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**James Moran, *Modernists and the Theatre: The Drama of W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf*
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Straddled between the long shadow exerted by the extremely prolific, late Victorian playwright G. B. Shaw and the emergence of experimental drama embodied by the younger generation of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and John Osborne – to quote only some of the dominant post-war voices in drama – modernist theatre is often unacknowledged, forgotten, and approached with prejudices in favour of the poetry and fiction produced around those same years. Nonetheless, as James Moran's latest monograph *Modernists and the Theatre: The Drama of W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* aims to show, theatrical production was far from being a marginal element in the literary background of the first decades of Twentieth Century Britain. Rather, as the rich array of examples and case studies provided in his book demonstrates, dramatical forms of expression should be seen as mutually constitutive of these modernist authors' products, not only affecting the creative processes that would lead to works such as *Ulysses* (1922) or *Between the Acts* (1941), but also equally informing these writers' critical views about culture, society, class, or even sexuality.

As the author states in the "Introduction", the choice to include the 'Big Six' of Modernism relates to their prominence in canonical overviews of the period as well as their ambivalent positions towards theatre, and specifically, certain theatrical forms they challenged and criticized. Their discriminating views are, however, to be rethought by shedding light on how theatricality is deeply immersed in the evolution of modernism as a whole and, more specifically, in the creative parables of the authors examined here. In



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contrast with the unavailability of their dramatic attempts, often unfinished (see Lawrence, Woolf, and Joyce), unpublished (in the case of Yeats, Pound, Lawrence, and Woolf) or destroyed (as for Joyce), Moran's noteworthy efforts are directed at bringing into light material research that witness their personal involvement with theatre as actors and producers, and illuminating the complex, entangled networks of affiliations, relationships, and collaborations that saw them related to the stage world. Of particular value, for both theatre and modernist scholars, are the dualisms explored across the six chapters that make up the book: high/low forms of entertainment, elitism/popularity, aesthetics/politics and, within this latter, inclusive/exclusive politics. Charting the transformations of the dramatic scene across the years, Moran outlines the tension between coterie drama and large-scale forms of theatrical entertainment, oscillating between the potentialities offered by the West End scene and the intimacy of private performances evoking closet drama. Moving freely from the Noh-style drama pursued by Yeats and Pound to the sensation of failure stemming from the struggle to stage their works, in Joyce and Lawrence's case, and to the box-office success of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), readers can grasp different attitudes towards the politics of culture and better understand the underlying the social implications at stake.

As far as the methodology employed is concerned, *Modernists and the Theatre* constitutes a primary form of geo-chronological mapping of the networks, performances, plays, actors, and directors at the heart of modernist theatre. It is therefore no coincidence that, besides the six preeminent figures mentioned in the subtitle, the author considers the legacy of J. M. Synge's works, the fascination towards actresses such as Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt, or even the transnational influences of Maurice Maeterlinck and Henrik Ibsen's innovative playwriting. Moran thus shifts between Britain, Ireland, and Europe, reviewing for instance the pioneering project of the Abbey Theatre, Woolf's connections with the theatre producer and women's rights advocate Edy Craig, or Lawrence's and Joyce's engagement with the Italian production of Ibsen's *Ghosts* by Ermete Zacconi. While revealing these associations and relying on memorable anecdotes – to name but one, Woolf's



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participation in the Dreadnought Hoax in blackface and dressed as an Abyssinian prince – Moran creates a common thread, with Yeats at the indisputable centre, and tracks the trends and currents of drama by resorting to primary sources, including reviews, articles, performance histories, and the play scripts themselves. Although the author claims that his is merely “a small and tentative contribution to a far wider debate” (173), *Modernists and the Theatre* effectively introduces students, scholars, and readers to the issues at stake in the theatrical environment of the modernist age, including debates around politics and identity and the extent to which masses should access these forms of entertainment.

In the first chapter, “W. B. Yeats: Theatre and Shakespearean elitism”, Moran navigates through various phases in the life of the Irish man of letters, from his first attempts at playwriting inspired by Shakespearean motifs through the turn towards Irish settings and themes, as witnessed by *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), to the London years and the enduring collaboration with the actress Florence Farr. What remains constant in Yeats’s conception of drama through the decades, the author argues, is the model provided by Shakespeare of an artistic drama distant from the standards and the modalities typical of the commercial scene, which culminates in his fascination for Noh drama and his later works. The legacy of a Yeatsian understanding of the relationship between the dramatic text and its audience is made visible in chapter two, “Ezra Pound: Theatre and anti-Semitism”, where is shown how “[u]nder Yeats’s tutelage, then Pound developed an interest in forms of theatre that were associated with particular kinds of social privilege” (64), which especially emerges in his activity as a theatre reviewer. In Pound, Moran illustrates, Shakespearean intertextualities are equally constitutive of his views on drama and the public as his master’s, as evident in his critique of J. B. Fagan’s *The Merchant of Venice* and, especially, of Maurice Moscovitch’s Yiddish-speaking Shylock, up to the point that quotations and allusions to the text would resurface in his eugenic, antisemitic remarks produced for his infamous Rome Radio broadcasts. Paralleling Pound and Lawrence in “D. H. Lawrence: Theatre and the working class”, the following section explores Lawrence’s engagement with drama across various



periods of his life and career – including his thespian interest in performing charades at Eastwood and his activity as director of school plays while working as a teacher – with a focus on his prolific activity as playwright. Inevitably influenced by Synge in *The Daughter-in-Law* (1913) and *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* (1914), it is shown how Lawrence transformed his dramatic aesthetics into a political gesture by employing a Nottinghamshire setting and the use of working-class dialect – an overtly distinct result of the socio-cultural demands theatre was requiring from authors, if compared to Yeats and Pound.

Chapter four, “James Joyce: Theatre and sexual-non conformity”, builds on Lawrence and Joyce’s shared fascination for the communal dimension of popular, commercial drama – despite their struggle to stage their plays – as well as their conception of the playhouse as “a site of relative inclusiveness, as both focused on how the sexually subversive might be expressed in and through the realm of the theatre” (107). Moran thus delves into Joyce’s fiction, considering for instance the performative aspect involved in the subversion of gender and heteronormative sexuality in the ‘Circe’ episode of *Ulysses*, and his only published play, *Exiles* (1918), which involved a plot driven by the veiled erotic potential of a *ménage à trois*. Returning to the centrality of Yeats in “T. S. Eliot: Theatre and popularity”, the author evokes a series of connections between the two poets, including Eliot’s 1940 lectures in Dublin in tribute and praise of the Irishman’s efforts in the creation of the Abbey Theatre. Shifting between his critical prose and his plays, including *The Rock* (1934), *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), and *The Family Reunion* (1939) among others, the chapter highlights how Eliot gradually moved away from Yeats and Pound’s coterie theatre, positing conversely a form of verse drama that specifically aimed at a popular audience to which the moral hints in his plays were addressed, shaping a hallmark of commercial success that will peak with Andrew Lloyd Webber’s West End musical *Cats*. The closing chapter, “Virginia Woolf: Theatre and gender equality” pursues the previously addressed issues of gender dynamics on stage, reflecting on Woolf’s fascination towards female actresses and theatre producers, including Ellen Terry and Edy Craig, that will respectively inspire her only



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surviving play *Freshwater* (1935) and her last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941). Tracing her theatrical involvements as actress, director, supporter, and her shared passion with her sister Vanessa Bell and her niece Angelica, Moran craftily illustrates how Woolf conceived the small-scale stage and coterie entertainments as liberating for gender politics, in contrast with the institutional scene that would offer limited opportunities to women.

The six case studies proposed in *Modernists and the Theatre* raise a variety of questions and issues revolving around the theatrical scene of the Twentieth Century that, albeit common to the representative figures chosen here, demand distinct answers and approaches. Nonetheless, their reactions and contributions on different levels, from mere theatregoers to actors and playwrights, are paradoxically entangled and require acquaintance with the theatrical networks which they were involved in and, in some cases, brought them together. The value of James Moran's latest monograph hence lies in charting these networks, providing the reader with a clearer perspective of their relationship with the stage. What is more, the book compellingly expands the research horizons by considering the impact of these on their other achievements, including fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Concise yet clear, *Modernists and the Theatre* presents only a limited, chosen cluster of authors, works, and concepts, but effectively shows students and scholars the potentiality of a research field that has been overlooked but which holds great value for both modernists and theatre researchers.



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Bio-bibliographical note

Andrea Lupi is a PhD student of the doctoral programme in Linguistics and Foreign Literatures at the University of Pisa. His area of specialization is English Literature, and mostly Modernist literature, with a focus on T. S. Eliot. His research project, tentatively titled “‘You must not deny the body’: Corporeal Encounters in T. S. Eliot’s Writings”, examines Eliot’s engagement with the body in his poetry and drama, understanding how it informs related issues such as illness and trauma, gender and sexuality, the relationship with the non-human, and phenomenology. His research interests also include the literature of the 1930s, spatial literary studies, and the phenomena of intertextuality and adaptation.

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