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Book Review

by

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Postmodern Theater and the Void of Conceptions. By William S. Haney II. Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006; pp. 160. \$59.99 cloth.

In *Postmodern Theater and the Void of Conceptions* William S. Haney II grapples with an elusive range of subjects, including the nature of the sacred, the fractured aspects of individual consciousness, and the tendency of the audience member to move from a state of concept-forming consciousness to a state of unconscious consciousness, which Haney characterizes as a "void of conceptions." Haney approaches these ideas by examining the work of six playwrights: Tom Stoppard, Caryl Churchill, David Henry Hwang, Sam Shepard, Derek Walcott, and Girish Karnad. Haney places postmodern theories of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and deconstruction in conversation with "Indian (Vedic) language theory," which he claims moves further than Western language theory by "examining language in relationship to the levels of consciousness" (11). Haney's use of Vedic language theory makes his approach to postmodern theory unique amongst theatre history texts, and his book may enlighten someone who shares his knowledge of Vedic literature and philosophy. This book will prove difficult to read and comprehend to the reader who does share such specialized knowledge.

In his preface, Haney equates Derrida's "unsayable" with "the void of conception" contained in the *Maitri Upanishad*, arguing that "the unsayable . . . that Derrida finds in literature has clear affinities with the Brahman-Atman of Advaita Vedanta" (vii). He also claims that the theatre of Stoppard, Churchill, Hwang, Shepard, Walcott, and Karnad "induces the characters and spectators to deconstruct habitual patterns of perception, attenuate the content of consciousness, and taste 'the void of conceptions'" (ibid.).

Haney applies his dialectical combination of postmodern theory and Vedantic language theory to plays, in order to expand upon his ideas relating to the "void of conceptions." In the chapter on Stoppard, Haney writes that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a play that uses

"the discourse of A minus A," "shifting identities," and metatheatricity to take the "characters and the spectators to a space beyond language and interpretation" (35). This technique, according to Haney, dramatizes "how they [characters and spectators]. . . reflect a direct 'interior-to-interior participatory presence'" (ibid.), and it "begets a transformative process that takes us beyond conceptuality altogether" (44). Regarding Caryl Churchill, Haney proposes that she "uses feminism" to "unconstruct our perceptions and behavior and to forget our concepts and beliefs" (65). In *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang is credited with showing the spectator a process through which Gallimard is forced to "dis-identify with his personal attributes," and, by doing so, Haney claims that Hwang "underscores the existence of a transpersonal, immaterial knower" (84). Sam Shepard's *Tooth of the Crime* and *Suicide in B-Flat* are presented as plays that "dramatize the subtle presence/absence of a contentless realm of experience that underlies all intimacy and all forms of expression, both social and artistic"; additionally, Shepard's plays "reveal the risks of neglecting the visible-invisible interdependence of all human activity" (100). In reference to Derek Walcott's play, *Dream on Money Mountain*, Haney asserts that the play transcends the issue of the simultaneous connection to European and African culture on the part of Caribbean peoples, which is exoterically central to the play. It does this by "opening a space of hybrid in-between-ness that the audience—whether European, African, or Caribbean—can appreciate as accessible within themselves." (114). Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is, Haney writes, a play that "suggests that the spectator . . . may . . . succeed in becoming complete," by presenting the negative example of three characters who "never manage to enjoy the 'Self in the midst of the possessions of the world'—that is, to enjoy the coexistence of mind/body" (129-30). Haney concludes that all of the plays examined in his book "suggest" a "void of conceptions" and form "a thread connecting all theater audiences who have had a taste of no-thought" (140). As Haney's conclusion makes clear, his efforts in his book are to give formal, language-based expression to theatrical/mystical experiences which are usually considered indescribable.

This project is highly ambitious. Many writers would shy away from such endeavors, because, in addition to being difficult to describe, "unsayable" events or experiences of "void of conception," as Haney describes them, are nearly impossible to grasp intellectually. Perhaps this is because, in order to do so, they must be perceived as a concept—the very opposite of "void of conception." No doubt Haney blended Western theories of deconstruction—of both the

literary and socio-political sort—with Vedic writings in an effort to bridge the gap between intellectual, categorized thought and logic-defying mystical thought. Indeed, there are moments in the book when Haney comes close to bridging these two types of thought. These moments, however, are few and fleeting—especially for the reader who is not familiar with the Hindu scriptures.

The reader may also be perplexed by Haney's dense and repetitive use of theoretical terms and jargon in conjunction with Hindu and Buddhist terms. This mixture of language sometimes results in passages that make complicated subjects even more complicated. An example of such a passage is found in Chapter Three, entitled "Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*: The Self Beyond Narrative Identities":

When the player, such as Betty in Act One, is a man in the role of a woman, s/he is spontaneously mindful of his/her multiple identities. The player/role division, far from locking the subject (performer/spectator) within binary oppositions, explodes all conceptual boundaries through a multiplicity that not only deconstructs a gendered wholeness but also destroys the very concept of identity, whether essentialist or constructed. In breaking down masculine/feminine oppositions, the identities of the player/role mutually negate each other through a multiplicity of the "I is not I," . . . Experiencing (non) identity as not this/not that (*neti, neti* in Buddhism) points to the qualityless state of "I AM" . . . This knowledge-by-identity of non-intentional witnessing consciousness is mirrored in the sacred events suggested by Churchill's theater. (54-5)

Haney seems to assume that the reader of his book either possesses an understanding of the terminology he employs that is as sophisticated as his own, and he also appears to trust that the same reader is well versed in Eastern mystic literature.

Even the highly educated reader with a strong interest in learning about the relationship between plays and various states of consciousness, will find Haney's writing style tedious and, at times, incomprehensible. This is unfortunate, because Haney clearly possesses a strong command over the subject of his book, and his idea to combine postmodern and Vedic theory in the examination of consciousness as it relates to drama would seem to promise many new insights. I simply wish that Haney would have presented this topic, which inspires mental somersaults, in a more accessible style.