Davis succeeds in systematically applying rigorous theatre and performance theory to the Cold War defence procedures marshalled by Canadian, British, and US civilian groups facing the perceived threat of nuclear attack in the mid- to late twentieth century (p. 2). These procedures included not only staged exercises in emergency response, triage and evacuation, but more broadly the indoctrination of rehearsed behaviour in the populace, from the early ‘duck and cover’ drills to more insidious normative inscriptions of gender roles: men save the wounded and trapped, while women do the clean-up and supply cheery moral support (p. 36 ff).

The study demonstrates how theatre was used by civil defence organizers to assign to the abstract and unknowable future of nuclear war a set of consumable narratives that could be responded to. In this respect, chapter 2, ‘Rehearsals for Nuclear War’, is the most theoretically important contribution, parsing the complex intersections of realism and the real, of acting and authenticity, in defense exercises. Yet the most gripping pages are in chapter 7, ‘Acting Out Injury’, which describes the actors in the ‘Casualties Union’ and other groups who played the wounded and dying in defence simulations – so persuasively in some instances that they challenged the paradigms of emergency response planning (p. 219).

While the reader must at times navigate dense prose and complicated charts, the reward is a manifestly more complex notion not only of performance and war simulations, but also of how social anxiety was and is mobilized for state purposes through rehearsal. It is disturbing enough to witness the futility of the performative preparation for nuclear war, knowing now that the devastating reality of such a war would render any anticipated post-attack scenario moot (p. 330). Most disturbing for theatre scholars, though, might be Davis’s (near) indictment of theatre as the culprit in the inculcated disbelief in this futility. Moreover, as Davis points out, we rehearse an analogous complicity today each time we remove our shoes at airport checkpoints, having been trained in the received hegemonic narrative that the war on terror is necessary and inevitable. The question with which Davis charges us, in the end, is whether we will ever stop rehearsing for ‘risk abatement’ and the ‘mitigation of consequences’, and start rehearsing for peace.


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Theatre history still tends to privilege narratives of elaborate productions and artistic achievements. Combined with the too rarely challenged paradigm of ‘national theatre’, the so-called ‘provincial theatres’ remain largely invisible in many accounts. Heinrich’s study responds to this problem by venturing into Yorkshire and Westphalia in the period between 1918 and 1945. That particular comparative perspective, for a time when Germany and Britain only held somewhat scant cultural relations, eventually embarking on a war with each other, initially surprises. Heinrich shows, however, that
the depression after the Wall Street Crash in 1929 affected both countries deeply, and
the use of theatre as an instrument of mental mobilization took a similar course –
notwithstanding utterly different initial positions. Whereas theatre in England had always
been a place of commercial entertainment, theatre in Germany was heavily subsidized.
With the end of the German Empire after the First World War, the newly founded
democratic municipalities took over the former court theatres and started to provide a
broad spectrum of repertory theatre. While these institutions were conceived as ‘moral
institutions’ in the vein of Schiller, Heinrich’s analysis reveals astonishing similarities,
with stages in both countries offering entertainment and amusement.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the English attitude towards theatre
then changed radically. Within a short period of time, the government realized the
political potential of the performing arts and offered financial support, preparing the
ground for the (post-war) Arts Council. In Germany, the Nazis immediately took control
of the theatres and attempted to implement a repertoire fitting their ideology. When these
attempts showed no success – the audience simply did not respond to the new völkisch
drama – theatres returned to their routine offering of classics, light comedies and a few
contemporary plays. The study emphasizes the different political approaches behind the
similar repertory: the Nazis tried to directly control the theatres by creating bureaucratic
structures to exert influence on programming and even casting processes; the British
government created a system of subsidies and incentives to gain the artists’ support.
Heinrich stops at the end of the war, just to leave the reader curious as to what could
be learned from such a continuing comparative perspective on the following Cold War
period and its construction of ‘Western culture’. His study is meticulously researched,
complex in its analyses and built on impressive archive work. Even if his argumentation
appears at times too detailed and too narrow, his conclusions as well as the principal
approach are exemplary in developing new historiographic perspectives, beyond ‘great’
productions and national narratives.

Forgeries of Memory & Meaning: Blacks & the Regimes of Race in American
Theater & Film before World War II. By Cedric J. Robinson. Chapel Hill:
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Despite the clunky title, Robinson’s book offers a copiously researched and compelling
study of what he calls ‘Black history written through the filters of film and capitalism’
(p. xv). He examines the economic and cultural forces perpetuating stereotypical
representation onstage and in film during the early twentieth century, and portrays black
filmmakers and performers who resisted these derogatory images. His study foregrounds
the conflict between films such as The Birth of a Nation (1915) and images of blackface
minstrelsy that reinforced racism, and black actors and filmmakers who created their
own artistic value systems. Robinson’s argument situates the emergence of racism in
the Elizabethan period, where it surfaced simultaneously with capitalism: ‘Shakespeare
drew his audience into the twisting psychological geometry of racism’ (p. 28). From this