



2011

[Review of the books: *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945–1985* and *Poets at Play: An Anthology of Modernist Drama*]

Heidi R. Bean

Bridgewater State University, [heidi.bean@bridgew.edu](mailto:heidi.bean@bridgew.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/english\\_fac](http://vc.bridgew.edu/english_fac)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

**Virtual Commons Citation**

Bean, Heidi R. (2011). [Review of the books: *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945–1985* and *Poets at Play: An Anthology of Modernist Drama*]. In *English Faculty Publications*. Paper 55.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/english\\_fac/55](http://vc.bridgew.edu/english_fac/55)

**THE KENNING ANTHOLOGY OF POETS THEATER: 1945–1985.** Edited by Kevin Killian and David Brazil. Chicago: Kenning Editions, 2010; pp. xiv + 590. \$25.95 paper.

**POETS AT PLAY: AN ANTHOLOGY OF MODERNIST DRAMA.** Edited by Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2010; pp. 353. \$80.00 cloth.

To anyone not well versed in poetic theatre, the publication in 2010 of not one but two such anthologies—roughly 900 pages of poetic plays—may come as a surprise. And while theatres from New York to San Francisco, and various points in between, continue to stage contemporary US poetic theatre for a motley assortment of theatre and poetry fans, critical assessments of both texts and productions lag far behind. So the near simultaneous appearance of *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945–1985* and *Poets at Play: An Anthology of Modernist Drama* begs two interrelated questions: Why poetic theatre now? And what are we to do with this windfall?

Each of these new anthologies suggests, in its framing and presentation, different answers to these questions. *The Kenning Anthology* is edited by two creative writers, Kevin Killian and David Brazil, and published by a “small” poetry press; it focuses on US poetic theatre after World War II. *Poets at Play* is edited by theatre scholar Sarah Bay-Cheng and poet Barbara Cole and published by a scholarly press; it examines modernist poetic drama. Aimed at an academic audience, *Poets at Play* offers a critical reconsideration of the relationship between dramatic text and theatrical performance in modernism. *The Kenning Anthology* makes no pretense of critical assessment, but instead casts itself as a treasure trove of unpublished and hard-to-find plays offered up for readers’ delight.

Despite having long been regarded as a mere footnote in both theatre and poetry criticism, poetic theatre has recently enjoyed a spike in scholarship and productions. But because the field is still emerging, the proper term has not been definitively settled: is it poetic theatre, poetic drama, poets’ theatre, or something else entirely? Each choice might be construed as an argument. In referring to its subject as “poetic drama,” *Poets at Play* challenges conventional understandings of poetry in modernist drama: as such, it is well suited to college drama and theatre courses, especially modern US drama. The collection gathers together examples ranging from the apparently anti-theatrical, closet dramas of H. D. and Wallace Stevens that test the conven-

tions of the material stage, to poetic plays by Edna St. Vincent Millay and e. e. cummings that draw on popular performance practices such as vaudeville and minstrelsy.

Placing these plays alongside others by Marita Bonner, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound, *Poets at Play* argues that poetic drama—usually dismissed as a minor practice in the discourse of American modernism—must instead be understood as an essential component of modernism and as an important departure from representational theatre. Poetic theatre is presented as an antidote to the mimetic stage, as an anti-absorptive strategy, and as a link between realism and postwar experimental performance. “Unique among other forms of verse plays,” the editors assert, “modern poetic drama attempted to make the poetry visible as the hallmark of truth within the theatrical illusion of realism” (21). In this view, the combination of poetry and performance enacts some of the key tensions of modernism itself—tensions between the private and public, between texts and bodies, and between formal experimentation and real experience. While each of the plays in *Poets at Play* has been collected elsewhere, this anthology makes its unique contribution in recasting them collectively as an important contribution to our understanding of US theatre and literary history.

*The Kenning Anthology*, by contrast, wants less to make critical arguments than to offer readers a feast of poetic theatre, from Jack Spicer’s adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” (1946), only recently uncovered by the editors among Spicer’s papers, to Kathy Acker’s Arabic-inflected *The Birth of the Poet* (1985). Editors Killian and Brazil, themselves active in San Francisco’s annual Poets Theater festival, deem their interest “poets theater,” retaining the idiosyncratic punctuation of its West Coast practitioners. While they duck a precise definition, two criteria seem especially important: that the play texts and productions value spontaneity, theatricality, and play, and that each playwright is known primarily (or at least equally) as a poet.

Poetry, rather than theatre communities, have driven much of the new poetic theatre, and *The Kenning Anthology* reflects the interests of poetic theatre practitioners, such as textual provenance, production histories, and the playwrights’ own chatty recollections of their work. The anthology’s forty-eight plays comprise an astounding collection that emphasizes the pleasure of discovery and includes a range of tips for researchers and fans, including information on where to find more of the same, references to memoirs and criticism relating to the plays, and anecdotes of all sorts acquired through

the editors' dogged searches. Arranged chronologically, the anthology leaves readers to trace their own critical paths through these plays, and there is much material here for critics and fans alike. Several of the plays, for example, relate to specific theatre venues or companies, such as the Living Theatre (see plays by James Schuyler, Diane DiPrima, Jackson Mac Low, and John Ashbery), the Cambridge Poets' Theatre (plays by V. R. "Bunny" Lang, both Ashbery and Schuyler again, and Frank O'Hara), and the San Francisco Poets Theater associated with "Language" poetry (plays by Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, and Alan Bernheimer). There are also several examples of African American poetic theatre that emerged from the civil rights era and from the Black Arts Movement (plays by Lorenzo Thomas, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Ntozake Shange). There is also at least one discovery here of a forgotten theatre company—the Wastepaper Theatre of Providence, Rhode Island, which was founded in the 1970s by poets, including Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop.

As much as I admire the sheer breadth of *The Kenning Anthology*, its lack of critical coherence obscures poetic theatre's explorations of the relationship between textuality and performance. For example, *Third Man* (1978), by "Language" playwright Carla Harryman, is significant for its use of both textual and theatrical performativity. Harryman's work is celebrated by a community of poets and poetry critics, but remains under-recognized by theatre scholars—and here its contributions are easily hidden in so large a project. What sense does it make, for example, to situate Harryman's audience-oriented work alongside a play whose author discarded it immediately after writing it (Diane DiPrima's *Rain Fur* [1961]) and another that languished in a box of papers with no readers and no production (James Schuyler's *The Mystery Chef Mystery* [1953])? Furthermore, there is a clear text-centric bias here, as when the editors describe poetry as the writers' "real" work, or when they suggest that the lack of extant scripts should be taken as evidence of playwrights' lack of dedication, "as though they were ashamed of having done it" (ii). Perhaps another way to interpret this absence of documentation is as a demonstration of the very

spontaneity, ephemerality, and engagement with site-specific practices that the editors themselves celebrate in their account of poets theatre.

Still, the gems to be found here are numerous. Fiona Templeton's *Against Agreement: Duel Duet #4* (1982), for example, a tour de force of conceptual theatre, explores the fine line between agreement and disagreement on which communication depends. Hannah Weiner's *RJ (Romeo & Juliet)* (1966) uses maritime code as a kind of objective, universal language that critiques the solipsism of romantic narrative. Enjoyment of Weiner's play is enhanced by the publisher's blog, a special feature that supplements the published anthology ([www.kenningeditions.com](http://www.kenningeditions.com)). In one entry, performers discuss a 2007 production of Weiner's play, in which characters employed walkie-talkies in the bedroom as a means of performing the distancing effects of code. These online supplements also include reviews, images, and rare archival materials demonstrating the ongoing life of poetic theatre, and they are definitely not to be missed.

Why publish poetic theatre texts now? For the editors of *Poets at Play*, another look at modernist poetic drama can help us to better understand the role this hybrid form played in constructing modernism and in laying the groundwork for performance practices later in the century. The editors of *The Kenning Anthology*, on the other hand, wonder quite simply why poetic theatre has not been celebrated all along. The combination of theatricality and, often, radical language politics evident in both anthologies will also likely appeal to the same demographic interested in what Hans Thies-Lehmann has called "postdramatic theatre." Like postdramatic theatre, poetic theatre often engages the relationship between textuality and performance—and frequently that between representation and experience—that makes the study of drama and theatre an important arena of cultural production and critique. Taken together, these two anthologies suggest the rich life of US poetic theatre and give scholars, teachers, and practitioners ample material to explore its pleasures, as well as its implications.

**HEIDI R. BEAN**

*Bridgewater State University*