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not to ignore it, something might begin to change.

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Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline by Michael Mangan


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In the UK in 2013 we were bombarded with media headlines about the impact of an ageing population and the consequences of ignoring this rapidly adjusting demographic profile. From the alleged negative effect on the National Health Service and state-funded pensions, to the positive economic boost that may come from older people staying in the workforce, the stories have reflected society’s anxieties and hopes as we grapple with this new social fact and its future implications. Michael Mangan’s Staging Ageing seems particularly timely in the face of these controversies, and it offers an insightful and detailed examination of representations of ageing across a range of examples and texts. Mangan is careful to explore some of the negative stereotypes around ageing, and the book has much to offer to current debates, both within the discipline of theatre and performance studies and more widely.

The book aims to examine ‘our understanding of ageing by looking at it from the perspective of drama, theatre and performance’ (p. 5) and engages with selected texts and performances ‘as an optic through which to view changing images, representations and understandings of old age’ (p. 6). Divided into four sections with several chapters each, the book focuses on ‘Frames and Contexts’, ‘Tragedy and Comedy’, ‘Memories’, and ‘The Value(s) of Old Age’. The initial framing of the book through relevant theories, such as contemporary age studies, provides an accessible and productive opening into the material. This sets the agenda for what is to follow and also constructs persuasive arguments against ageism and the negative impact of the ‘narrative of decline’ that is now so familiar in the media. The next four chapters, under the heading of ‘tragedy and comedy’, explore specific dramatic examples of representations of old age in classical Greek, Roman, medieval, and Restoration theatre texts. The chronological unfolding of an impressive range and breadth of materials makes for compelling and enjoyable reading. The obvious gap in the chronology leaps over extensive analysis of Shakespearean examples, which are deliberately avoided by Mangan because of recent publications on this topic by other scholars (pp. 31–32). The final chapter in this section comes up-to-date with ‘dirty old men and trickster figures’ from television programmes, such as Steptoe and Son (1962–64 and 1970–74) and The Last of the Summer Wine (1973–2010). Mangan follows a chronological structure through this second section as a way of pursuing the development of age-related stereotypes, particularly in relation to old men. He states that ‘chronology is followed when there is no good reason not to do so’ but that there is also ‘no overall attempt to develop an overarching chronological argument’ (p. 6). Whilst a ‘chronological argument’ might not be productive, I found the move from chronology to themes, which follow in the next sections, to be somewhat disruptive to the developmental logic and careful exposition of the three chapters spanning the Greeks to the Restoration period.

The final two sections of the book, focused on themes of memory and reminiscence and the value(s) of old age, cover a wider range of dramatic, paratheatrical, and performance examples. Chapters on memory and reminiscence deal with theatrical stagings of the recollection of memories, such as in Samuel Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape (1958), and Melanie Wilson’s recent piece exploring dementia, Autobiographer (2010). The second chapter in this section considers reminiscence theatre as a form and details various companies who work with the elderly and ‘the dramaturgy of reminiscence’ (p. 153). Mangan returns to the issue of dementia through a slightly different lens in this chapter and considers how acting itself may be beneficial in counteracting the advance of the disease. The final section of the book turns to thinking about longevity as a particular idea of old age, one that is tied to myths of immortality and explored by Mangan in the work of George Bernard Shaw and Karel Capek. This section also includes a chapter looking at the institution of the care home in theatrical and televisual representation. Here, Mangan relates his examples to recent scandals about care for the elderly in the UK, where various nursing homes have come under close scrutiny for neglecting their residents and for institutional abuse. The final chapter examines works that have incorporated elderly performers in ‘song
and dance’, such as Pina Bausch’s *Kontakthof* (2010). Overall, these final two sections offer significant preliminary critical essays, with Mangan guiding the reader through a diverse and rich range of performative examples and laying the ground for future thinking in these areas.

Mangan is exemplary in handling complex ideas in a gentle and comprehensible way. The introduction to the book is very clear about its aims, objectives, and structure, and the choice of examples is clearly explained. He is careful throughout to maintain this clarity and also to persuade the reader to think about the complexity of readings of old age in ‘imaginative narratives’ (p. 59), and to challenge the predominant ‘narrative of decline’. The productive range of examples and the originality of the research make this a significant text for anyone interested in gerontology and its relation to performance practice. I also believe that undergraduate students would take much from this text, not only in terms of its content, but also in relation to the writing and Mangan’s unfolding of the arguments. It is clear that there is much more work to be undertaken in these areas – as Mangan states: ‘[p]ublishers, theatre and media producers are turning out more novels, poems, plays and programmes about old age than ever before’ (p. 32). In the meantime, Mangan has written a key text on the subject that widens the debate and lays the ground for further study.

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