commerce. But how was the experience of the theatre distinct as a subset of this more general question, especially since Montmartre artists also sought to engage in a cultural politics that at times promised to reshape France?

The expansion of audiences was crucial for these directors since it not only ensured financial viability for their theatres but also took the message of a reformed theatre to the people of Paris and beyond. To remake the theatre, they argued along with many before them, was to reinvigorate French culture. Presenting new and challenging works of drama would bring important social questions to the very audiences—especially a growing bourgeoisie—needed to hear them. Unfortunately, we hear very little from these audiences in Charnow’s narrative except for published critics. Most likely, this is a function of the difficulty of finding sources, but as a result we do not get a feel for how bourgeois Parisians reacted to the challenges they faced in modernist theatres, especially given the often shocking content of the plays.

Yet in helping to bring the *avant-garde* to mainstream culture, these theatres were frequently engaging with political and social questions at a time of increasing polarization within French society and hoped to make their bourgeois audiences squirm. Antoine’s production of *Les Bouchers* (1888) featured a set decorated with bloody slabs of real meat that forced audiences into a working class setting. Theatre could also be a way to democratize France thereby both reforming society and the people in it. The “popular theatre movement” which Charnow discusses toward the end of the book, although unsuccessful, saw modernist theatre as a form of intellectual and cultural uplift so that it would “enrich their lives and enable them to become better citizens” (p. 180). Modernism in the theatres could make all of French society modern, too.

In walking that fine line between art and commerce, Charnow likens the modernist theatre directors to late nineteenth century artists of the *juste milieu* who pushed stylistically outside the academic system but remained within the world of galleries and the marketplace, and Charnow carefully and judiciously charts how fine a line it was. The modernist theatres likewise followed this system of creating a parallel culture by organizing first as “private” spaces available through invitation only. In part, this was a way around laws regulating the theatres. But as the private spaces of the theatres became increasingly popular, they pushed the bounds of the “public” realm. As a result, the question of censorship became increasingly central to their operation, and Charnow’s discussion of the political is especially interesting when she outlines the ways in which modernist theatres fought to help overturn theatrical censorship laws. Here is one very concrete example, analyzed deeply by Charnow, of how the challenge of modernist theatre had a direct and lasting impact on reshaping the values of Third Republic France.

The other politically charged question that Charnow calls to our attention was the debate between nationalist and internationalist visions of culture. Bringing the work of foreign playwrights, such as Ibsen, to the stage was for some critics particularly problematic while others saw it as a way to rejuvenate French theatre. The shock of foreign plays was important to the overall aesthetics of scandal on which these theatres relied both to retain authenticity and to draw audiences. But it also promoted a dialogue about the place of theatre in France. That discussion is particularly interesting in the last chapter where Charnow discusses the work of a regional theatre in Lorraine under the direction of Maurice Pottecher for whom *avant-garde* productions could allow spectators to “embrace a new morality and provide an impetus for national regeneration and integration at a time when France was deeply divided” (p. 186). Here, regionalism and nationalism worked together, and the *avant-garde*, ironically, strengthened the mainstream values of Republicanism.

Charnow says much about the aesthetics of modernist theatre, in particular the emphasis on eclecticism—less a style, perhaps, than a self-conscious lack of style designed both to sell the theatres to a wide

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variety of audiences as well as to make a point about the bankruptcy of the more traditional theatre with its rigid rules of acting and content. Charnow combines close textual analysis with crucial contextualization of individual plays to illuminate them within the broader context of issues which she discusses. Her careful interweaving of text and context shows a remarkable and skillful balance of historical and literary sensitivity.

Yet there are so many strands of argument in this book that it almost explodes with ideas. At times, the connections that Charnow draws are not easy to follow. For instance, the link between aesthetic choices and market motives is not always clear beyond the discussion of eclecticism. Likewise, there are brief discussions of the relationship between the high art of theatrical modernism and mass and popular cultural forms such as poster art, newspapers, and pantomime, but those discussions do not illuminate as much as they could the tension between aesthetic and commercial choices that seems to rest at the center of this study. A fuller engagement with, for instance, Vanessa Schwartz's *Spectacular Realities*, might have been revealing on this point.[1] The book is dense with ideas, some of which still seem not fully unpacked, but as such it will serve as a stimulus for further research and analysis.

Charnow situates her story within a larger context of intellectuals in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, placing these directors and critics in the "generation of 1890" that Venita Datta has described.[2] And Charnow's discussion of Emile Zola's role in promoting theatrical modernism is particularly interesting as it clearly links the realist aesthetic with the self-promotion in which Zola engaged and demonstrates how directors like Antoine might not have been as successful without the intervention of a more famous intellectual. Within this context, though, it seems odd that the Dreyfus Affair makes only occasional appearances in this story. Might it make sense to discuss why this episode seems relatively marginal to artists who were otherwise so engaged in the cultural politics of their day?

Nevertheless, Charnow's book represents an important contribution to understanding how the highly influential world of theatre responded to and shaped a series of debates at the turn of the twentieth century about the complexities of the modern world. She brings the topic more fully into French historiography by offering us a highly nuanced social history of modernist theatre in France. In doing so, Charnow casts modernism as engaged with the world through a medium deemed to have an extraordinary power to educate and change France, but one that existed in deep tension with the very society it wanted to transform.

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## NOTES

[1] Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998).

[2] Venita Datta, *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

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