

***Theater of Capital: Modern Drama and Economic Life.* By Alisa Zhulina. Northwestern University Press, 2024. Cloth \$110.00, paper \$36.00, e-book \$36. 296 pages. 3 black-and-white images.**

For decades, literary criticism has privileged the novel as the cultural form best equipped to capture the complexities of capitalism. Alisa Zhulina grapples with this claim early in *Theater of Capital: Modern Drama and Economic Life*, a sterling first monograph in which she contends with proponents of fiction—including Ian Watt, Nancy Armstrong, Fredric Jameson, and others—to articulate precisely what fin de siècle drama reveals about the rise and predominance of capital in the nineteenth century. Her central contention, that playwrights used theater as a forum in which to experiment with different economic ideas and models in the crucible of capitalist development, makes the volume essential for scholars of modern drama and students of economic theory more broadly.

Zhulina focuses on European drama from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cleverly beginning her project in the 1870s when the term *capital* entered the public lexicon and, by extension, the mouths of dramatic characters. The roughly five decades she covers also witnessed significant socioeconomic transitions, including the rise of legitimate financial speculation and investment. *Theater of Capital* is not siloed off from the rest of history, though, as it often gestures toward the contemporary moment in discussions of recent stagings and adaptations of the plays under consideration. It also discusses the economic drama of Ayad Akhtar and others who continue the practice of writing “theater of capital” today.

The term *theater of capital* refers to a specific type of theater, one that explicitly focuses on capital as a central concern and criticizes the ills of capitalism. It also highlights the intrinsically paradoxical relationship between capital and theater, an art form that noticeably necessitates expenditure on labor and is guided by profit motives but also sometimes explicitly denounces the economic system in which it operates. This conflict proves pivotal to the study. Zhulina argues that bourgeois dramatists of the era engaged in “immanent critique,” a form of writing that exposes the internal contradictions of capitalism by depicting the gulf between economic ideas and their implementation. She contends that the immanent critique in their works gives their plays political power, not only because these bourgeois writers criticized themselves as beneficiaries of capitalism but also because they represented systemic injustices to their audiences in order to spur collective action.

*Theater of Capital* begins to bring these concepts to life in chapter 1, which focuses on Henrik Ibsen. Reading *Pillars of the Community*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *A Doll’s House*, Zhulina draws a parallel between

the invisible hand of the market and the theatrical device of the *deus ex machina*, which both masquerade as natural phenomena. But Ibsen's diction and nuanced treatment of capitalism reveals that it is not Providence or the "free market" behind the invisible hand, but rather labor. Zhulina most keenly realizes her argument in an extended reading of *A Doll's House*, in which she discusses the Norwegian concept of *hyggeligt*—domestic coziness and freedom from (financial) anxiety—alongside Marxist feminist scholarship to show that only through Nora's labor does the illusion of the *hyggeligt* bourgeois household exist.

Women's work and marriage come to the fore in chapter 2, which examines how patriarchy and capitalism intertwine in the tradition of the dowry. Zhulina brilliantly teases out issues of the marriage market and speculation through a moment in August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* in which Jean flings a coin at Julie, which she interprets as a demonstration of the tenuous distinction between marriage and prostitution. In the late nineteenth century, both men and women striving for socioeconomic advancement leveraged their personality and attractiveness as "erotic capital," a term Zhulina adopts from Catherine Hakim after offering significant corrections to her original theorization. Engaging with Friedrich Engels, Georg Simmel, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and others, the chapter explores "the difficulty of disentangling economic and erotic desires" in *Miss Julie*, George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, and Victoria Benedictsson's novel *Money* and play *The Enchantment* (104). Her analysis persuasively considers the playwrights' biographies and personal economic interests, including Strindberg's misogyny and socialism, Shaw's Fabianism, and Benedictsson's experience as a woman artist.

Biographical details are also indispensable to chapter 3, which analyzes Anton Chekhov's plays through his reportage on the Rykov banking scandal of 1884. Zhulina suggests that through his coverage, Chekhov learned about the "near hit," an event that almost happens but does not, a phenomenon that influenced the temporality of his creative writing. Against the volatile backdrop of Russia's nascent capitalist economy and the population's penchant for gambling and investment, Chekhov's characters "speculate" not only with their money but also through their contemplation. Zhulina examines the effects of the near hit in the short stories "The Winning Ticket" and "The Bet" and in the play *The Anniversary*, and she probes the aftermath of lost bets in the form of mortgages in *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard* in the unpredictable, unequal "casino" of capitalism (145).

Chapter 4 magnifies the issues of labor threaded throughout the book by discussing Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, one of the earliest plays to represent a collectivity of laborers onstage. Zhulina attends to the myriad indications of labor in Hauptmann's stage directions, demonstrates the play's self-awareness about the difficulty of depicting labor in the theater, and offers compelling synopses of its productions that led to revolutionary actions (including its stagings in the United States in the early twentieth century). The chapter then considers expressionist playwrights Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, and Karel Čapek, whose works followed

Hauptmann's. But unlike *The Weavers*, their plays betrayed a cynicism and distrust of the proletariat. In the coda, Zhulina extends her examination of theater and capital to the present to contemplate audiences' appetites for imagining alternatives to capitalism.

Given how prominently labor recurs throughout the book, I would have appreciated more engagement with race and colonialism in modern drama's representations of capitalism. Zhulina broaches the subject through contemporary rewritings or remountings of canonical plays, such as Tanika Gupta's *A Doll's House*, set in colonial Calcutta (Kolkata), and Yaël Farber's South African, post-apartheid *Mies Julie*, but not through the original plays themselves. Some acknowledgement of the work of Cedric Robinson, Anne McClintock, and others who have shown how European bourgeois life was intimately shaped by empire would have been welcome. This caveat aside, *Theater of Capital* is an especially energizing work that will inspire future scholars of drama and socioeconomic theory.

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***The Healing Stage: Black Women, Incarceration, and the Art of Transformation.***  
By Lisa Biggs. Ohio State University Press, 2022. Cloth \$139.95, paper \$37.95,  
e-book \$37.95. 258 pages.

Lisa Biggs's ethnographic account of Black women's prison theatre practice, *The Healing Stage*, explores cultural works that perform repair amidst interlocking catastrophes of misogynoir and capitalism, and generates considerable insights for the interdisciplinary fields of theatre and performance studies, critical prison studies, Black queer and feminist studies, and critical health studies. Analyses of race and gender in critical prison studies are not unprecedented, but there are few book-length monographs that specifically and deliberately frame Black womanhood as central in understanding the logic of incarceration. There are fewer still that theorize Black women as artists of transformation for the system and for themselves—and Biggs's book is the first to my knowledge that incorporates extensive critiques of conventional medicine. In these ways, *The Healing Stage* makes a significant intervention that expands on abolitionist Mariame Kaba's idea that the prison can never be feminist, that policing and imprisonment are "institutionalized practice[s] of racialized, gender-based violence," and that performance is a powerful tool to "think, rest, heal, and dream about the future" (30–31).

The book looks at four examples to theorize how imprisoned artists "stage healing" in processes that repair both interpersonal and institutional harm. The compelling ethnographic narratives demonstrate Biggs's skills as a storyteller.