Review of Demands of the Dead in Journal of Dramatic Theory & Criticism

Katy Ryan, West Virginia University

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Demands of the Dead: Executions, Storytelling, and Activism in the United States ed. by Katy Ryan (review)

John Fletcher

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historical scope. These points aside, this monograph is a well-researched addition to the history of copyright law in the United States, and is of great use to students, scholars, and lay individuals alike.

Tracey Elaine Chessum
Point Park University


The United States imprisons more people than any other nation on Earth. It is one of the few countries still imposing the death penalty. Most capital convictions involve white victims, even though black Americans make up over half of all murder victims. Katy Ryan and her contributors revisit such facts throughout the sobering anthology Demands of the Dead, pounding a drumbeat of outrage that resounds through the book’s eclectic mix of testimonials, articles, scripts, and poems. This is activist scholarship. Contributors are unwaveringly abolitionist. Each piece chips away at the logical and affective support for execution. Though not a book about performance issues per se, the work’s subject matter and model of critical engagement should command the attention of theatre critics and practitioners alike.

Ryan divides the anthology into thirds. The first section, “Words through Walls,” focuses on first-person accounts from people on death row. She begins with the testimony of Willie Francis, a black teenager sentenced to die in 1946 (on flimsy evidence, by an all-white jury, and after a ludicrously brief trial) for the murder of a white man in Louisiana. Remarkably, gruesomely, Francis survived the state’s two (!) successive attempts to electrocute him. His advocates appealed to the Supreme Court, arguing for clemency on the grounds that subjecting Francis again to the electric chair would constitute cruel and unusual punishment. In a five-to-four decision, the case failed, and Francis was put to death in 1948. The piece included here is Francis’s testimony as recorded by a local writer about what it was like to live through an electrocution. His words filtered we know not to what degree by his transcriber, Francis is harrowing in his detail and humbling in his generosity, one moment describing the sensation of being electrocuted and the next extending gratitude and understanding to his advocates even after the failed appeal.

Equally riveting are accounts by Steve Champion (now Adisa Akanni Kamara) and Rick Setter. Champion, who sits on death row in San Quentin,
recounts how, together with fellow inmates Anthony Ross (a.k.a. Ajani Addae Kamara) and Stanley Tookie Williams (a.k.a. Ajamu Kamara), he underwent a rigorous program of self-education. They absorbed whatever books they could secure, writing and discussing ideas whenever and however they could, and honing their authorial skills like iron sharpening iron—all the time while working within and around whatever arbitrary roadblocks the prison deemed fit to impose. Setter writes about his experiences working as a prison guard in Texas, exposing the inhuman and dehumanizing conditions that define life on death row.

Little in the rest of the anthology stands a chance of matching such testimonials in raw power. Ryan cannily pairs Francis’s and Champion’s accounts with scholarly pieces (essays by Jason Stupp and Tom Kerr, respectively) that engage the accounts and the writers’ lives directly. The pairings enhance rather than compete with the first-person accounts. A scene from Elizabeth Ann Stein’s screenplay *Leaving Death Row* rounds out this section.

The second section, “History and State Power,” includes scholarly essays by H. Bruce Franklin, John Cyril Barton, and Jennifer Leigh Lieberman. In each, literature (mainly from the 1800s) serves as a jumping-off point for investigating historical shifts in attitudes toward the death penalty in the United States. Readers not especially invested in nineteenth-century fiction will find a multitude of fascinating tidbits concerning the history of public execution (particularly electrocution—alternately framed as a more or less humane way to die). Ryan complements these articles with a set of short poems from Jill McDonough and a one-act play by Kia Corthron, *Life by Asphyxiation*. Corthron’s piece stages a fantasy encounter between a middle-aged death-row inmate, the girl he raped and murdered decades before, and historical figures Nat Turner and Crazy Horse (both of whom were killed for resisting racist, colonialist violence). Ryan concludes with “Routines,” a brief, straightforward narrative in which Anthony Ross (a cohort of Steve Champion) reflects on an average day in his life and imagines his own execution. Ross’s account brings past and present into vital contact, underscoring the contemporary stakes of the section’s historical reflections on state power.

The final section, “Voice and Bodies in Resistance,” studies anti-execution arguments from a range of perspectives: philosophical (Thomas Dutoit’s illuminating piece on Derrida), literary (David Kiernan’s informative analysis of lynching imagery in African-American poetry), and pop cultural/musical (Matthew Stratton’s focused reading of a 1992 gangsta rap album by Da Lench Mob). Poets Sherman Alexie and Delbert L. Tibbs (whose own time on death row is staged in *The Exonerated*) share their own powerful selections.

Ryan’s contribution about Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen’s documentary play *The Exonerated* is especially strong. Staging the stories of six death-row inmates convicted for crimes they did not commit, the play seems on the one hand to have “worked” as activist theatre. Illinois governor George Ryan famously cited
it as influencing his 2003 decision to grant a mass commutation. Acknowledging that her criticism may seem “wearily skeptical” (256), Ryan launches an incisive critique about the script’s partial sentimentality. The appeal of the characters’ stories, Ryan observes, traffics largely on the fact of their innocence. The death penalty is wrong, argues *The Exonerated*, because it can so easily entrap the wrong person. While indubitable (innocent people ought not be executed), this argument tacitly leaves intact the notion that the death penalty is fine as long as it only applies to guilty people. From the abolitionist perspective Ryan writes from, such an argument ignores the structural (primarily racial) inequities that make capital punishment inherently unjust regardless of the guilt or innocence of the person executed.

In her introduction, Ryan (citing H. Bruce Franklin) contends that teaching American literature without reference to the nation’s prison industrial complex resembles teaching nineteenth-century American history while ignoring slavery. Readers’ impressions of the book may depend somewhat on whether they concur with Ryan’s argument. I found myself convinced. Her work pushes me to consider how theatre history might likewise account for the role of prison systems in US culture, a project already being pioneered by scholars like Nina Billone Prieur and Jonathan Shailor. Ryan’s challenge, like her collection, responds to the demands of those living and dead who find themselves caught in our glaringly unjust criminal justice system.

John Fletcher
Louisiana State University


Within the realm of American popular theatre scholarship, amongst the many works on circus, vaudeville, variety, minstrelsy, dime museums, and concert saloons, the burlesque tradition remains one of the most theorized, yet least comprehensively examined. In the last thirty years dozens of books and articles examining both the history of burlesque and contemporary variations have been published. Almost without exception, these works, led by Robert C. Allen’s excellent *Horrible Prettiness* (1991), focus on feminist and cultural approaches to the disrobing portions of the shows. Most works that chronicle the history of burlesque as a part of their project, like Rachel Schteir’s *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (2004) and Katherine Liepe-Levinson’s *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (2003), barely mention the comedians whose acts tied the strips together