

**Ozieblo, Barbara, and Jerry Dickey.** *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell.* Oxon And New York: Routledge, 2008.

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Routledge's collection "Modern and Contemporary Dramatists", whose general editors are Maggie B. Gale and Mary Luckhurst, intends to provide readers with quality introductions both to well-known and not-so-well-known playwrights. As the outstanding publishing house declares, "[e]ach volume provides detailed cultural, historical and political material, examines selected plays in production, and theorises the playwright's artistic agenda and working methods, as well as their contribution to the development of playwriting and theatre" (<http://www.routledge.com/textbooks/rmcd>). After Federico García Lorca and J. B. Priestley, the third release of the series delves into less scoured territory with Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) and Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970).<sup>1</sup> As befits Routledge's quality standards, the volume is complete with useful chronologies of both playwrights, a bibliography, and an index for quick reference. Endnotes are well chosen, useful, and, on top of that, in a reasonable amount (I personally prefer footnotes, though). But, precisely on account of the innovative theatrical focus of the whole series, it is impossible not to regard as a serious flaw the scarce number of (black-and-white!) plates (10 altogether) and their limited quality. Arguably, with more and better photographs the price would have soared, but I see no other way if the focus is really to be what plays look like on a stage.

Glaspell and Treadwell are as relevant for the development of American drama as often absent from the histories of American literature. Emmory Elliott's *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988) refers to Glaspell almost only as a footnote in the 4-page section he devotes to O'Neill (1110), and does not even mention Treadwell. Other histories do not mention either of them: it is the case of Blair's *American Literature. A Brief History* (1974), Quinn's *The Literature of the American People* (1951), or Cunliffe's *The Literature of the United*

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<sup>1</sup> Later "Modern and Contemporary Dramatists" issues will focus on Bertold Brecht, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, Jean Genet, Caryl Churchill, and Mark Ravenhill. Surprisingly, only the Glaspell/Treadwell one is a collective volume.

*States* (1954). Their belonging to a time when only mainstream writing found a way into the histories of literature can explain their neglect of Glaspell and Treadwell. However, even such a recent book as Gray's *History of American Literature* (2004) continues to ignore them, even if it reflects a negotiated canon in other respects. Mention indeed does not amount to much: Spiller's *Literary History of the United States* (1949), though ignoring Treadwell, at least alludes to Glaspell and two of her plays, *Trifles* and *Inheritors*, while reviewing American playwriting of the 1920s (160). But it is mere name-dropping. The belief that Americans had no theatre until Eugene O'Neill came along, and that even after others also did theatre in the United States continued to be exclusively male territory, have shown considerable reluctance to disappear, in spite of being both unfair to women playwrights and historically inaccurate. Nonetheless, considerable effort has gone to recuperate both Glaspell and Treadwell over the last decades, with a view to having their plays staged, read, studied, and, above all, given the place they deserve in the American dramatic canon. Their names sound more and more familiar to more and more people every day and their plays are increasingly produced by important companies, as attested by the impressive 2005 production of Glaspell's *Inheritors* at the Metropolitan in New York, and the more recent ones of *Trifles* and *Suppressed Desires* by the American Century Theater in Arlington (Virginia), and *Chains of Dew* by the Orange Tree Theatre in England. As far as Treadwell is concerned and aside from the influential productions of *Machinal* in the early 1990s both in London and New York, the Arena Stage produced *Intimations for Saxophone* in 2005, and the American Century Theater premiered the 1919 play *The Eye of the Beholder* in 2007.

Glaspell's plays and fiction are now widely available both in hardback and paperback (as a quick browse through any online bookstore will show you), and not only by scholarly presses, evidencing that a market exists for them outside academic circles. There are even online "study guides" (Gale's "Drama for Students" series) of *Alison's House*, *Trifles*, and *The Verge*, as well as "A Jury of Her Peers", which obviously means that they are all currently taught on a regular basis. Treadwell has been less lucky, however, and her plays are far less available, the early 90s' editions of *Machinal* being obviously out of print by now. As a matter of fact, the only recent edition of plays by Treadwell was the volume *Broadway's Bravest Woman: Selected Writings by Sophie Treadwell* (2006), edited by Jerry Dickey and Miriam López-Rodríguez,<sup>2</sup> which at least contained *The Eye of the Beholder* and *Ladies Leave*. As far as critical work is concerned, Glaspell has fared enormously better than Treadwell, and a significant amount of criticism exists on her work: Marcia Noe's *Susan Glaspell: Voice from the Heartland* (1983), Mary E. Papke's *Susan Glaspell: A Research and Production Sourcebook*

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<sup>2</sup> López-Rodríguez is a member of Barbara Ozieblo's scholarly circle and also a professor at the University of Málaga. Next to this city is the holiday resort town of Torremolinos, where Treadwell lived for eight years in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

(1993), Veronica Makowsky's *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women: A Critical Interpretation of Her Work* (1993), Linda Ben-Zvi's *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction* (2002) and *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* (2007), J. Ellen Gaynor's *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theater, Culture, and Politics, 1915-1948* (2003), Martha Carpentier's *Susan Glaspell: New Directions in Critical Inquiry* (2006), and Kristina Hinz-Bode's *Susan Glaspell and the Anxiety of Expression: Language and Isolation in the Plays* (2006). Barbara Ozieblo's contributions to Glaspell's scholarship will be mentioned afterwards. About Treadwell only Jerry Dickey's *Sophie Treadwell: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (1997) has book length, most of the rest being articles, reviews, and passing references in books not specifically devoted to her.

The volume under review has important assets, even if it cannot be regarded as exactly opening up the field or pioneering the pairing of Glaspell and Treadwell (a chapter of David Krasner's *Twentieth-Century American Drama* (2007) entitled "Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell: Staging Feminism and Modernism, 1915-1941" had already done so). This dual focus is obviously granted by the fact that both of them, while coming from Midwestern backgrounds, were absorbed by the cosmopolitan hustle and bustle of early 20<sup>th</sup> century New York and the work which small companies were doing there to modernize American theatre and drama. Well known is their association with the Provincetown Players, more substantial in Glaspell's case however, as she co-founded the group, wrote 11 plays for it, and "discovered" O'Neill. Conversely, Treadwell had a longer Broadway career and saw seven of her plays premiere on Broadway from the early 1920s to the early 1940s. There are further similarities: both Glaspell and Treadwell cultivated different genres, were concerned with women's issues, and also found it easier to challenge established norms and beliefs in their writing than in their personal lives (some of their attitudes or actions would hardly qualify as even remotely feminist). Both indeed displayed a fluctuating feminism. Moreover, both gave up writing for the theatre at one point in their respective careers, finding their work frequently neglected or misunderstood. But however much justification exists for coupling them, it would be misleading to suggest that this is a comparative study, as, beyond the brief Introduction co-authored by Ozieblo and Dickey, each of them undertakes the study of Glaspell and Treadwell respectively in separate sections of the book. Unfortunately, the Introduction, exceedingly brief, falls short of providing such background as would perhaps result in a more profitable and unified reading of the two halves of the book.

What I found most interesting about *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell* was its critical underpinnings. Feminist theory occupies a well-deserved place in the approach to the two playwrights' writing, and Reception Theory informs most of the discussion. After briefly reviewing the writers' literary and aesthetic agendas, substantial attention is given to specific productions of some of the plays, thus exemplifying one of the central notions of Reception Theory, namely that no literary

or dramatic work is complete until every reader or community of readers actualises it through the act of reading, producing, or watching it. Every production (reading) of a play is a creative act which picks up the threads suggested by the original text and always weaves them in a unique way. But since there is not such a thing as the *meaning* of a play as independent from the life given to it on a stage by a creative team, there is no such thing either as a “faithful” or “accurate” or “respectful” (or their opposite) production, however much such epithets abound in traditional theatre criticism. Consistent with such a (unstated, I should wonder) theoretical approach, neither Dickey nor Ozieblo attempt to assess the productions they discuss in terms of their proximity to the playwrights’ “purpose” or “message”. Also innovative is their inclusion of foreign productions of the plays as a seamless follow up on the consideration of domestic work on the same plays, thereby acknowledging theatre as outside the traditional boundaries of national pursuits. Any play by Treadwell or Glaspell can be actualized as interestingly in the US as in any other place in the world and the insight of a European director into the play is as relevant in reviewing it as that by an American one is. I have to add that in spite of the innovative theoretical approach, it was very considerate of the authors not to overwhelm the reader with unfamiliar terms or concepts, a flaw of many other studies (however, some more theoretical self-consciousness, even at a basic level, would not have been out of place, I guess). But given the many examples of studies which display an impressive array of theoretical equipment in the opening sections, to then never use any of it in the subsequent pages, it is refreshing that the theory is indeed there (not made conspicuous, not proudly displayed, but really informing the work) but you do not even notice because it is never in the way of a fluent reading.

As I pointed out before, the Glaspell segment is the work of Barbara Ozieblo, a professor of American Studies at the University of Málaga (Spain) who has devoted years of research to unearthing America’s forgotten dramatic tradition of women playwrights. Among her latest work are co-editions such as *Staging a Cultural Paradigm: The Political and the Personal in American Drama* (2002), *Disclosing Intertextualities: The Stories, Plays, and Novels of Susan Glaspell* (2006) (with Martha C. Carpentier), and *Codifying the National Self: Spectators, Actors and the American Dramatic Text* (2006). Hers is also *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* (2000). But it is not only her own work that does her credit: she has also managed to make Málaga the nucleus of an incredibly talented circle of scholars who have taken upon them the task of re-writing the history of American drama in such a way as to heed and recognize the many and varied contributions of women. Ozieblo was also co-founder of the Susan Glaspell Society and a true pioneer in the field. The volume under review (or its Glaspell half to be more precise) is the result of years of work on Glaspell by Ozieblo, and covers all the relevant aspects of her life, personality, and work, constituting a useful introduction to the major themes and techniques of her plays. The literary scholar will probably miss a more explicit theoretical approach, but the reader for whom

the volume is intended (theatre professionals and students both of literature and drama) surely won't.

Four chapters are devoted to the discussion of Glaspell's plays, one to the one-act plays, one to the longer plays, and the other two to a specific play each (*Trifles* and *The Verge*). The chapters in which several plays are discussed tend to be a little dizzying (at times I wondered whether it would not have been better to deal with them collectively instead of on a one-by-one basis), but emerging clearly from them is Glaspell's fondness for technical experimentation, her syncretism of avant-garde modes borrowed from European theatre and indigenous (comic) forms, and the persistent treatment of gender issues. Ozieblo stresses the gender perspective throughout, but never to the point of excluding the entire scope of Glaspell's themes (individual vs. society, the role of the artist, personal freedom vs. familial/social responsibilities, etc.). The more in-depth treatment of *Trifles* and *The Verge* is a welcome relief and allows one to calm down a little after the frenzied and slightly breath-taking treatment of the other pieces (the same thing can be said about the Treadwell section and the chapters "Early Plays" and "Broadway and Later Plays"). On the other hand, I find it was very intelligent on Ozieblo's part to bring together the best-known and the least-known of her author's work, in a silent give-and-take agreement with her reader, fulfilling and simultaneously challenging his/her expectations. We are not disappointed because Glaspell's most famous text is given the prominence we assumed it would, but at the same time we are invited to approach a less travelled section of Glaspell's production (*The Verge* has practically not been staged since the 1920s, and only made its way back to the theatre as a consequence of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Glaspell revival). This pattern or tacit negotiation with the reader will recur in the Treadwell section with the inclusion of the very popular and often staged *Machinal* alongside the virtually unknown *Intimations for Saxophone*. Going back to Glaspell, *Trifles* (1916) is her best-known piece (partly because she re-wrote it into the often anthologized short story "A Jury of Her Peers"), and Ozieblo's treatment of it is compelling. Based on a real murderess whose case Glaspell had covered as a journalist in Iowa, it is Ozieblo's contention that the play posits women as the best readers of other women. The trifles in Margaret Hossack's kitchen which had said nothing to the male investigators empower both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters as privileged readers of this other woman's mind, tortured as she had been by years of callous abuse by her husband. Ozieblo employs this reading of the play to argue that *Trifles* is representative of an early feminist consciousness that seeks to urge women to see themselves as sharing a same space within society, and hence facing similar problems, which only unified action can allow them to overcome (as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters' identification with the absent Minnie foregrounds).

After the discussion of *Trifles* and Glaspell is over, we go into a section on Sophie Treadwell for which Jerry Dickey has been responsible. A reputed

Treadwell scholar and also Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Arizona, Dickey's section is more critical with Treadwell than Ozieblo's is with Glaspell. Beginning with the questions "Were her [Treadwell's] achievements underestimated in her own day, and can their significance be fully appreciated only with the advantage of time and distance? Was she ahead of her time, or was she an individual who absorbed the ideas of her time and occasionally translated them into sensational but temporal media events?" (94), Dickey invites us to join him in a search for a balanced appreciation of Treadwell's achievement as a playwright and her right place in American drama. He thus foregoes the often fashionable notion that *any* forgotten writer has been unjustly so, conscious as he is that Treadwell's sensationalism and her tendency to rely on shamelessly melodramatic devices tend to sit uncomfortably with modern audiences. Dickey makes us partake of Treadwell's many contradictions, from the conflicting female models of her childhood (a self-reliant grandmother and a much more dependent mother), her yearning for a place on Broadway and simultaneous refusal to comply with its agenda, or her ambivalence before a mixed ethnic background. We travel with Treadwell through the fervent years of the Women's Liberation Movement, first in San Francisco and later in New York and its modernist salons, the cradle of much that was to re-shape American society along radically different lines to those that had defined it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We are then taken to the different phases of Treadwell's career (a first one of short plays and a later one of longer plays, many of them staged on Broadway), to finally undertake a calmer analysis, as stated above, of both *Machinal* and *Intimations for Saxophone*. At all times, Dickey makes clear that, through different theatrical modes, both realistic and unrealistic, Treadwell invariably explored gender issues and the role of women in modern society. Some such issues (the price paid by working women and their exploitation, the difficulty for women to keep a sense of identity, or the nature of their sexual desire) seem rather naïve today, after decades of vibrant feminist drama. But even feminism had a past, when it had not yet reached the degree of theoretical sophistication it later did. Of Dickey's treatment of *Machinal* I welcomed the gendered insight into material too often exploited merely for sensationalist purposes (one needs only remember James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*).

It is a staple in this kind of reviews to point out some flaw(s) in the book one is addressing. I am going to do just that now, but only because I believe it can be useful to share the things that I felt slightly uneasy about. Yet, I have to insist that this is a volume of truly exceptional quality, a *rara avis* of rigor in an academic environment in which what often matters does not seem to be to publish the best but to publish by the ton (something someone should take care of some day). As far as introductory guides go, it is impossible to expect more. Anyway, I have to confess that I missed a tighter chronological arrangement of the material in chapter one about Glaspell, in which we are told about her involvement with the Provincetown Players before her childhood is discussed but after the critical



reaction to her early plays (those with the Players) has been (very satisfactorily, I should say) covered. The final section entitled “Themes in Susan Glaspell’s Writing” is surprisingly brief and vague, and mostly quoted from other sources, especially Hinz-Bode’s not very clarifying summary of the writer’s works. Ozieblo’s paragraphs are also a bit oversized. To add something else, I would have appreciated the inclusion of recent editions of Glaspell (for practical purposes, as there might be people interested in knowing what to order exactly) along with the mostly very old ones that Ozieblo lists in her bibliography. In Dickey’s section I sometimes missed a reference to the intellectual tradition inscribing the writer. For me it feels odd to point out that “Treadwell associates the term ‘immoral’ with any action that suppresses the authentic self, while ‘moral’ is associated with actions that unlock this authenticity” (138) and not indicate how rooted in the American philosophic tradition such a belief was, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau (instead of attributing it to a vague European influence). I could also complain that the theatrical focus is not as systematically maintained as I expected. While most sections rigorously stick to it, in others there is a dangerous tendency to fall back upon the more traditional literary analysis (nothing wrong with it other than the fact that it does not keep up with the stated purpose of this series by Routledge), something that happened more often in Dickey’s section than in Ozieblo’s. Conversely, I want to thank Dickey for having me burst out laughing at one point, specifically after the following remark while discussing the critical reception of *Hope for a Harvest*:

Guild co-producer Lawrence Langner, angered by the [New York] critics’ dismissal [of Treadwell’s play], placed a large advertisement in the New York dailies “printing enthusiastic notices from over thirty out-of-town critics who liked the play. The results were instantaneous. Even those New Yorkers who had bought tickets seemed to want their money back!” (143)

To conclude, I think this book contributes to a better understanding of Glaspell and Treadwell among students of literature, drama and theatre, as well as professionals of the performing arts (the latter will especially appreciate the hints given throughout on the production of the plays and university students can undoubtedly profit from the notes on theoretical possibilities for approaching the plays, thinking for instance on term papers), as well as anyone interested in American theatre and drama and their history. Secondly, the Reception approach and the consideration of theatre as a worldwide phenomenon are really innovative, and could hopefully invite similarly focused projects in the future. I certainly ended the book with the feeling that much evaded me and that I needed to go on reading both on and by Glaspell and Treadwell. And such is probably the feeling that good introductions should provoke, giving you enough to be attracted to the material, but not so much as to leave you with the idea that the field is exhausted and there is nothing more for you to find out. *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell* certainly captured my interest, and also left me hungry for more.

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