

Introduction to *Modern and Contemporary World Drama*

ESTHER KIM LEE

Studies of modern and contemporary drama typically begin with Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg with a definitive focus on the European influence on theatre since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Such studies may cite non-Western drama, but it is done so as a way to illustrate the expansive influence of European modern drama around the world. *Modern and Contemporary World Drama* aims to challenge these Eurocentric assumptions and fundamentally change how drama is studied and understood by foregrounding multidirectional and global influences and to expand the discourse beyond the West. Modernism affected all parts of the world in ways that are much more complex than what has been described in Eurocentric discourses, and modern drama has had multiple beginnings, theories, and trajectories. The four volumes underscore the importance of migration and transnational movements of dramatic forms and place emphasis on the transmission and circulation of dramatic forms and theories around the world.

Modernism did not begin within the insular confines of nations or regions, and it has always been a global development brought about and sustained with global encounters. As Felicity A. Nussbaum and others have argued, modernity is inseparable from European colonialism, industrialization, and the nation-state during the eighteenth century, and the framework of “the global” must include “the new imperial history” that affords attention to “non-European areas, to indigenous peoples and knowledge, to diasporic mobility, and to the social, economic, and ideological investments of colonialism on a worldwide scale.”¹ The essays collected in the four volumes expand and accommodate a more inclusive version of what could be called “the canon” of modern and contemporary drama. Together, they make a historiographical intervention to posit that modern and contemporary drama can and should be understood as inherently intercultural and global.

With the goal of decolonizing how drama is discussed and studied, *Modern and Contemporary World Drama* begins with the acknowledgment that European modern drama was influenced by non-Western forms of theatre, art, dance, and philosophy. The traditional canon of European modern drama includes elements of intercultural theatre. For example, Strindberg’s plays were influenced by Buddhism, and Yeats was inspired by Japanese Noh theatre. Brecht, famously, incorporated his interpretation of Chinese theatre in his plays and theories. In many ways, European modern and contemporary drama represents the West’s response to global encounters that led to the questioning, and in some cases, the collapse of long-held Western philosophies and assumptions.

¹Felicity A. Nussbaum, ed., *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 7–8.

Indeed, I approach the entirety of modern and contemporary world drama as intercultural drama, and there is much to be gained by examining it not as a movement started by a small group of European men but as a worldwide phenomenon in which a diverse array of artists and writers participated collectively as co-creators. This collection critiques the prevailing scholarship about modern and contemporary drama that has ignored non-Western developments and consistently chose to focus exclusively on European influences. Many have written about the themes of “alienation and hostility” in European and Euro-American plays, but they describe them in abstract and isolated terms, as if what was happening in the West was completely cut off from the rest of the world.² In other cases, European modern drama is seen as the “original” that inspired the creation of drama around the world. This collection also rejects such causal and linear logic and posits that there were multiple beginnings and “origins” of modern and contemporary world drama both in and outside of the West.

I should, however, emphasize that there have been scholars who have insisted on thinking globally about modernism in theatre. For instance, in her editorial comment on a special issue of *Theatre Journal* on the theme of “Modernism,” Penny Farfan explains how theatre studies can incorporate new modernist studies in order to problematize and expand “the traditional periodization, geography, style, and address of modernism.” She invites theatre scholars to interrogate what modernism means in theatre scholarship and to bring an “expansive geopolitical dimension to bear on traditional canons of modern drama.”³ Another project that made an effort to work against Eurocentrism in drama is *Modern Drama: Defining the Field*, in which editors try to be inclusive in their selection of essays. The anthology is successful in articulating “a new openness” in theatre scholarship that could allow different kinds of questions, including those related to “period and generic boundaries” and “privilege based on class, race, nation, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality,” as well as “those that haven’t been thought of or understood.”⁴ *Modern and Contemporary World Drama* continues the work started by these scholars and also attempts to expand how we understand world drama.

The four volumes bring together previously published articles to underscore the fact that studies about world drama have always been global and do not have to default to Eurocentrism. The selections of the articles were based on both the theoretical significance in academia and the impact on the practice of theatre. However, there are a number of limitations to this approach that readers may notice. One of them is the centrality of the English language in the essays. Because I had to select essays that were written in English, scholarly works written in other languages had to be excluded, and there are obvious thematic and topical gaps in the collection. The Anglocentric perspective of this collection also places focus on the effects of British colonialism and leaves out other forms of travels, settlements, and displacements. Although English is considered a “global” language, there are robust scholarly activities in many different languages, and for a collection like this to be truly reflective of “the world,” it would be necessary to include essays written in other

²Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr, *Modern Drama: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

³Penny Farfan, “Editorial Comment: Modernism,” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 4 (2013): x–xiii.

⁴Ric Knowles, “Introduction,” *Modern Drama: Defining the Field*, eds. Ric Knowles, Joanne Tompkins, and W.B. Worthen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), xiii.

languages. Such a project would need to involve multiple scholars from all corners of the world, and I hope such works will be published in the near future.

In sum, *Modern and Contemporary World Drama* includes essays written in English that address broad questions of modernism in national and international contexts as well as specific case studies of plays written by diasporic writers. The goal of the collection is to provide a survey of representative studies of world drama since the late nineteenth century and to place emphasis on the types and styles of drama that have been excluded from Eurocentric metanarratives of theatre history. Currently, studies of non-Western modern and contemporary drama are published in a wide selection of journals and anthologies, and most of them are separated geographically (usually by continent). For instance, studies of modern and contemporary drama in Asia are most likely to be found in *Asian Theatre Journal*. It is rare for articles about modern drama in different parts of the world to be found in one book or a journal. This collection aims to bring together essays that were previously published in different venues into one large set in order to illuminate how modern and contemporary world drama can and should be examined collectively.

The four volumes are arranged thematically to give readers a sense of how modern and contemporary world drama began and has developed in the past 150 years. The first volume includes essays that describe various beginnings of modern drama. Instead of identifying a singular origin of modern drama with a linear chronology, the volume suggests multidirectional and multidimensional beginnings. The geographical area covered in the volume is extensive, and each essay describes different ways to conceptualize time, chronology, and what would be considered “innovative” in dramatic writing. The volume does not reject the European tradition of modern and contemporary drama; rather, it includes Ibsen and other canonic European dramatists as one of many beginnings of modern drama. It is my hope that the juxtaposition of multiple beginnings of modern drama provides a more comprehensive assessment of its history.

The second volume includes a set of essays that address theoretical questions of modern and contemporary world drama. In many ways, modern drama around the world began as a theoretical endeavor that questioned the fundamentals of the dramatic form. Dramatists have been self-conscious with their dramaturgy and wrote plays that did not merely tell stories but commented on what it meant to write for the theatre in an increasingly interconnected world. Sometimes, their plays were “new” for the sake of being new, and at other times, they intentionally disrupted the theatrical form. Authors of a number of essays in the volume analyze how modern and contemporary dramatists have incorporated theoretical perspectives in their plays, while others interpret broader theoretical issues that emerge from their case studies. Like the first volume, the second volume illustrates an array of studies that challenge a singular interpretation of modern and contemporary drama. Moreover, theories presented in the volume are not all abstract, as is often the case in canonical studies of dramatic theory. Many essays provide practical applications of dramatic theories in lived realities or theatrical productions, and all of them situate the core analysis in historically and politically specific contexts. In the volume, the question of what theory means to lived experiences in the era of globalization is particularly salient.

Globalization is often defined as the shrinking of time and space with the increase in travels and transnational movements of people, ideas, commerce, and technology. In general, modern and contemporary world drama is about such movements, and theatre, which relies on the concepts of time and space, has been used as a microcosm to explore

how the world is interconnected. As the term *theatrum mundi* suggests, theatre has always functioned as a metaphor of the world and existence, but with the shrinking of the world in the global era, theatre's metaphoricity in modern and contemporary drama has been even more significant. Themes of migration, exchange, national borders, exile, and diaspora are frequently mentioned in the volume, and the theatrical stage is often used as a laboratory to examine key issues of globalization and displacement. The volume also examines other definitions of "movements," including political and aesthetic movements that have determined the development of modern and contemporary drama. Like the first two volumes, the third volume prioritizes studies that emphasize the complexities of the global and cosmopolitan experience and refuses to arrive at a grand narrative with a singular or "universal" perspective. Modernity was created with, and continues to be defined by, messy and sometimes destructive movements even when the intention was to be progressive. The aim of the volume is to showcase essays that, collectively, demonstrate how the world has been shrinking and how drama has represented such changes.

Although we are still in the early part of the twenty-first century, there are key developments that distinguish the new millennium from the previous ones. The last volume provides an overview of some of the topics that have appeared in drama around the world since the turn of the new millennium. The essays in the volume examine various developments that are commonly described with the prefix "post," as in posthumanism, post-truth, postcolonial, postrace, and post-nation. As the essays in the volume demonstrate, "post" signifies both what comes after and what continues. The prefix is modern in how it implies progress and innovation, but many essays use it to describe the feeling of being fragmented, displaced, and exiled. Similarly, cosmopolitanism is not viewed by dramatists from a celebratory perspective but with suspicion in many cases. The uncertainties around the future of humanity in the age of technological advancements and late capitalism are palpable in a number of essays in the volume. The volume continues many topics and questions raised in the first three volumes and examines how the new millennium has affected the development of modern and contemporary world drama.