

## Book Reviews

### ***Royal Court: International* by Elaine Aston and Mark O’Thomas**

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 229 pp. (hardback)

By Nicholas Holden

It is 1996. In football, England plays host to the European Championships. In the charts, Take That disband and the Spice Girls begin their rise to superstardom and in politics the last full year of Conservative government of the twentieth century is underway as Tony Blair’s ‘New’ Labour storm to victory in the 1997 election. Meanwhile, at the Royal Court, 1996 sees the founding of the theatre’s International Department by Artistic Director Stephen Daldry.

Headed by Elyse Dodgson, who remains in the role today, the Court’s International Department sought to facilitate ways in which the theatre could engage with new writing beyond national borders. With the department’s twentieth anniversary on the horizon, Elaine Aston and Mark O’Thomas have provided “an overarching view of and critical engagement with” (2) the international work of the Royal Court.

The history of the Royal Court Theatre is well documented. But often in these accounts, strands of the theatre’s work, such as its international agenda, are left relatively unexplored and this is where Aston and O’Thomas’ publication is both of value and necessary within scholarship that concerns the Court. Indeed the first chapter of *Royal Court: International* seeks to explore the theatre’s history through an “international lens” (3) and offers an insight into how international policy has been present, to varying extents, within each Artistic Direc-

tor's vision since 1956. The history is supported by a contextual frame, which continues throughout much of the book, that places the international work of the Court at the forefront of an illuminating social, political and economic backdrop that takes into account events on a global scale.

Chapter Two deals more explicitly with the workshops and residencies that have initiated connections between the International Department and playwrights from across the world. While the residencies take place in the Court's Sloane Square home in London, the workshops have extended much further afield to countries such as Uganda, Cuba, Brazil, Russia, India and much of Europe, demonstrating the truly international reach of the department. The chapter goes on to trace the path that a select few playwrights (who have participated in the workshops and residencies) have taken towards productions on the Royal Court stage, although, as the authors point out, the success of the International Department should not be measured in terms of how often the work has featured in the Court's programming. Among the writers who have seen their plays receive full productions are Marius Von Mayenburg, Marcus Barbosa and Anupama Chandrasekhar. And it is these three playwrights, along with British writer Mark Ravenhill, who feature as part of the book's central chapter entitled 'Conversations'. Conducted by Aston and O'Thomas, 'Conversations' presents a series of seven interviews with not only playwrights but also directors Indhu Rubasingham and Dominic Cooke, as well as translator Sasha Dugdale. Each practitioner offers vital individual accounts of the international activities of the Royal Court. With insights from Von Mayenburg (Germany), Barbosa (Brazil) and Chandrasekhar (India), along with Rubasingham, Cooke and Dugdale, these interviews illustrate the range of na-

tionalities and roles that have both contributed to and benefited from the Court's international work, which in turn creates a rounded and personal portrayal of life within the Royal Court.

In a theatre that was once synonymous with British realism, the penultimate chapter of the book considers the reception by audiences and critics to the presentation of international work on the Royal Court stage. Throughout this chapter, the authors discuss plays from across continents, charting the international plays produced at the Royal Court since the inaugural international season in 1997 and analysing these works alongside critical responses to the productions. The negative connotations that can arise out of 'cosmopolitan curiosity' (128) and them/us binaries are explored and an approach to the work more akin to anthropology whereby audiences are invited "inside" cultures to question "not just who 'they' are, but who 'we' are" (128) is revealed as a common objective within much of the Court's international canon.

The final chapter takes us out of London and into the rest of the world once more as the authors look to measure the impact and legacy of the Royal Court's International Department within the countries with which it has partnered throughout its history. Often working in countries where new writing and the text-based model of playmaking is not the dominant theatrical culture, the authors consider issues of sustainability and debate the criticism surrounding the Royal Court's international practices as it looks beyond borders to "break down the walls of cultural misunderstanding, misconception, or misrecognition" (184).

*Royal Court: International* provides the first study of its kind into the work of the International Department at the Royal Court Theatre. The history provided early on in the book offers a new perspective on the theatre's well-documented life, which

is successfully supported by thorough investigations of the International Department's activities and objectives, a wide range of case studies and insightful interviews in the chapters that follow. In a book that cites countries, participants and facilitators in abundance, one figure remains constant: Elyse Dodgson has been integral to the international work of the Royal Court and indeed the book readily acknowledges her contribution both in the form of a foreword penned by Dodgson and subsequently in first and third person accounts throughout. The authors themselves express a hope that their work will initiate further studies on this topic in the future and their 'Conversations' chapter in particular will not only act as a superb resource for future research, but should spark additional scholarship on the international work of the theatre. The scope of the Court's international work is evident from the useful timeline at the end of the publication and it is this that perhaps best illustrates the significant challenge that the authors undertook in documenting this area. This publication will be accessible to scholars, students and enthusiasts of theatre alike.