Death by Drama and other Medieval Urban Legends


It is difficult to review a book that has already garnered so much acclaim. Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends by Jody Enders, winner of the Barnard Hewitt Award from the American Society of Theatre Research, has received praise from across the academy. Not surprisingly, the commendations remain entirely warranted. The book is engaging and meticulously researched, wrestling with issues far beyond the purview of French medieval theatre, its primary subject. Instead, her work explores “where theater ends and life begins … or, sometimes, where life ends and theater begins” (2). She reveals the problematic position of theatrical events as “not quite representation and not quite reality” (66). Her book fully explores what passes for truth and how it impacts the living of life.

Enders begins with an explanation of her framing device of urban legends: (possibly) apocryphal stories and the relationship between their veracity and what people believed about them. She defines them as (relatively) realistic stories that reflect unselﬁshconscous concerns of the time. For example, the urban legend of wealthy vacationers bringing home baby alligators, only to flush them into city sewers, comes down to: “Meaning: ‘Our public works are not properly maintained,’ or ‘Beware of rich people with time on their hands and no ethical boundaries about life and death’” (xix). In this way, Enders uses urban legends as a means of accessing cultural concerns. She then offers an excerpt from the titular story of the book. During a performance of the biblical drama of Judith and Holofernes, a convicted murdered was executed as one of the characters in the play by another convict standing in for an additional character. As will prove her methodology, Enders handles the story as both possible fact and as possible fiction, exploring whether the story tells more about what the people of the time hoped and feared could happen or whether it expressed what actually did happen.

To achieve this complex and elusive goal, Enders seeks to create her own literary form, reﬂecting the tangible and intangible manifestations of her topic. On one hand, this book employs serious in-depth research of the highest level. She offers copious notes as well as appendices containing the original documents on which she based her research, allowing readers of foreign languages to assess directly the material themselves. On the
other hand, her approach does not end there. Instead, she seeks “to create a kind of hybrid form, situated between short stories and literary theory, in which the storytellers could tell their own stories and in which the telling itself would provide the ‘key’ to the interpretation – if there was one” (xxvii). These two approaches balance and support the book.

In all, she relates fourteen different stories, breaking the book into two sections. The first section, “Telling the Difference,” delves into the pretenses of theatre and where (and whether) truth may be found in them. The first two chapters, “Lusting after Saints” and “Queer Attractions,” survey the effects of stage attractiveness, where two young performers (a young girl in chapter one and a young man in chapter two) find their lives altered by suitors held rapt by their performances in religious dramas. The third chapter, “Of Madness and Method Acting,” is a rumination on an actor in Ancient Greece who actually “goes mad” while playing madness on stage. Although the analogy to the other stories remains clear, the chapter is peculiarly out of synch with the historical mappings found in the rest of the book. Chapter four tells the stories of two priests who would have died playing their roles of Jesus and Judas if not for alert and attentive audience members who discerned their true (ie., not staged) suffering. Chapter five, “Dying to Play,” crosses the line to actual death. The chapter contains two separate incidents where people were killed while attending and/or assisting theatrical productions, questioning where legal liability lay for theatre. After so much death, chapter six, “The Eel of Melun,” explores what happens when an actor merely believes real danger is possible on stage. It tells the story of a frightened performer who ran off the stage before his (staged) torture and death even began, prompting ridicule and linguistic infamy. The final chapter of this section, “The Devil Who Wasn’t There,” investigates the power of the Devil character to impact the players’ lives long before and long after the proverbial curtain has closed.

Section two, “Make-Believe,” centers on the role of theatre to affect (and be affected by) actual religious beliefs in the tumultuous time of the Reformation. Chapter eight, “The Laughter of Children,” wonders at the power of theatrical reception, where laughter can appear as a rebuke of religious intention. It ultimately posits the need to control laughter in order to control theatre itself. Chapter nine, “Burnt Theatrical Offerings,” tells a horrifying story of the propagation of anti-Semitism through the use of theatre, questioning which came first: the underlying sentiment of the urban legend or the story itself. The possible use of relics on stage and the theological ramifications of that choice forms the center of chapter ten, “Theatre’s Living Dead.” “The Mysterious Quarry,” chapter eleven, examines a populist theatre that addressed religious struggles present at the time concerning how society should be governed. Chapter twelve, “Seeing Is Believing,” recounts a theatrical retelling of the “loaves and fishes” Bible miracle that was so convincing it raised the question of whether an actual miracle occurred. The penultimate chapter, “The Suicide of Despair,” tells three stories of performers who found the same ends as their roles, characterizing the danger and/or value placed on theatre and theatrical representation. The final chapter contains the title story “Death by Drama,” and it presents the troubling relationship between theology and “snuff,” the intentional killing of performers during a performance. The book closes with a short Epilogue furthering that theme, appealing for a need to investigate truth as substantially as belief.
One of the hallmarks of this book is the outstanding research and intellectual rigor that created it. In addition to using such disparate secondary sources as Stanislavski, Foucault, Artaud, Bakhtin, Goffman, Plato, and Schechner among many others, her historical research is unparalleled. In her chapter on the Eel of Melun, she even discovers a list of “eely” expressions from 1640 that includes a reference to the aforementioned animal. Although she claims the real work comes not in finding medieval sources, but rather in their decoding, the volume and depth of her work is legendary. A primary aim of her research is to get underneath the supposed “authenticating” details that remain part and parcel of urban legends then and now. In this way, Enders never takes anyone at her/his word, exploring where each author based her/his account and then scrutinizing from where that account emerged. The chapter “The Suicide of Despair” provides a typical example of the depth of her research and its value to this project: “In multiply mediated testimony, Petit de Julleville cites Carro, who was citing the eighteenth-century prosecutor Dr. Rochard, who was citing the manuscript testimony of the sixteenth-century prosecutor L’Enfant and the seventeenth-century curé Janvier” (170). In the appendix, all of the sources remain open to further examination by the reader.

Another effective strategy consists of her embrace of questions as opposed to seeking set, uncontestable answers. Given the mercurial nature of her object of study, she contends that remaining open provides truer insight into the material. Therefore, she often begins her analysis of a story with a series of questions: “What are the odds that a convicted criminal about to be beheaded would take the time and trouble to play-act his own death? What were the odds that ‘Judith,’ unskilled as an executioner, would get it exactly right the first time” (xxi)? Rather than introducing doubt, Enders’s tactic creates resonance and depth to her material, presenting a sometimes contradictory, but nonetheless, more accurate picture of the event. Life is messy and full of questions; Enders’s approach uses that apparent deficit to her distinct advantage.

The writing strategy of creating a hybrid form is particularly successful. A skilled storyteller, Enders draws the reader into the events. Each chapter reads like the peeling of an onion, unfolding layer upon layer of significance and meaning. She stimulates the emotional impact necessary to underscore the dramatic ramifications of the “sacrilegious” Jew in “Theatrical Burnt Offerings,” while also conveying complex and nuanced distinctions between the mere moving of relics in “Theater’s Living Dead” and the ecclesiastical practice of translation.

This storytelling is assisted by her great, and unexpected, use of humor. One rarely expects to laugh out loud at a book of academic criticism on medieval theatre. Whether playing on words, such as Austin’s performative misfires as they relate to the explosions that killed theatre-goers, or regaling the reader with a theory on why a group of medieval actors met their demise after apparently over-identifying with their roles (“maybe they died in poverty while waiting for their big break, a situation that would be credible to anyone on friendly terms with a struggling actor”), Enders’s humor permeates and enlivens the discourse (173).

Much of the success of this book comes from her ability to take material that everyone (outside of French medievalists) finds obscure and make it relevant to our world today. For instance, while contemporary readers may find it difficult to grasp the “politicized theology” she finds present in many of these stories, she relates it to our own
current “theologized politics,” brought on by the rise of the Religious Right in national American politics (142).

Another approach offers readings using theoretical frames familiar to most scholars. For example, she applies “liminality” to the events surrounding the deaths of the theatre-goers. However, this tactic differs methodologically from her use of pop culture references. She often uses theory pejoratively, demonstrating how, although these stories may appear a “postmodernist’s dream,” critical theory alone may prove misleading (xxi). In this way, Enders creates a profound partnership between the medieval Europe of the book and our own time, inviting readers to question their world as she has done.

Despite all the well-deserved praise for this book, there remain troubling aspects, particularly for people connected to the study of religion and performance. At times, the view of religion felt one sided and reductive. In an almost quasi-Marxist vein, priests are hypocritical, religion has false pretenses, and the Church is engaged in violent oppression. The book delimits the Church as an institution, with a capital ‘C’. This surprising position undermines her otherwise complete embrace of ambiguity as a means of gaining fuller insights into an event. For example, Enders claims that saint’s lives were not considered theology, but rather were effectively history (ie., real) for the people involved. Saints’ lives have always been theologized; that is how their stories were constructed and retold. History does not exist independently of theology.

A second problem comes from a lack of exploration of the realm of faith or personal piety. When Enders claims that the book’s two sections explore religious drama’s ability to make believe as well as make others believe, she leaves no room for belief itself, only the making of it. What role did one’s personal piety play in these stories as opposed to their relationship to the institutional structure of believing? Her problematic discussion of whether it was God’s will that the actors portraying Jesus and Judas actually die or not undermines and devalues the possibility of authentic religious belief. Religion is not solely an external construct. An openness to the power of religious faith, in line with her openness on all other subjects, would have strengthened the book.

The topic is a slippery slope, but the whole premise of the book undertakes equally slippery slopes, so this omission is notable. “One man’s faith is another man’s fetish” does not do justice to the depth of the spiritual material involved (102). Religious faith deserved the same care and in-depth treatment as her other excellently researched ideas.

Death by Drama remains worthy of the attention of scholars in a variety of fields, particularly those interested in the relationship between theatrical representation and lived experience. Enders writes that “ultimately, the mystery of whether or not our fourteen stories actually occurred is less important than the fact that our narrators believed, hoped, or feared that they occurred – and that they called upon theater to address these beliefs, hopes, and fears” (6). She then asserts forcefully and convincingly in her Epilogue that “It must also matter whether or not their beliefs were true” (198). Her performative call, repeatedly intoned in her reminder that “part of every legend is true,” prompts us to explore where that truth appears (and why), a message relevant to scholars everywhere.

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