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Book Review

Bev Orton, *Women, Activism and Apartheid South Africa: Using Play Texts to Document the Herstory of South Africa*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018 ISBN: 978-1-78754-526-7 (Hard)¹

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Bev Orton is a lecturer in sociology and criminology. She is also a filmmaker who has worked in South Africa and in Britain. Artistic work is part of her research, as she points out in the preface to the book. Orton's research is informed by her commitment to feminist issues; she considers herself a feminist researcher. Feminism is central to her monograph, *Women, Activism and Apartheid South Africa*, and this book approaches the play texts which document women's lives in apartheid South Africa from the perspective of an activist/sociologist. Orton's interest lies in the "herstory of South Africa" and the plays are one means to arrive at this herstory. Her book focuses on five plays written by both men and women but with women characters at the heart of them all. The plays are: *You strike the woman, you strike the rock*, created in ensemble fashion in 1986 by director Phyllis Klotz in collaboration with performers Thobeka Maqhutyana, Nomvula Qosha and Poppy Tsira, *Glass House* by Fatima Dike (1979), *Born in the RSA* by Barney Simon (1985), a play workshopped at the Market Theatre, *Have You Seen Zandile?* by Gcina Mhlope, first performed in 1986 at the Market Theatre, and *So What's New?*, written in 1990 by Fatima Dike. Orton frames these readings with an introductory chapter on the "dynamic herstory of South Africa 1912-1993" and two final chapters: one on "women, protest and theatre" and the concluding chapter, "twenty years on and 'so, what's new?'" Please use the proper chapter

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titles. In this way, Orton covers more than a hundred years of South African “herstory” and brings her study up to the present day. She states: “[t]hat women’s political and civil citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa is guaranteed by the South African Constitution is assumed to be a given. However, the reality tends to defy this assumption” (Orton 169). This informs her concluding remarks on sexual violence, education, poverty and domestic workers today, which show that women’s situation still needs to be improved. What are the concluding remarks?

Orton’s thesis that the women’s active part in the anti-apartheid struggle and their daily work of care which has been occluded in South African history deserves more attention is supported by statements from women artists and activists quoted in the book. Orton worked with a substantial body of published work on South African history, sociology and theatre, and conducted interviews with leading playwrights and theatre practitioners. The survey chapter sets the stage for the discussions to come and helps to situate the plot elements in the plays. What is the chapter title? Does the author call it a survey chapter? For those less familiar with the details of South African history, chapter 1 what’s the title? provides a fruitful and succinct account which sheds light on the crucial position of Black women and their plight, the many organizations they were involved in and the specific gender-related obstacles they faced. Within a mostly male-dominated history, for Orton women’s plays aim to “contribute to knowledge about social, economic and political phenomena and its effect on women in apartheid South Africa” (Orton 45).

In the following chapters, what do you mean by following chapters? Orton brings together information on the plays, the circumstances of their production and the sociopolitical context which is pertinent to these plays. This is unclear. Her focus is more on content than form but the chapters are rich in information on the production and reception. Notably, Mhlophe’s *Have you seen Zandile?*, criticized during apartheid for its lack of obvious politics, and Dike’s *So what’s new?* with its two main characters watching the soap *The Bold and the Beautiful* proved particularly long lasting, what do you mean? even though Dike says: “I couldn’t have written *So, What’s New?* in the 1970s, as much as I would have loved to. The whole idea was that we had to harness our power together to fight the struggle through theatre” (Dike in Perkins 1998, 25). In her discussion of the play, Orton provides valuable information on shebeens as well as on South African television and thus helps to contextualise the play, for the non-South African reader. This kind of contextualizing of plot elements runs through the entire book and claims the specificity of these plays in a South African context, even if some of them, Dike’s *Glass House* for example, were also staged abroad (see Perkins 1998, 24). This statement is unclear.

“Black theatre was dominated by black South African males and ‘most of the stories would be male related’ (Interview with Dike, 2010)” (Orton, 70). What is

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the purpose of this quotation? In order to locate women in the picture of South African history and theatre history, Orton unfolds her account of theatre history in which the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, plays a crucial and recurring role. It is therefore fitting that Barney Simon's (1932-1995) play *Born in the RSA* figures in the collection since as the artistic director of the Market Theatre, playwright and director, his work is interwoven with many of the theatre practitioners mentioned in the book.

In this informative study work two features disturb: what do you mean? Please rework. There is a certain sloppiness ?? which brings about the repetition of entire sentences (e.g. p. 33/34) and a few typos. Orton talks about action in the plays in the past tense instead of the habitual present tense. Perhaps you could split this into two sentences. Information on real people and on characters on stage is therefore more difficult to keep apart. It would have been useful to list all the Orton interviews separately citing the date and place when they were conducted. The interviews are missing in the bibliography.

In 1997, Mhlope, talking to Kathy Perkins about theatre, states that "[t]here is no real network for black women" (*Black South African Women: An Anthology of Plays*, London: Routledge, 1998, 82). Meanwhile, the African Women Playwrights Network, founded by Professor Yvette Hutchison and Amy Jephta in 2015 in South Africa, has come to fill that void.