

Shakespeare's language was of course English, and he possessed it as utterly as anyone ever has, as utterly, in fact, as it possessed him. And Shakespeare the dramatist used the language as a poet uses language. Those observations would once have been too self-evident to bear mention, but not any more, argues Kermode. He fears that we've lost sight of the poetry in the spate of critical studies focusing on Shakespeare's religion or sexual preference or business acumen. Whatever their incidental fascination, such topics are subordinate to the texts as dramatic poetry.

Kermode's approach is as straightforward and foursquare as his title. He considers roughly the first half of the Shakespearean corpus—the histories, tragedies, and comedies of the 1590s—in a single section of some 50 pages. He's eager to get to the years when the playwright's craft attained a higher level. The pivotal work for Kermode is *Hamlet* (1600), that great “bazaar” of a play—“everything available, all warranted and trademarked”—in which, he believes, the playwright offers the fullest exhibition of his powers. “In Shakespeare's plays, especially after 1600, say from *Hamlet* on,” Kermode writes, “the life of the piece . . . is in the detail, and we need to understand as much of that as we can.”

So Kermode attends to the poetic detail of 16 individual plays. He takes key passages from each—in particular, knotty and involved passages—settles their literal meaning, and suggests how they served Shakespeare's larger dramatic purpose, which was to make language present the complexity of character and motivation as it never had done before. Shakespeare's characters weigh “confused possibilities and dubious motives.” They propose theories or explanations only to abandon or qualify them almost immediately. Their thoughts are rugged, intricate, even obscure, and only a new kind of poetry can do them justice. Kermode believes that much of the language was difficult even for the audiences who first heard it, but the playwright educated them to his genius even as he went on imagining and testing new possibilities.

Kermode is not afraid to admit that some passages still leave him baffled, and to argue

that the poet sometimes loses his way. No one who wrote so much, he says, and for commercial purposes, could hit the mark every time. So anyone who has ever puzzled over an intractable bit of Shakespeare can take heart: The playwright may not have known exactly what he meant either, and what he meant, in any case, may not be worth the effort of excavating the sense from its muffling expression.

This would be a wonderful book at any time. It's all the more welcome now, when so much of what passes for literary criticism has the weight, the appeal, and (thank goodness) the staying power of carelessly emitted gas. Kermode honors his subject and returns us to the plays newly alert to their pleasures.

—JAMES MORRIS

SILENT SCREENS:

The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater.

Photos by Michael Putnam. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 102 pp. \$39.95

Disused small-town and neighborhood movie theaters are to photographer Putnam what the decrepit churches and storefronts of the rural South were to Walker Evans: objects that, austere and photographed in their decline, can cause us to reflect. On what, though, I'm uncertain. Just as Evans's pictures were always too stark for mere nostalgia, Putnam's are a little too artless to transcend it. Putnam did, however, make me think about how changing values, changing technologies, and changing economic priorities are reflected first in our landscapes and then, perhaps, in our souls, which are ever yearning, not always appropriately, for the past.

As you study Putnam's well-composed and well-lit photographs of abandoned theaters, a pang for the lost past inevitably afflicts you. Even more saddening is his record of conversions—theaters turned into evangelical churches, bookshops, banks, restaurants, a swimming pool. As writer Molly Haskell observes in the best of the four brief essays included in this slender, handsome volume, the disappearance of the community theaters signaled “the passing of

a way of being together.” But she also notes that the movies shown in these theaters were powerful anticommunitarian instruments: “The most engaging heroes were possessed by wanderlust; the smartest working-women heroines believed in self-betterment; the increasingly dominant tone was against provincialism.” In short, content inevitably trumped architecture.

So did show-biz economics. In his introduction, New York University film professor Robert Sklar points out that the small-town and neighborhood theaters had always been a nuisance to Hollywood. They needed to change their bills more frequently than the first-run houses—as often as three times a week—which forced the studios to make more pictures. Renting films for as little as \$10 a run, these theaters never contributed much to the distributors’ prosperity. A big-city picture palace could generate \$10,000 a week; a small-town theater might produce just \$1,500 a year. Given the cost of extra prints and shipping, distributors might do no better than break even. As a result, these the-

aters were doomed well before television.

Which is not necessarily a bad thing. An awful lot of shoddy movies were made with an eye toward the small towns, where exhibitors tended to be noisy cultural conservatives. Beyond that, I’m not sure that community values are all that important when it comes to movies. We may go to the theater in a crowd, but once the picture begins we are alone with it, voyeurs peering into a lighted window, thinking our own thoughts, mulling our own fantasies. The structure surrounding this somewhat onanistic activity is relatively insignificant.

What’s important are the movies themselves. Instead of mourning the past, we might more usefully discuss how contemporary distribution and exhibition practices—particularly the emphasis on the first-weekend grosses of movies playing on 2,500 screens— affect what we now see. And don’t see. But that’s a different argument, one that this pretty, but to me rather idle, book does not take up.

—RICHARD SCHICKEL

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

*“THAT’S NOT WHAT WE
MEANT TO DO”:
Reform and Its Unintended
Consequences in
Twentieth-Century America.*
By Steven M. Gillon. Norton.
288 pp. \$25.95

Attention, policy wonks: University of Oklahoma historian Gillon has written a delightfully subversive book about how reform legislation goes awry. With no hand-wringing, no conspiracy theories about forces of evil undermining good works, he recounts the unintended postenactment journeys of five laws. Along the way, he demonstrates that the only thing predictable about reform is that its consequences are unpredictable.

He starts with the 1935 Social Security Act’s little-debated provision to help young widows and their children. With the breakdown of the nuclear family, this modest widows’ entitle-

ment mushroomed into a \$13 billion program (eventually Aid to Families with Dependent Children) that mostly benefited families with live but absent fathers. This development in turn provoked another policy shift, welfare reform, and a change in the national consensus about government aid to the poor.

With the Community Mental Health Act of 1963, Congress sought to move thousands of long-term mentally ill residents from large, out-of-the-way hospitals into community-based settings, where they would receive continuing support from a network of mental health centers. But subsequent congresses cared more about Vietnam, civil rights, low-income housing, and urban unrest than about funding the community services. The released hospital patients often ended up on the streets, and homelessness became a political issue.

Gillon also traces the curious history of racial preferences. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 expressly barred quotas, but two federal regulatory agencies claimed the authority to