



The Contemporary British History Play (Contributions in Drama & Theatre Studies)

Richard Hudson Palmer

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British drama since 1956 has been particularly innovative. This volume investigates how recent British history plays reflect the methods and values of New History, in contrast to traditional biographical dramas that depict the lives of great men of the past. More than 50 British playwrights are discussed, including John Osborne, John Arden, Edward Bond, Robert Bolt, Pam Gems, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Howard Barker, and Peter Shaffer. Historical drama consistently displays the sense of history prevalent when it was written: a 17th century quest for precedent and analogy; the affirmation of cosmic order in the 18th century; the Romantic search for manifestations of spiritual purpose; in Victorian times, a demonstration that humans control events; and the early 20th century promise, emulating science, to present the facts objectively.

Contemporary British history plays, however, demonstrate different agendas for history itself. Marxist plays illustrate a historical dialect leading to the emergence of Communism. Oppositional history takes the point of view of the disenfranchised, the defeated, or the oppressed. Social histories refocus attention away from movers and shakers onto groups of small players. Feminist historians expose the biases of a male dominated hegemony and confront the role of gender in history. Deconstructionists debunk our confidence in historical metanarratives. Postmodernism uses anachronism and stylistic eclecticism to emphasize parallels in different historical periods or to relate historically defined metaphors and rituals to modern experience. Both playwrights and critics confront the implications of the idea that history is constructed and not simply found, and new approaches to history demand innovations in the staging and structuring of plays.

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