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Book Review

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Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance*
Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2007, 229 pp. (Hardback) ISBN:
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Lynette Goddard's *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance* is both audacious and germane in its critical appraisal of the challenges and fortunes of black British women dramatists and performers. It sets out to confront and, perhaps, alter long held notions of black women's work as inherently feminist. The book draws heavily upon Goddard's extensive experience as a black woman/ feminist stage manager, technician and lighting designer with theatre companies such as Black Mime Theatre, Black Theatre Co-operative (now NITRO) and the Tricycle Theatre, and recently as an academic, to unite issues of identity, politics and performance aesthetic in discussions about contemporary black feminist theatre.

The book is divided into four parts, with a total of eight chapters. Part I, aptly titled 'History and Aesthetics', comprise of two chapters which, respectively, render accounts of socio-historical and political status of black British women playwrights and performers, particularly in the 1980s, and open up debates about what constitute black feminist performance aesthetics by questioning inherent assumptions of feminism in black women's performance work.

In the second part, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 offer case studies in poignant textual analyses that delves into the plays of black women writers; Winsome Pinnock, Jacqueline Rudet, Jackie Kay and Valerie Mason-John. In Part II, Goddard delves into the works of these black women playwrights in search of how an exploration of their content and form can

signal the feminist leaning of a play. Goddard's reading of the plays strikes a defiant tone as she tackles prevailing notions about black women's identity in relation to issues of migration and mothering in the works of Pinnock, sexual deviancy in that of Rudet, and black femininity in the works of Kay and Mason-John. However, as well as pointing out feminist potential in the works of these playwrights, Goddard does not hesitate to warn of the inherent limitation created by the use of realist form by the first two playwrights. At the same time, she does not conceal her admiration for Kay and Mason-John who she considers as 'out lesbian playwrights' whose work 'freely [interrogate] dominant and sub-cultural attitudes to race and sexuality that offer pertinent models for a black feminist practice that speaks to our twenty-first-century selves' (128).

Part III, subdivided into Chapters 6 and 7, moves away from discussions of plays and playwrights to focus on performance works by black women that are not text-based. Chapter 6 explores feminism in the issues-based work of Black Mime Theatre Women's Troop, looking specifically at four devised physical theatre performances by this company. The company's commitment to what Goddard describes as 'black cultural identity and experience, drawing on [...] the ways that black bodies move and sound, and the mannerisms and idiosyncrasies of black culture, experience and expression' (134) help to position their work as a minefield of feminist subjectivity and nuances. In Chapter 7, Goddard looks to the work of black live artists and performance poets whose autobiographical re/enactments 'interrogate identity politics and explore themes of belonging, displacement and fragmentation that capture the dynamics of black women's lives in Britain' (154-5). Goddard suggests that the black live artists and performance poets discussed in this chapter; SuAndi, Susan Lewis, Valerie Mason-John, Patience Agbabi, Dorothea Smartt and Adeola Agbebiyi appear to project the notion of self-referential or self-defined black feminist performance aesthetic that lends credence to the idea of multiple black feminisms.

The fourth part of the book has Chapter 8 and in it Goddard contemplates a progressive black feminist practice that goes beyond engagement with black women's cultural identity to focus on the nature of interpersonal relationships between characters in modern urban communities. By considering debbie tucker green's 'in-yer-face plays', *Water* and *One Under* by Winsome Pinnock, Doña Daley's *Blest Be the Tie*, Tracy Daley, Jo Martin and Josephine Melville's *Shoot to Win* Goddard

attempts to, perhaps, suggest what a progressive black feminist play should look like.

Staging Black Feminisms has set the tone for future studies in black feminist theory and performance. The book offers its reader a rich array of theoretical, textual and performance models, which can be used to appraise the feminist representations and potential in black women plays and performance works of the future. With this book, Goddard has drawn the proverbial 'line in the sand' in black feminist performance criticism and has made a compelling case for a reappraisal of dominant representations of black women on the contemporary British stage.