

SHARON ARONSON-LEHAVI, *Street Scenes: Late Medieval Acting and Performance*. (The New Middle Ages.) New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. xv, 183; 4 b&w figs. \$80. ISBN: 9780230606654. doi:10.1017/S0038713412004277

This book is part of The New Middle Ages series, which specializes in pluridisciplinary studies of medieval cultures. Although *Street Scenes* does not engage the series's emphasis on women's history or gender analysis, it does engage medieval theatrical performance in a way that applies semiotics and twentieth-century performance theories to the medieval theatrical event. The book's audience appears to be a general one rather than medieval drama specialists, as all Middle English quotes have accompanying translations, and the author is frankly naïve about current scholarship and trends in medieval drama. For example, she repeatedly refers to the vernacular biblical drama as "mystery plays," a term which seems particularly dated, and treats all English biblical play collections as "cycles" akin to the York Cycle. Nevertheless, the links she makes between medieval street performance and the performance theories of Bertold Brecht and Antonin Artaud are refreshing and thought provoking.

The essential question of the book is, Was there a theoretical discourse about performance that dealt with the tensions of performing holy characters and events? Could such a discourse have led to a specific language, aesthetic, and acting style, one that embraces and emphasizes the duality of the actor-character relationship? Not surprisingly, Aronson-Lehavi's answer is affirmative, and she begins her explication of that aesthetic with an analysis of the probably Lollard *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, the longest and most detailed work of dramatic criticism in Middle English. Aronson-Lehavi provides a translation of the text in the Appendix.

The *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* is a late-fourteenth-century Middle English text that strongly attacks the performance of holy events or "miraclis." Aronson-Lehavi stresses the way the *Tretise* focuses on the live event-ness of such theater. The anonymous author objects to the performance context rather than the dramatic texts, particularly the tension between the live event (signifier) and the holy event (signified), a tension that is located in the actor's body. The *Tretise* author is especially opposed to the potential for mirth or humor in the performance of sacred events. Aronson-Lehavi's premise is that, while enumerating objections to the performance of holy events, the *Tretise* presents a shared understanding of medieval religious drama's conventions and aesthetics, and that those who supported drama understood and embraced the qualities to which the *Tretise* objects. Fundamental to her approach is the idea that dramatic performance is distinct from the dramatic text on which it is based, and that the actor's body is the locus for the tension between signifier and signified.

From the *Tretise*, Aronson-Lehavi extracts a latent theory about the affect of the performative and the generation of something new at the moment of performance, something that is not what is represented. She postulates that creators and critics of medieval vernacular drama made use of the tension between live event and scripted narrative, leading to an acting style that emphasized the "signifying function of the theatrical event" (3). Using Brecht's Epic Theater, and Artaud's Total Theater, and placing medieval street performance at the crossroads of the two, she argues that the medieval theater had a "deeply rooted and coherent non-illusionist aesthetic concept of performance" (13).

Following this analysis of the *Tretise* in chapter 2, Aronson-Lehavi turns in chapter 3 to an exploration of epic and total acting and performance. The post-realist acting styles of Brecht and Artaud reject realism's goal of the merger of actor and character. Instead, they place the conflict and difference between the two at the center of their theatrical dynamic. Epic Theater features the deliberate exposure of the theatrical mechanism, using visible reminders that the performance is not "real" (often referred to as Brechtian alien-

ation devices). The acting style articulated by Brecht requires the actor to “show” or “present” a character, never attempting to “become” the role. The audience is repeatedly shaken from any illusion of realism. Aronson-Lehavi not only applies this theory of acting to medieval drama (particularly texts from the York Cycle), but also finds connections to the tensions explicated by the author of the *Tretise*.

Artaud’s concept of Total Theater emphasizes spectacle and the affecting of the audience rather than the realist concern with representing the story. Artaud uses the physicality of the performer to affect the audience’s consciousness through sensory perception (as opposed to using language to appeal to the audience’s reason). For Aronson-Lehavi, in total acting, the extreme situations and emotional and physical danger of the performance call attention to the body of the actor as distinct from that of the character. This aesthetic is particularly applicable to the Passion sequences of medieval vernacular drama.

By applying modern theater theory, particularly the ideas of Brecht and Artaud, to medieval performance, Aronson-Lehavi develops useful terminology to discuss aesthetics that medieval drama scholars have known or at least sensed are there. Although the performance aesthetic she reveals is not particularly revolutionary to those who have experience staging medieval drama, her argument for an intentional aesthetic is tantalizing, and her application of Brecht’s terminology to the peculiar conundrum of “playing God” is very useful. The book is strongest in the second half, when she turns to the discussion of Brecht and Artaud, and it will be greatly useful to modern theater practitioners looking for an entry point to staging medieval dramatic texts with a deliberate aesthetic and acting style.

CAROLYN COULSON-GRIGSBY, Shenandoah University