

David Savran 2009: *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 328 pp. ISBN: 978-0-472-11692

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It is virtually impossible to do justice to David Savran's recent volume *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* in a brief review, for it is a veritable quilt of information on all the topics included in the title, and more. Savran brings a sociological and cultural focus to his interpretation of the relationship of jazz and theater in America, a focus he has used in previous publications such as *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and American Culture* (1998) or *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (2003). This new volume makes for a captivating read for anyone interested in the reception of jazz in the USA and Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, although it is also about the development of 'serious' American theater – so called by British critic William Archer, who located its conception and birth on the sand dunes of Provincetown in 1915, and which, unfortunately, Savran almost willfully ignores. The other area that this volume attempts to cover is that of the audience and their reaction, the sociology and cultural economics of the phenomenon of entertainment. Such an original juxtaposition of jazz with the serious or legitimate theater in America will not be found in any other comparable study on theater, although sociological themes are explored in volumes such as *Culture Makers: Urban Performance and Literature in the 1920s* by Amy Koritz (2008), who links dance, drama and literature to the changes in society, or Dennis Kennedy's *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audience in Modernity and Postmodernity* (2009), a study that extends well beyond the Broadway audiences of the twenties into Europe and the late twentieth century. David Savran defines his aim and methodology as "using jazz as a kind of lever to prise open relations between and among the producers and consumers of a wide range of theatrical genres, the shifting class relations that were so deeply implicated in the rapidly changing shape of the cultural hierarchy, and the relationship between a revolution in music and a revolution in modes of industrial production" (5-6). Jazz, which Savran identifies as the music of the machine age, was rejected or welcomed in the same measure that the machine age was by the population at large as also by those concerned with the cultural output of the United States of America. Culture was fast becoming a consumer product, and Savran stresses this by dividing the audience into *upstairs* and *downstairs* and by focusing on the variations produced in such seating niceties by financial as much as cultural fluctuations.

Savran's analysis of consumer culture, jazz and theater is based on Raymond Williams's theory of *structure of feeling*, but also on the social and political economies of culture as a site of struggle for power as expounded by Theodore W. Adorno and by

Pierre Bourdieu. These theoretical notions are applied to the history and development of jazz as it engaged the minds and creative efforts of numerous critics and artists of the twenties, the period that F. Scott Fitzgerald dubbed *the Jazz Age*. The ways in which critics reacted – thereby controlling the fate of specific works of art – is meticulously traced and offers an invaluable introduction to the state of the theater in America in the twenties. The reviews published by men such as Brooks Atkinson, Gilbert Seldes, Walter Prichard Eaton, John Tasker Howard, George Jean Nathan, Van Wyck Brooks or D. W. Griffith are analyzed, and their lives and personalities illuminated. Even more importantly, the reader is made aware of how these men maneuvered jazz into a ‘lowbrow’ category for both racial and elitist reasons, and how ‘legitimate’ theater was displaced into the position of a ‘middlebrow’ enterprise. The many, well-chosen quotations also introduce us to a handful of earlier cultural historians of American theater and the twenties, such as Joan Shelley Rubin, Janice Radway, Michael Kammen, Paul Gorman and Paul Di Maggio.

Chapter one, ‘America’s Music’, attempts to define both jazz and legitimate versus illegitimate, or serious versus popular, theater, and shows how the influence of jazz pervaded the whole cultural scene. The complexity of jazz was recognized as early as 1924 in *The Seven Lively Arts* by Gilbert Seldes, who began his discussion of the phenomenon with the following statement: “The word jazz is already so complicated that it ought not to be subjected to any new definitions, and the thing itself so familiar that it is useless to read new meanings into it” (81). And yet Savran takes on the challenge not only of defining jazz but also of separating the intertwined strands and relating them to the development of the American theater of this period. Savran makes a point of establishing the racial and elitist reactions to jazz from the start: it could be ‘hot’ or ‘sweet’, depending on who was playing for whom. He also makes clear that jazz, with its mix of styles such as “ragtime, coon songs, and military marches” (31), although African-American in inception, was quickly assimilated into Euro-American traditions, absorbing on its way popular rhythms of European origin. Thus, Savran argues, cultural purity does not exist, although jazz was welcomed as a truly American cultural manifestation, albeit frequently considered to be Jewish because its dissemination was largely in the hands of Jews. The indisputably popular roots of jazz threatened the new literary or serious theater that the Little Theater movement of the nineteen tens had stimulated and which then had to struggle against the rapid advance of the movies.

In the second chapter, ‘The Struggle for Legitimacy’, Savran strives to answer some of the questions related to the phenomenon of jazz and the creation of a legitimate theater and audience reception that his first chapter had posed. However, he quickly moves on to an analysis of Gilbert Seldes’s *The Seven Lively Arts*, crediting the critic who had previously written for the highbrow magazine *The Dial* with the creation of a positioning of the ideal audience of a theater that appeals neither to the boorish masses nor to the sophisticated elite as definitively ‘middlebrow’.

Three of the seven chapters chart the development of jazz and its influence on the growth of what is today recognized as American music. Savran likens jazz to minstrelsy in that the form was so readily taken over by white artists (frequently Jewish) who made it their own, converting both into popular entertainment typically scorned by even the most discerning critics, whom Savran berates for their conservative lack of vision.

Chapter three, 'Fascinating Rhythm', is devoted in large part to Ira and George Gershwin, and shows how the all-black musical *Shuffle Along* (Eubie Blake and Norbie Sissle 1921) that introduced the Charleston to Broadway and took the social elite by storm, was one of the most important influences on George Gershwin, spurring him to compose music of comparable variety and vitality for musicals such as *Tip-Toes* (1925). These pieces, as so many of their period, as Savran points out, were, in one way or another, about the conflict between high and low that was being played out on the field of American culture. Savran uses contemporary reviews – in most cases the only source available to researchers of audience response or of the entertainment world, both low and highbrow – to offer summaries and insightful commentary, particularly on the racial prejudices revealed by white critics, but also, in the case of *Shuffle Along*, on the attitudes of the African-American audiences and artists who, although rejecting stereotypes imposed on them by white society, needed to conform in order to gain acceptance. Savran berates critics such as George Jean Nathan, Oliver Sayler and Walter Prichard Eaton for their uncompromising attitude to the musical, which Nathan defined as “as alcohol to art: a convivial moment of forgetfulness” (93). Musical comedy threatened the ‘seriousness’ of American theater – the literary theater that the Theatre Guild, O’Neill and *Theatre Arts* were promoting, having taken this task over from the Provincetown Players. Savran, who interprets Gershwin’s music as modernist, praises him for legitimating jazz in the theater, and compares Gershwin’s stand to that of the exponents of serious drama who rejected jazz, creating a high modernist theater. According to Savran, such a theater is inconsequential in American culture, in spite of the plays of Djuna Barnes or Gertrude Stein and the latter’s undeniable influence on the Living Theater, the Worcester Group, or playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks.

‘Pandering to the “Intelligent Minority”’, the fourth chapter, the most sociologically orientated, relies on the statistics and surveys carried out, among others, by Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, authors of the well-known *Middletown*, an account of the typical American Main Street of the early twentieth century. It is in this chapter that Savran looks at audience numbers, at what he calls the “hierarchy of theatrical entertainments” (105), and at the hierarchies of audiences and the social classes they were made up of. Again, the reader discerns a rigorous research methodology – here frequently anecdotal, as Savran readily admits – based on data culled from newspaper and magazine articles on theaters and their audiences. We learn, for example, that the movie palaces which replaced the nickelodeon in the second decade of the twentieth century were more expensive, and yet, in Buffalo, where four showings were offered per day, were all full. The audiences, which before had been of the working class, rose on the social scale as the venues became more luxurious and ticket prices came close to equaling those of theaters. And so, as Savran assures us, it was the lower theater forms such as vaudeville that suffered most from the rise of the movies. The literary or legitimate theater became a minority interest, yet this minority did not hail from the sophisticated upper strata of society but from the more discerning, educated new middle class who were “neither time killers nor sensation seekers” (130) as Walter Prichard Eaton put it.

The Theatre Guild, as an example of a theater that tried to combine both artistic and commercial concerns, and its interest in expressionism, gives Savran his topic for

chapter five, tellingly entitled 'Human Cogs and Levers'. The playwrights to whom Savran dedicates most space are Elmer Rice, John Howard Lawson and, in the last chapter, Eugene O'Neill. His analysis of Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923) allows Savran to expand the social commentary on the twenties and, in particular, his theory that expressionism and jazz, manifestations of modernism, were, if not a result, certainly a reflection of the ascendancy of the machine. He posits that expressionism expressed the fear of the machine age and creates a canon of expressionistic American plays, in which he includes *Machinal* (1928) by Sophie Treadwell (one of the few women mentioned in this volume) but not Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* (1921). However, rather than limit his analysis of Rice's play to expressionism on the American stage, Savran is true to his social/cultural focus and positions *The Adding Machine* as a parody of the Marxist class struggle. This is an interesting approach which gives unity to a play that has frequently been criticized for its two-part structure, highlighted by the expressionist and surrealist devices used. Savran shows how the surreal section of the play offers a criticism of the upper classes that produce nothing worthwhile as contrasted with the artists – who, Savran wryly points out, resemble the board of the Theatre Guild, people who worked to elevate their theater's productions into the sphere of high art, although the legitimate theater of the time was clearly the province of the new middle class. As Savran reminds his readers, the Elysian Fields of *The Adding Machine* are not home to any theatrical activities. The history of the reception of Lawson's *Processional: A Jazz Symphony of American Life in Four Acts* (1925) allows Savran to shore up his thesis of the divide between popular and elite entertainment.

Chapter six, 'Jazz Cosmopolitanism', returns to the concern with the music of the Jazz Age to focus on two composers, John Alden Carpenter and George Antheil, and on their differing fortunes in the history of the American musical canon as well as on the reception of jazz in Europe. Carpenter's *Skyscrapers* (1926) was acclaimed by critics while Antheil's *Ballet mécanique* (1926), when performed in New York in 1927, was derided as non-comprehensible mechanical noise. Savran analyzes the success of the one and the failure of the other, as also the reversal of their fortunes at present, for Antheil is today recognized as the precursor of John Cage, Merce Cunningham or the Living Theatre, while Carpenter's fortunes have waned: he is seen as a conservative modernist of little interest to the development of the American avant-garde.

Eugene O'Neill merits a chapter to himself, chapter seven, entitled 'The Canonization of Eugene O'Neill', part of which Savran had already published in *Modern Drama* and which, through the theme of canonization, links it to the previous chapter on the composers Carpenter and Antheil. The focus of this chapter is more on the agents of the process of canonization than on O'Neill himself for Savran devotes a large section to George Jean Nathan and his biographer Isaac Goldberg and shows how Nathan too became canonized as the theater critic of his times. Perhaps because O'Neill disapproved of jazz in his commitment to creating a 'serious' theater for America, Savran, while managing to sustain his position as founder of American theater, does not seem to value too highly his contribution as a playwright. In this at times tongue-in-cheek analysis of how O'Neill was 'beatified' and then made into a saint or messiah of the American drama, three names are missing: those of Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook (mentioned but once), the founders of the Provincetown Players who

believed in O'Neill and gave him his start on the non-commercial art stage, and Kenneth Macgowan, the critic who first took up O'Neill's cause. The canonization of O'Neill is the climax of the tenuous thread that holds the volume together: the theme of the creation of the new middle class that sought serious entertainment.

Highbrow/Lowdown is an academic book that examines the anthropological, sociological and cultural elements that go into the making of social class but written without any unnecessary excess of theoretical language or concepts and is therefore accessible not only to the academic reader but also to those who are interested in the history of jazz and theater in the USA. For an academic reader, there is, however, one serious flaw, and that is the lack of a bibliography to facilitate locating references, which are indicated in the usual shorthand form in the notes. Neither this, nor the fact that many sections had been published previously in academic journals and anthologies of essays, detracts from the general interest of this volume, which throws light on the development of serious theater in America and, in its imaginative viewing of theater through the lens of jazz, offers an innovative way of analyzing social classes and their desire to be entertained.

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