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***Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theatre.* Sarah Bay-Cheng.** New York: Routledge, 2005. xii+207 pp. \$26.95 (paper).

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Sarah Bay-Cheng's *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theatre* begins again the ongoing debate about the simultaneously praised and derided American writer/theorist's place in the dramatic canon. The success of Bay-Cheng's project of reclaiming Gertrude Stein's dramatic work rises and falls on the writer's conclusion that Stein's plays are not only innovative with dramatic form but ultimately worthy of the stage, rather than simply chamber pieces that are better read than seen. In other words, Bay-Cheng asks and attempts to answer the question, "Do the plays play?" This "stageability" (20) then serves to forcibly allow the plays to address the relevant political, social, and aesthetic questions of the avant-garde not only for Stein's own time but also in the contemporary stage work of theatre artists such as Susan Lori-Parks, Richard Foreman, and Robert Wilson. *Mama Dada* is a necessary and engaging view into Stein's always-emerging, forever-receding shadow on the landscape of contemporary nontraditional play-writing; however, Bay-Cheng's study can also be an occasionally infuriating series of absences for the reader more interested in the stagecraft or actual performance reconstruction surrounding Stein's work.

After beginning with Stein's fixture within and emergence from the early movements of the avant-garde, experimental cinema, and the germination of what would become queer theory, Bay-Cheng spends the majority of *Mama Dada* in the critical analysis of and the engagement with Stein's dramatic texts and theatrical productions as they were realized and received in her lifetime. These analyses include two of Stein's most celebrated works, "Four Saints in Three Acts" and "Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights," along with her monumental dramatic coda "The Mother of Us All." *Mama Dada* concludes with an overview of Stein's widespread but still underappreciated influence on the American avant-garde of the present day. The book's structure fixes Stein in a continuum; Bay-Cheng playfully refers to it as a "continuous present" throughout the text, where Stein is always a presence but not always seen, even in her own lifetime.

Chapter 5, "Atom and Eve: Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights," illuminates what is both rewarding and lacking in *Mama Dada*. Bay-Cheng traces Stein's modern retelling of the Faust legend from its incubation within the novel that would become *Ida, A Novel* (1941) into a fully realized stage production. Using both the photos from the program and Stein's journal notes from her viewing of Mozart's

Don Giovanni in 1938, Bay-Cheng shows Stein's inspiration for bringing the Faustus story to the stage: "Thus, it is not difficult, based on the conclusion of *Don Giovanni*—in which the title character descends into hell—and the program's references to previous productions of Faustian operas, to see how Stein began combining the elements that would eventually become *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*" (76). The ingenious use of the primary documents shows a clear demonstration of Stein's understanding of the necessity for theatrically realizing her rumination on the classic tale of a soul sold for enlightenment. Bay-Cheng's analysis of Stein's journal notes and *Don Giovanni's* program then sets the stage for her in-depth examination of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* as a text with no past or future but only a present contained in a technological nightmare that is debilitating in its blinding brilliance.

However, the insight of the analysis of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* ends before arriving into its actual production. For all the time *Mama Dada* spends deconstructing theatrical texts, it does not give anywhere near equal weight to the reconstruction of the plays as actual theatrical events. Stein's work, as Bay-Cheng rightfully asserts, calls attention to the "continuous present" of existence where nothing is as it previously was or will be. Of all the arts, theatre, with its inherent ephemerality, makes more visible the impossibility of actual repetition. This impossibility was central to Stein's lifelong project of a continuous present as Bay-Cheng points out with Stein's own words:

Existing as a human being, that is being listening and hearing is never repetition. It is not repetition if it is that which you are actually doing because naturally each time the emphasis is different just as the cinema has each time a slightly different thing to make it all be moving. (Stein 179)

Although Stein is referring to the cinema, this quote can equally apply to the performance of an actor in the continuous present of the stage.

Crucially, the reader is never given the benefit of enough of Stein's thoughts on seeing the actual performances of her work or how this seeing might have shaped her further writing. Therefore, the built-in suspense of the tension between written text and live performer is never fully resolved in *Mama Dada*, and its lack of resolution creates moments of confusion in Bay-Cheng's writing: "Although Marc Robinson *oddly* describes *Doctor Faustus* as 'taut with anticipation' the audience has most of its questions answered from the opening moments" (81, emphasis added). Robinson's comment is only odd if he is considering text exclusively, but all performance, no matter how minimal in its conception, cannot escape Robinson's

taut anticipation. An audience does not only consider the script in its viewing of performance but also must resolve questions of performance quality and technical virtuosity. To put it in the simplest performance terms: an audience understands what it is a juggler has to accomplish, but a tension still remains as to whether or not the execution will be successful. Because of their exacting word-play, Stein's dramas demand virtuosity in execution, and it is that expectation that creates the taut anticipation.

No such problems attend Bay-Cheng's final chapter "America Is My Country." Having placed Stein clearly in a continuum of her own past and present, Bay-Cheng moves the dramatist into a future that is this present by showing the economy of Stein's influence throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into our current one. Calling upon essays and artists that see Stein as a fixture in the firmament of the avant-garde, Bay-Cheng makes a forceful claim that Stein with her continuous present and theories on landscape plays has affected not only the way theatre is created but the way it is watched.

Bay-Cheng's Stein is not a historical antecedent but a contemporary collaborator. *Mama Dada* begins a conversation that has been going on for quite some time.

Work Cited

Stein, Gertrude. "Portraits and Repetition." *Lectures in America*. New York: Random House, 1935.

Marcel Duchamp. Caroline Cros. Trans. Vivian Rehberg. London: Reaktion Books, 2006. 1x+199 pp. \$16.95 (paper).

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Most readers of the *William Carlos Williams Review* will be familiar with the by now infamous story of Williams's first encounter with the avant-garde artist Marcel Duchamp (in which the sophisticate Duchamp scoffs at the "yokel" Williams's compliment of one of his paintings). Williams explains in his *Autobiography* that, from this moment on, he was determined to repay Duchamp by one day "laying him cold" with his own to-be-perfected art (A 173). As Henry M. Sayre has noted, however, Williams's initial skepticism about, even hostility toward, Duchamp's radical modernism eventually transformed into real admiration. Sayre writes, "This change in attitude reflects [. . .] not just Williams' growing