

Revived with Care: John Fletcher's Plays on the British Stage, 1885-2020 [Book review]

HOPKINS, Lisa <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9512-0926>>

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Peter Malin, *Revived with Care: John Fletcher's Plays on the British Stage, 1885-2020*
(Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), xi+207 pp., ISBN 978-0-367-54034-0, £120.00 (hbk).

Reviewed by Lisa Hopkins, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

There are few upsides of the coronavirus pandemic, but one small one is that it has for once proved safe and reasonable to affix a firm end-date to a performance history: nobody is going to come along and say to the author of this book, 'What a shame you stopped in March, you missed a really brilliant production of x or y in April'. That is, however, even more of a pity than it might appear, because while Peter Malin certainly fulfils his self-appointed task of recording and analysing UK stagings of Fletcher's plays from 1885 to 2020, what really shines out from his book is what a nurturing, energising and valuable enterprise putting on plays can be. The author introduces himself as a later-life student who has been helped and inspired by scholars such as José Pérez Díez and Martin Wiggins, whose support has enabled him to find a passion and a voice, and he reminds his readers how easy and enjoyable it used to be to watch plays and see how they worked in the theatre.

Malin has set himself a tightly-defined task: only UK productions (though he does touch on two American stagings of *A King and No King*), none of a series of shortened ones produced by RADA students, and no staged readings (so no Read not Dead). He also doesn't consider any of Fletcher's collaborations with Shakespeare, arguing not unreasonably that they are produced so often that they would require a separate study, but also pledging his allegiance to the increasingly trendy cause of decentring Shakespeare (his word for it is 'deiconizing'). Many decades ago I was taught at Cambridge that it was a mark of the debased taste of the Restoration

that they preferred Beaumont and Fletcher to Shakespeare; it is amusing to see how views have shifted, and I was also struck by how little either Beaumont or Massinger features. With the exception of a brief discussion of how Beaumont's conception of Aspatia differs from Fletcher's, and occasional mentions of plot twists introduced by Massinger, this is, as it says on the tin, a book about Fletcher.

The productions Malin discusses are fully and thoughtfully described and contextualised in a chatty and pungent style informed by an acute theatrical intelligence, and he talks not only about particular staging choices but also about what seeing the plays in the theatre can tell us about how they are constructed (and sometimes about the attitudes and aptitudes of different collaborators). It will come as no surprise to anyone that *The Maid's Tragedy* is the star of the show; it saw several productions in the period covered by Malin's book, and attracted some distinguished performers (Evadne was played by both Edith Evans and Sybil Thorndyke). There have, however, been performances of a number of other plays too, including *The Chances* (with which Olivier opened the Chichester Festival Theatre), *The Coxcomb*, *Bonduca*, *The Scornful Lady*, *The Humorous Lieutenant*, *The Faithful Shepherdess*, *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, *The Wild-Goose Chase*, *Philaster*, *A King and No King*, *The Island Princess*, *The Woman's Prize*, *The Sea Voyage*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Love's Cure*, and *The Woman Hater*. In keeping with his title, *Revived with Care*, Malin treats the stage history of each of these plays with care, and anyone planning to produce any of them in future will need to read this book.

If I felt a lack, it was that there are no pictures. I realise that in some cases these may never have been taken or may not have survived, but in other cases (productions at the Swan, at the Chichester Festival Theatre, or in modern stagings directed by academics) it seems likely that there will have been some, and in one case (*Philaster*) Malin mentions having seen them;

unless there were serious copyright problems, the book would have benefited from their inclusion. This is however compensated for to some extent by liberal quotations from reviewers. There is a real gem on *The Faithful Shepherdess* – ‘There is no reason why any particular shepherdess should not go on being assassinated and supernaturally revived for ever’ (62) – and I’m sure the cast of an early revival of *The Maid’s Tragedy* were grateful to be told that it was ‘meritorious in intention and not quite inadequate in execution’ (74). Despite the fact that some of those who saw them were clearly underwhelmed, though, Malin’s book shows us that Fletcher can and should be staged, and also reminds us that 2025 is the quatercentenary of his death. Let’s hope we can see some productions of his plays then.