Scholarly Reading Notes · EN

Reading Susan Bassnett’s “The Politics of Location”

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In “The Politics of Location”, Susan Bassnett considers how globalisation and international exchange unsettled the idea of a single British identity. The renewed assertion of national and cultural affiliations also mattered. On the British stage these shifts could be felt in performance styles and in the choice of material, whether a company began with a script or devised its work in rehearsal. English habits of speech and behaviour could no longer stand for the whole of British experience.

The subjects of women’s theatre changed too. Questions associated with socialist feminism, including equal pay, motherhood and women’s work, shared the stage with violence, incest, sexual identity and the performance of gender. By the early 1980s, gay and lesbian theatre had gained prominence. The performer’s body became a particular focus of feminist debate.

The Magdalena Project in Wales offered women working in experimental theatre a place to meet and exchange practices across national boundaries. The image of a crossroads is especially apt here. Participants meet at a particular place, bring knowledge acquired elsewhere and carry what they learn in different directions. Festivals and regional arts events in London, Edinburgh and Wales multiplied such encounters. Alternative work for theatre and television also found audiences.

Television’s place in everyday life, developments in computing and the growth of multinational companies form part of Bassnett’s account of the 1980s. International connections grew alongside renewed interest in local cultures. Theatre, literature, music and the visual arts flourished in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Arts Council and the British Council supported cultural work and exchange. Other routes linked Britain with India, the Caribbean, Uganda and Nigeria. Writers including Jackie Kay and Meera Syal brought multiple affiliations into their work, calling simple oppositions between cultural identities into question.

Liz Lochhead explores Scottish identity and its relation to power through history and myth. Timberlake Wertenbaker asks how British identity looks from within and beyond its cultural boundaries. The return to stories such as Medea and Philomela opens a different way of thinking about inheritance. A myth can travel across borders and acquire a different meaning in the place where it is performed.

The body is another language in this account. An interest in gender intersects with a changing understanding of space and place. The performer’s movements can transform the words spoken onstage and communicate something those words alone cannot carry. Looking back over the chapter, what stands out is the coexistence of widening international connections and the affirmation of particular national cultures. Against the familiar image of a cultural melting pot, Bassnett’s theatre offers a more plural sense of Britishness whose differences remain perceptible in performance.

Source · Susan Bassnett, “The Politics of Location”, in Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt (eds), The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights (Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter 5.