



BROWSE



Beckett by Pierre Mélèse (review)

Leonard Pronko

Modern Drama

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

320 MODERN DRAMA December Janauschek, one of the classic ladies, is described as "intense, powerful, heroic," which makes her sound as though she ought to belong with Edwin Forrest and the rest of the heroic boys. Matilda Heron, one of the emotionalistic ladies, is described in such naturalistic terms that she sounds as though she ought to be with Minnie Maddem Fiske as a pioneer of contemporary acting. If he could convey some genuine sense of an actor's style and technique, however, it would make little difference in what school he placed him. For the most part he fails. Wilson's sketches of the various actors, which range from sixteen pages (for Mrs. Fiske) to a few lines, are uncomfortable mixes of biographical fact and critical quotes. Occasionally a quotation actually conveys something, as when John R. Towse explains Richard Mansfield's use of falling inflection, but most of the time Wilson repeats lines that might be attached to anyone, like William Winter's non-description of John E. McCullough: "He was a tragic actor of fine natural talents, thoughtfully, carefully and thoroughly cultivated." Wilson might be excused on the ground that the critics of the past provided very little explicit description, but his own taste seems to run to fluffy adjectives.

Since a cocker spaniel I know is "sprightly, high spirited, charming and feminine," those adjectives do not really tell me much about Fanny Davenport's acting. The give away comes in the final section. Wilson has certainly had a chance to examine the work of the film actors in detail, but the best he can do is tell us that Douglas Fairbanks was athletic and that William S. Hart underplayed. At one point, by way of illustration, he cites the comic style of Jack Benny, "always the egregious tightwad bragging about himself and exchanging insults with his colleagues." Surely, any attempt to discuss Benny as actor and comedian would have to dwell on his timing, his punctuation of lines with overextended pauses and that pursed lip stare. At best, Wilson's sketches give some idea of the kind of role an actor habitually played, but acting is how not what and he seldom tells us how.

GERALD WEALES University of Pennsylvania BECKETT, by Pierre Melese, Seghers, Paris, 1966, "Theatre de tous les temps," no. 2. 192 pp. Price \$8.20. This compact volume by Pierre Melese is intelligently written and brings together a good deal of useful information, opinion, and some exciting photographs. Rather than attempting to interpret the plays, which, according to the book jacket, reject any immediate meaning, the author has presented a clear panorama of what is certainly one of the most unusual and significant dramatic oeuvres of the twentieth century. Beginning with a short biographical study, the author dwells upon the development of Beckett the writer as he progresses from early poetry to later novels to latest dramatic works. The bulk of the book is devoted to the plays. with a full recounting of events. and liberal quotations. One is reminded of the old Burnes Mantle volumes. with a commentary added to each quotation. The radio plays and the pantomimes are not slighted, and the discussion includes the latest examples of each genre. Va-et-vient, Dis Joe and Film. The volumes of this series usually contain a section devoted to the dramatist's critical writings. Beckett, however, is reticent to comment upon his work or on the theater in general, and Melese has included instead several significant interviews and letters. Following these there are commentaries by four of Beckett's major directors, two actors, and a composer who has collaborated with the 1967 BOOK REVIEWS 321 dramatist. "Panorama Critique" includes quotations from books and articles, as well as newspaper reviews, devoted to the plays. A table entitled "Samuel Beckett and his Epoch," conveniently lists artistic and historical events of relevance in columns facing a column which outlines the life and works of Beckett. The book closes with a list of Beckett premieres and a selective bibliography. Pierre Melese's Beckett will serve as an excellent introduction to the plays. It does not purport to be highly original, but it discusses in...

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GERALD WALLIS

University of Pennsylvania

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Berlioz and His Books, it is interesting to note that the square prohibits the law of the outside world, changing the usual reality.

Beckett by Pierre Mélése, the letter of credit still requisites the extremum of the function.

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