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***A Concise History of Polish Theater from the Eleventh to the Twentieth Centuries* by Kazimierz Braun, The Edwin Mellen Press (Studies in Theater Arts, Vol. 21), 2003, 476 pages.**



A CONCISE HISTORY OF POLISH THEATER  
FROM THE ELEVENTH TO THE TWENTIETH  
CENTURIES  
BY KAZIMIERZ BRAUN



Kazimierz Braun, director, scholar, writer, playwright and teacher is uniquely suited to be the author of this volume. He was totally involved with Polish theater throughout his career in Poland, Europe and America. Braun deserves to be commended for writing the first history of Polish theater for English-speaking readers. Few people in the West know anything about Polish theater traditions. In the Anglo-American world, theater is entertainment or an art form. While in Poland, Daniel Gerould notes in his *Preface*, theater is “regarded as the repository of moral values and national identity.”

Braun interweaves the history of the theater with the history of Poland. The volume has six chapters, from *Theater in Independent Poland* (11th-18th Centuries) to *The Twenty Years of Storm* (1980-2000). Braun manages to be both concise and comprehensive. Each chapter features noteworthy playwrights, directors, actors and stage designers as well as theater companies, buildings, theatrical histories of cities, audiences, the training of actors, theater schools. Braun is particularly inspired by actors and his astute comments stimulate our interest.

In the excellent *Selective Summary: Polish Theater* Braun explains the status of Polish theater as a national institution. He discusses the phenomenon of “Civic Theater” whereby theater remained “the last territory of freedom” during the partitions (1797-1918), during World War II (1939-1945) and under Communism (1945-1989). Braun was part of the story of post World War II theater in Poland and as a participant his account of those years is particularly vivid. Substantive information is provided about the underground theater, something unknown in America. It originated in the 19th century tradition of clandestine social gatherings at which prohibited émigré dramas would be read and continued during World War II and under martial law in the 1980s. During the period of martial law there was a whole network of underground theatrical activities. Performances were given in homes and churches with hundreds of actors participating throughout the country. Braun also does full justice to Polish theater outside of Poland. Many semi-professional and amateur groups existed in Polish communities scattered throughout the world during World War II. There were military theater groups. There were also many fine productions in various labor, concentration and prisoner-of-war camps. Polish émigré theater, especially active in London, The United States and Canada is also highlighted.

The *History* has tables and timelines in each chapter that clarify the development of the Polish theater. Braun also provided a *Hall of Fame of the Polish Theater Artists* illustrated by drawings and photographs. There are two selected bibliographies of English and Polish sources. Indexes of names and plays are helpful.

This is clearly a very useful and much needed reference book. It can also be read as an engrossing story of a national theater. Braun combines both scholarship and passion in this outstanding work.

***Monika Mieroszewska***

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