



Mariacristina Cavecchi,
*The Art Gallery on Stage. New Vistas on
Contemporary British Playwriting*

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by Giovanna Buonanno

Mariacristina Cavecchi's expertly written monograph *The Art Gallery on Stage. New Vistas on Contemporary British Playwriting* is an engaging and comprehensive study of the representation of the art gallery in contemporary British drama that explores the many ways in which playwrights have turned to the art gallery as "muse", or as a "recurring subject for their plays" (1).

The Introduction offers a useful clarification of the difference between museums and art galleries, arguing that since the 1980s both have reconsidered their traditional function as art sanctuaries and gradually adopted a more performative and collaborative practice by encouraging a participatory approach on the part of the visitors. Cavecchi considers this shift to be crucial in facilitating the encounter between theatre and art galleries towards the end of the twentieth century. As she then points out in Chapter 1, exploring this encounter is "no easy matter", given the "intricacies of the dense traffic between the two places and between the verbal and the visual" (91), but she rises to the challenge, and in the four chapters that make up the body of the



book, she takes the reader through an impressive array of plays that vividly represent a cross-section of contemporary British drama.

She also acknowledges the crucial role played by theatres in championing the writing of plays about the art world. One such example is the Arcola Theatre in Hackney, which in the early 2000s explored the artist's studio in a series of plays about famous artists past and present, including Turner, Degas and Banksy. In the same way, changes in the British art world and in the heritage industry, culminating in the opening of the Tate Modern in 2000, have acted as a catalyst for writing plays about art. This dynamic context is reflected in Tim Crouch's *ENGLAND* (2007), a site-specific, experimental play in which the Tate Modern is "a constant reference" (78). Cavecchi's vivid illustration of Crouch's play also points to one of the strengths of her study, namely its equal emphasis on text and performance, as the analysis of the selected plays is enriched by frequent references to their staging or production context.

As Cavecchi cautiously suggests, the majority of the playwrights discussed in her book are white, possibly a consequence of the still underrepresented presence of minority playwrights in mainstream British theatre, which makes their work less accessible to audiences and scholars, even in recorded or digital form. However, one cannot help but notice that, with a few exceptions, such as Timberlake Wertenbaker, whose art-related plays *The Line* (2009) and *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991) are examined in the book, or Hannah Khalil, whose epic play *A Museum in Baghdad* (2019) raises crucial questions of heritage and national identity, the playwrights covered are overwhelmingly male. The conspicuous absence of non-white and female playwrights may therefore leave room for further research in this area.

Cavecchi explains that some playwrights have had only a cursory interest in art galleries limited to one, albeit groundbreaking play, as is the case with Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), which reads as "an ongoing conversation between the stage and the art gallery" (65), whereas others have repeatedly turned their attention to the art world. One notable example is Tim Crouch who, as a playwright and an actor has transferred his "profound interest in the visual arts" (204), to his dramatic output of the early 2000s, *My Arm*, *ENGLAND* and *The Oak Tree*, all plays that re-imagine the theatrical space as an art gallery in different ways.

The main focus of the volume is on plays produced in the aftermath of the radical changes in the art world brought about by the Young British Artists in the 1980s. The innovative stance of the YBA found a convergence with the theatre world, which was also undergoing significant aesthetic changes, thus encouraging "radical onstage explorations" (4) of the interaction between art exhibition and performance. However, the book also examines the encounter with the art gallery in the work of major British playwrights before the YBA revolution, and aptly provides a brief but dense overview of the early years in which the gallery tentatively made its way to the stage. Chapter 1, for example, considers Samuel Beckett's one-act play *That Time* (1976), which signals the playwright's long-standing interest in paintings as a collector and connoisseur, while also marking the performative turn in his dramaturgy. Taking *That Time* as her point of departure, Cavecchi reflects on Beckett's legacy and perceptively sees his experimental dramaturgy, which conceived of the stage "as a multimedia space" (23), as a major



influence on post-dramatic playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill, whose work features prominently in her study, or Martin Crimp. Similarly, she discusses Tom Stoppard's farcical play *After Magritte* (1970), the first British play "openly revolving around an art exhibition" (25), which heralded the writing of plays centred on the experience of visiting museums and art galleries.

A fascinating theme relating to the art world is developed in Chapter 2 through a number of plays that focus on authenticity and curatorship, as well as on the troubled relationship between originals and forgeries. Cavecchi sees plays such as Alan Bennett's *A Question of Attribution* (1988) and David Hare's *The Bay at Nice* (1986), as contributing, on the one hand, to the heated debate on the politics of art in the tense Thatcher years, while on the other they invite reflections on fakery and authenticity that are also relevant to the art of acting and the theatrical experience.

The analysis of plays in Chapter 4 dealing with the equally captivating, though uncomfortable issues of the commodification of art in Nick Dear's *The Art of Success* (1987), and the cynical spectacularization of suffering in art in Mark Ravenhill's *pool (no water)* (2006), seems a fitting conclusion to a book that retraces four decades of British theatre. All in all, Cavecchi makes an innovative contribution to the study of the productive dialogue between contemporary theatre and the art world, offering new vistas on a rich gallery of British plays and playwrights. The cross-fertilization between the arts that characterizes her study makes it a valuable resource for theatre scholars and students, as well as for anyone interested in the interplay between the visual arts and the performing arts in contemporary British culture.

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