BOOK REVIEW

Stephen D. Putzel. *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2012.

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With an eye towards cultural history, biography, and literary theory, Steven Putzel’s authoritative study, *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*, details the complexity of the iconic modern feminist’s relationship to the dramatic arts. Famously, Woolf often contended that plays were “better read than seen” (116). Her statements to the contrary, Putzel colorfully documents the novelist’s lifelong commitment to theater. In fact, Woolf enthusiastically and repeatedly participated in dramatic readings with family and friends, and she worked diligently as a theater critic. Her own play, *Freshwater*, was a labor of fascination, if not satisfaction. Most important for her prose, Putzel asserts that what Woolf learned from drama shaped the characterization and dialogue of her penultimate novel, *The Years*, as well as the content and structure of her final book, *Between the Acts*. Ultimately, Putzel sees Woolf’s ambivalence towards performance drama as neither a wholly personal reaction to her theater experiences nor a contentious theoretic based on her interpretation of the canon. Rather, he suggests that Woolf’s attitude was largely a reflection of her perception of theater as a historical “space” constructed by men. Looking forward from Woolf’s era to our own, Putzel links the writer to contemporary female playwrights via their shared struggle with the gender-based parameters of their chosen media. Putzel contends that in making her late fiction more spare and dialogue-oriented, Woolf created a “dramatic” narrative theory, and in so doing forged a lasting relationship to postmodern dramatists who continue to shape a commensurate “space” for their art.

In his first chapter, “Entertainment: From Music Hall to Opera,” Putzel details a fascinating list of the pantomimes, plays,
and operas attended by the young Virginia Stephen. As cultural historian, Putzel recreates the vaudevillian atmosphere of the Victorian music hall—whose audience, surprisingly, was predominantly female. As literary critic, Putzel employs a number of intriguing theoretical perspectives, ranging from Bakhtin to Foucault to Freud, to stimulate a deeper understanding of Woolf as stylistic innovator. Several of Putzel’s initial conclusions intrigue, including his notion that Woolf’s in-person experience of bawdy farces helped her understand “the absurdity of late-Victorian values” (17). As the writer matured, her fascination with Shakespeare and the classics increasingly underscored her contention that reading drama was superior to actual performance, leading to what Putzel identifies as a “tension” that would be long-lasting. Despite her reservations, Putzel believes that Woolf’s experiences with opera (first Wagner, later Mozart and Verdi) inspired her lifelong experiments in fiction, asserting that in the range of novels between *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and *The Years* (1937), the writer “transformed her experience as auditor/spectator at the opera into theme, symbol, and narrative technique” (32).

Putzel continues his biographical and cultural analyses in his second chapter, documenting the many ways theater linked Woolf to family and friend. “Bloomsbury Actors, Audiences, and Playwrights” brings alive that famous group of artistic adventurers who shaped Woolf’s consciousness. Despite her avowed distrust for performance, several diary entries and unpublished scripts illustrate the budding writer’s frequent participation as reader and actor in Bloomsbury’s Play Reading Society. Later, her husband Leonard’s attempt to produce his play addressing the Spanish political problems of the 1930s proved an acute frustration for both husband and wife. Bloomsbury friend T.S. Eliot gained increasing recognition for his drama at the same time—though the success of some of his scripts left Woolf mystified. Closer to home, “Aunt Virginia” wrote and acted in family productions for her nephews, more than once playing a comic send-up of herself. In 1923, the author completed a draft of her only full-length original drama, *Freshwater*; the manuscript sat unattended until 1935, when Woolf revised the work for a family performance. The play, which satirizes notable Victorian artists such as actress Ellen Terry and poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, was a creative lark for Woolf—a
lighthearted commentary on the pretense of past generations, but also a testing ground for continuing experiments with dialogue and narrative.

Putzel leads us from Woolf’s close relations to more significant personal and cultural influences in chapter 3, “Pioneers and Their Uncles.” Ironically, the writer attended few productions staged by the nascent women’s theater movement in London during the first decades of the century. There appears to be no satisfactory explication for Woolf’s oversight save her unpredictable health, but she was certainly alert to the lives of contemporary actresses and their craft. In particular, Ellen Terry proved inspirational; in her review of Terry’s memoirs, Woolf found the actress’s capacity to perform so many roles in life—from actress to mother to writer—sufficient to make her “larger than all of her roles” (90). Terry’s example proved so stirring that Woolf made the actress the protagonist of *Freshwater*. But it was the patriarchal “uncle” figures in the modern theater who ultimately convinced the writer of the dynamism of the stage. The works of Ibsen and Chekhov and her friend Shaw mitigated Woolf’s conviction about the superior experience of reading a drama. “After so many years of ambivalence between reading and viewing,” Putzel concludes, Woolf conceded that a staged performance might prove “superior to her own private imaginings” (105).

For Woolf’s literary critics, Putzel’s fourth chapter, “Theatrical Theory and Narrative Practice,” will prove most intriguing. Building on his documentation of her theatrical interests, as well as on contributions from critics like Jane Marcus and Brenda Silver, Putzel contends that in Woolf’s late works she sought “a hybrid art form” that would “incorporate the evocative power and the immediacy of drama into her own narratives” (115). Tracing the novelist’s diaries, Putzel finds the seeds of the hybrid Woolf imagined: in 1918, she began to elide narrative detail from her diaries; these efforts continued through her 1923 entries, when “all narrative was pared away” (121). New, increasingly experimental storytelling methods now appeared in Woolf’s personal prose—what Putzel labels first a “diary-cum-play,” followed by a “play-cum-letter” (122, 124). This experimentation evolved into wholesale use of “dramatic dialogue and theatrical metaphor” in *The Years* and then chorus-like effects
and audience participation in *Between the Acts*, where Woolf realized the potential of a “novel-as-play” (128).

“Stage Adaptations of Woolf’s Work,” Putzel’s fifth chapter, augments his service to Woolf enthusiasts by compiling a list of recent productions of *Freshwater*, as well as original dramas about the author and her work staged since the 1990s. Here, Putzel’s capabilities as drama critic are invoked, as he observes that the stage effects now available in the postmodern theater, including “video, bricolage, and digital media,” provide performers and audiences the opportunity to better understand the “omnipresent problem of staging interiority” crucial to an appreciation of Woolf’s fiction (149). New stage interpretations of key novels, including *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, and *The Waves*, now help us assimilate “the complex layering” of Woolf’s opus (179). Specifically, the current trend towards audience participation effectively links “the stage with the spectator” in ways that Woolf imagined since her first days as a theatergoer (176).

In his brief but provocative conclusion, Putzel considers contemporary women playwrights who have inherited Woolf’s gift of artistic courage. Alluding to the novelist’s now-famous charge in “A Room of One’s Own” that Shakespeare’s imaginary sister “Judith” could not have written for the male-dominated Elizabethan theater, Putzel asserts that “only quite recently have women begun to create a theatrical space of their own” (179). Citing examples like Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems, Putzel contends that without Woolf’s determined fictional experimentation, we would have few plays that “interweave poetry, prose, drama, comedy, and sexual politics” (182). Putzel’s study ends as a call for the continued emancipation of a women’s theater that fully realizes Woolf’s creative legacy. The novelist’s theatrically-inspired prose attests to the import of her “ideas about women as subjects of plays,” which, according to Putzel, must continue to serve as an examples to directors and playwrights “who have begun to break the male stranglehold on the theater” (182).

Those who know Woolf as a writer and feminist will be pleased to gain another perspective on her personality and intellect from this comprehensive theatrical study. If transgressing the patriarchal limitations imposed upon art is one of the major components of Woolf’s philosophic legacy, then Stephen Putzel has broadened
our understanding of that political heritage. For Woolf, the challenge of broad-based, unrestricted creativity was paramount, and the artistic world that she imagined must feature a theater whose stories are both recursive and experimental—a drama, as Judith Shakespeare’s brother suggested, that will be “full of wise saws and modern instances.”