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# Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage by Henry Bial (review)

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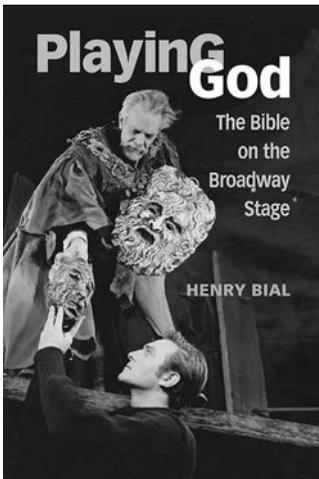
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***Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage.*** By Henry Bial. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015; 260 pp.; illustrations. \$80.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper, e-book available.

Throughout history, stagings of biblical drama have been sites of contestation among artists, audiences, and the faithful, resulting many times in controversies and social change. Scholars in the field of religious performance have analyzed such dynamics, and in *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage*, Henry Bial moves the conversation to relatively unexplored territory, asking, "What happens when a culture's most sacred text enters its most commercial performance venue?" (4). The answers to this question are found in the historical relationship between New York commercial theatre and its predominantly Judeo-Christian audience. Bial examines four main strategies used by playwrights, directors, actors, designers, producers, and publicists to achieve box office profits while satisfying the needs of religious audiences. He argues that a balanced, artistic application of sincerity, faith, irony, and spectacle were necessary for commercial and critical Broadway success.

*Playing God* explores the affective and critical responses of audiences, paying particular attention to the dynamic tensions between sacred texts and secular performance. Bial argues that dramas based on religious narratives are not unlike most theatrical experiences, as direct, wholly authentic emotional or spiritual conduits between actors, texts, and spectators are often unattainable. *Playing God* uniquely addresses how familiar problems of representation in Christianity (iconoclasm, antitheatricality, bodily corruption, etc.) were inflected and realigned within the commercial world of Broadway. Bial opines that spectators of faith tolerated dramatizations of biblical narratives as long as the tone of productions was respectful to God and religious practice.

From the 121 Broadway productions of biblical plays since 1890, Bial selects 17 case studies, including well-known commercially and critically successful works, like *Ben-Hur* (1899) and *Godspell* (1976), as well as "a handful of notable 'flops' that highlight the difficulties in adapting the Bible," (10), e.g., the Danny Kaye vehicle *Two by Two* (1970). Eschewing chronological orga-

nization, each chapter is devoted to particular episodes from the Bible, enabling Bial to conduct “intersectional and interdisciplinary analysis” (11). What emerges is a critical history of the difficulties of adapting and producing religious stories in secular settings.

Two plays that adeptly managed the often conflicting impulses of reverence and entertainment were *Ben-Hur* and *Green Pastures* (1930); these critically acclaimed productions became exemplars of biblical fidelity and creative spectacle. One of the most vexing problems in staging biblical drama is how to depict God, Jesus, and the Mother Mary onstage. Bial cites Andrew Sofer’s theory of “dark matter” to explain the phenomenology of sacred presence with the character of God absent from the stage, concluding that actors only rarely play God successfully. Like the use of a spotlight to signify God’s presence in *Ben-Hur*, theatrical problem solving often did more than simply ease the fears of skeptical audiences of faith. It also produced spectacle that enhanced the entertainment value in a number of instances.

There are notable exceptions, however. The success of the all-black production of *Green Pastures* can be attributed largely to the sense of humility Richard Harrison brought to his portrayal of God. Bial shows how infantilizing stereotypes of African Americans held by predominantly white audiences infused the reception of the play with an aura of innocent reverence. Ironic detachment in Arthur Miller’s *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972) obliterated any sense of reverence, and Bial cites a number of critical reviews to support his conclusion that the comical costumes and “Borscht-belt sensibility” (89) undermined the production. Bial is careful to note that comedy itself is not anathema to biblical drama, but that a positive reception requires a measure of deference to the material. On the other hand, theatricality and irony might have boosted audience appreciation of past productions. Clifford Odets’s *The Flowering Peach* (1954) was critically acclaimed precisely because the “incorporation of Jewishness into the narrative creates a space wherein irony can be perceived as authentic” (108).

Bial enlists literary and performance theory to tease apart genealogies of political, aesthetic, racial, and religious discourses, and I found these sections the most engaging. There are moments he could have gone further, though. Scare quotes around terms like “mainstream” and “prestige” require more careful conceptual unpacking. Bial supports his study of audience reception primarily with passages drawn from periodical reviews and articles. These, combined with records of box office successes and failures, disclose a cause-and-effect relationship between artistic choices and commercial success. A more diverse archive would certainly have buttressed his claims further. However, I am convinced by Bial’s reasoning that commercial success “indicated the degree to which a given production captured the attention and imagination of audiences in its era,” and that identifying economically viable productions “is helpful in understanding choices made by subsequent productions” (10).

At times Bial seems hemmed in by a scrupulous definition of Broadway theatre. As geographic and institutional factors that define Broadway culture have changed over time, thematic comparisons of plays produced decades apart are not always revealing. Bial admits ambivalence about his careful definition of a “Broadway biblical play” near the end of the book. Although not based on biblical narrative and despite its deeply satirical tone, *The Book of Mormon* might conform to his analytical frame since, in the production, “authentic blasphemy provokes an affective response, laughter, that connects spectators to something larger than themselves” (183).

That said, Bial’s fluency in US literary, theatrical, and religious history provides meaningful counterpoints and backdrops to the productions under examination. *Playing God* is in conversation with the work of contemporary theatre historians, and their perspectives add complexity to the study. I also appreciated Bial’s elegant descriptions that restaged production histories for the reader. His fresh insights enliven the subject matter and his crisp prose will be accessible to a wide reading community. The volume is illustrated with previously unpublished production photographs, and the text is superbly annotated. *Playing God* will find a readership in the academy, as well as among practitioners interested in formerly unexamined corners of historical

popular theatre. Most importantly, Bial's provocative paradigm of performative sincerity, faith, irony, and spectacle opens new critical territory in the field. Broadway's dalliances with biblical drama have received scant scholarly attention, and *Playing God* makes a valuable contribution, filling this void.

— Christopher Swift

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***The Transparent Traveler: The Performance and Culture of Airport Security.*** By Rachel Hall. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015; 240 pp.; illustrations; \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper, e-book available.

Twenty years after Marc Augé (1995) defined the airport as a “non-place,” we have seen the airport become a very different place—while the transient, lulling, consumerist paradise might still be apparent, other kinds of corporeal and ethical pressures are at work on traveler bodies in the airport today. However, such pressures are increasingly unevenly distributed—according to the color of your skin as well as the color of your passport—and by different security cultures around the world. The affective and embodied performance of self as available for inspection is at the forefront of Rachel Hall’s *The Transparent Traveler*. The first to explicitly examine security practices in the airport from the perspective of performance, Hall focuses on the culture and aesthetics of “transparency” that have underwritten

such practices in post-9/11 US airports. In the new era of terrorist risk management, it is citizen travelers who assume the labor of the threat of terrorism, Hall argues (citing Diana Taylor’s 2009 “Afterword: War Play”); further, “securitized airports treat all passengers as suspects (threateningly opaque) until they perform *voluntary transparency*, or demonstrate readiness-for-inspection” (8).

Chapter 1 traces the transparent aesthetic logic of the airport through luxury travel products and advertising as well as trends in airport architecture—the airport is, as Gillian Fuller has argued, fundamentally a space for looking (Fuller and Harley 2004). The traveler is made visually transparent (via x-ray, for example), as well as affectively transparent, as bodies learn to perform docility and availability as they negotiate the increasingly invasive apparatus of surveillance. Conversely, chapter 2 examines how media representations of terrorists’ bodies, particularly through news coverage of the so-called war on terror, document terrorist embodiment “as a problem of opacity” (59). Importantly, Hall argues that photographic images such as those of the captured Saddam Hussein, open-mouthed for inspection, pose such bodies as “inscrutably grotto-esque” (75); as such, they are media spectacles of the US military and government that are used to justify docile submission to the new procedures and technologies of airport security in the post-9/11 era (72).