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Review of: Treating the public: charitable theater and civic health in the early modern Atlantic world

Chad M. Gasta

Iowa State University, gasta@iastate.edu

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Abstract

Rachael Ball's *Treating the Public* is a study of playhouses and acting companies in both Spain and the Anglo-Atlantic world and their mission to fund charitable works in several Spanish and New World cities. The monograph deploys a comparative approach to analyze the development of public theater in the following urban settings: Madrid and London (chapter 1), Seville and Bristol (chapter 2), Mexico City and Dublin (chapter 3) and Puebla de los Ángeles and Williamsburg, Virginia (chapter 4). In the introduction, "Public Theater and Public Health in the Early Modern Atlantic World", Ball questions previous monolithic studies of early modern theater and instead advocates for "a historical rather than literary perspective" while exploring "a more Atlantic World rather than national perspective in its asymmetrical comparative analysis of the ways that urban dwellers experienced and used theater as a social, cultural, and economic institution" (11).

Disciplines

Classical Literature and Philology | Modern Literature | Performance Studies | Playwriting | Spanish Literature | Theatre History

Comments

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Treating the public: charitable theater and civic health in the early modern Atlantic world,

by Rachael Ball, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2017, 216 pp., \$42.50

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Rachael Ball's *Treating the Public* is a study of playhouses and acting companies in both Spain and the Anglo-Atlantic world and their mission to fund charitable works in several Spanish and New World cities. The monograph deploys a comparative approach to analyze the development of public theater in the following urban settings: Madrid and London (chapter 1), Seville and Bristol (chapter 2), Mexico City and Dublin (chapter 3) and Puebla de los Ángeles and Williamsburg, Virginia (chapter 4). In the introduction, "Public Theater and Public Health in the Early Modern Atlantic World", Ball questions previous monolithic studies of early modern theater and instead advocates for "a historical rather than literary perspective" while exploring "a more Atlantic World rather than national perspective in its asymmetrical comparative analysis of the ways that urban dwellers experienced and used theater as a social, cultural, and economic institution" (11). In particular, Ball asserts that public theater's role in funding charitable associations created a dependence on public consumption where leases and ticket sales became the primary source of support for hospitals, orphanages and other social agencies. As Ball shows, any funding lost due to theater closures exacerbated sickness, disease, poverty and other social ills.

Chapter 1, "The Money That Comes from Plays: Comedies and Charitable Urban Public Health Institutions in Madrid ~~in~~ and London", is the standout chapter of the book. It studies the interdependence of charitable organizations and public theater in Madrid and London, and it lays out many of the comparative points that recur throughout the remainder of the project. The majority of the first chapter examines how hospitals played the initial role in introducing public theater in

Madrid. Hospitals constructed small staging areas, rented equipment and seating and charged admission. The ticket sales in turn funded their organizations and with the growing popularity of the theater, the hospitals – and later other social organizations – affected government policy:

Plays and playgoing became integrated into daily urban life in Madrid to an extent that was unmatched in any other European capital during the early modern era because of the intersecting development of confraternities, institutions of welfare, and playhouses that took place there. The integration, in turn, gave theater the potential to influence public opinion and public health policy. (18)

Ball provides a short overview of the emergence of public theater in Madrid and the construction of the first playhouses, the roles played by various individuals (e.g., *autores de comedias*, actors and acting companies, etc.), the work of women in this enterprise and the administration and oversight of the industry through leases, contracts, box office sales and fee collections. Ball also describes how public theater's success and its revenue generation may have yielded higher cure rates among patients and decreased the numbers of indigents and orphans throughout Madrid.

The second part of chapter 1 compares the social situation in London regarding sickness, disease, infirmity and orphanage to that of Madrid, and London's attempts at battling these social ills through public theater. As Ball notes, London's spatial, political and social makeup was decidedly different from that of Madrid since the first theaters built in London were outside of the city walls, thus placing them somewhat outside of the authorities' control. Other topics in this portion of the chapter include censorship, the role of boy actors in female roles and a few anecdotes regarding unruly behavior.

The second chapter, “Playing the Port: Theater in Early Modern Seville and Bristol”, features a comparative case study of two economically significant urban centers which also enjoyed surging populations that made them second in size and importance only to the capital cities in each country. Both Seville and Bristol “played a key role in linking the metropole to wider Atlantic communities and economies”, and both assisted in generating revenue for hospitals and relief agencies (13). However, drama was far more prevalent and popular in Seville due to its relationship to Madrid’s successful theatrical industry which sent actors and plays to other municipal centers in the Peninsula. Moreover, Seville’s centrality in the Indies trade produced a strong municipal government that decreed that public theater should be an alternate source of funds for civic organizations, a stark change from the model in Madrid where religious brotherhoods played a decisive role. Although poverty and disease brought about by rapid population growth were problems that afflicted Seville, Bristol initially only had one permanent private theater. As Ball claims, the “evidence does not suggest as deep and consistent a connection as those that evolved between the theaters and hospitals in Spanish cities” although “the playhouses of Bristol did provide some financial assistance to local institutions of public health” (69). In short, whereas the two cities are similar in economic and political terms, Seville’s theatrical industry was much better organized and developed.

Given Spain’s spirited interest in public theater, it should not be surprising that drama enjoyed similar distinction in Spanish-speaking lands outside the Peninsula. In chapter 3, “Comedies in Colonial Contexts: Theater in Early Modern Mexico City and Dublin”, Ball demonstrates how the interest in utilizing public drama for public works was exported to Mexico City where theater transcended its initial tendencies to evangelize Indian groups or to foment nationalistic identity among its creole subjects. Moreover, Mexico City’s theaters were originally

structurally connected to hospitals suggesting both a physical attachment and financial dependence. From the earliest days of the conquest, several conquistadors such as Cortés, the Franciscans and Jesuits as well as prominent religious or political figures all opined on the necessity of public theater, and some of them used the genre to advocate ideological or religious viewpoints. However, there were also those who campaigned against theater and its seeming lewdness. On the other hand, Ball points out that Dublin had no permanent theaters and therefore no theatergoers. She briefly discusses instead the history of performance in Ireland and its ideological tendencies, although they may not have had any direct connection to civic or charitable organizations.

The fourth chapter, “‘Aware That It Is a Public Work’: Commercial Drama in Puebla and Williamsburg”, examines discourses that opposed theater by focusing on the closures of theaters after 1640 in both cities and the reasons and repercussions for those closings. Ball focuses on Puebla’s rapid growth and concurrent emergence as a destination for acting troupes. With several theaters in operation, public drama symbolized not only urban development but also a sought-after source of charitable funding. A good deal of Ball’s discussion, however, revolves around contrarian discourses against the theater by such figures as the Bishop Palafox, a powerful and well-known ecclesiastical figure who regularly attacked the stage for its perceived lasciviousness and even secured, for a time, a ban on performance. It is this sort of discourse against public drama that ties Puebla to Williamsburg – a significantly smaller and less developed settlement with virtually no public drama at all during the same period. Here, Ball provides a brief history of performance in Williamsburg and discusses the construction of the first playhouses after 1716.

The final chapter in the book, “‘The Plague of the Republic’: Antitheatrical Sentiment and its Limits in the Atlantic World”, picks up the previous chapter’s discussion of discourses against

theater and also includes an interesting commentary on the role of women in the industry (e.g., issues of femininity and masculinity, cross-dressing, etc.). As Ball rightly demonstrates, “The theater made a convenient target for anxieties felt during such periods of perceived degeneration and decline because public drama was such a regular and highly visible feature of urban life in cities throughout the Spanish Atlantic World” (131). The author goes on to show how charitable organizations’ dependence on public theater coupled with protection and patronage by important political and religious figures including the king (139) made it difficult for opponents to fully assert their view that “the state was sick” (142). This, of course, did not stop them from alleging theater’s so-called depraved nature and securing intermittent closures or punishments. A similar situation played out in the English-speaking world, particularly in London, where reformers sought censure of individual works or authors with outright theater closure as their ultimate goal.

Ball’s overall discussion on the role and impact of theater in the Spanish-speaking cities is illuminating and interesting. Indeed, many previously unknown or otherwise forgotten details involving box office proceeds, the role of civil and religious authorities’ oversight of the industry and the various vignettes involving unruly theatergoers or unhappy diplomats and royal appointees provide new and illuminating insights into the theatrical world of early modern Spain and the New World. Unfortunately, Ball’s analyses of the theater industries in London, Bristol, Dublin and Williamsburg are significantly less developed, and, as the author herself admits several times, the comparisons are often “asymmetrical”. In fact, some statements threaten to undermine the entire project, such as when she remarks: “The charitable function of the theaters in funding the hospitals of the colonial cities of New Spain had no real counterpart in the settlements of Anglo America” (128). That criticism notwithstanding, the book contains fascinating and rich analyses of the early modern Spanish and New World theatrical scene that would otherwise remain mostly unknown.

Chad M. Gasta

Iowa State University

gasta@iastate.edu

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