

Editorial

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The first issue of the journal in 2004, and the first under my editorship, is devoted to a special focus on ‘Postdramatic Theatre’. While this term may not be familiar to many readers, the phenomenon it embraces most certainly is. Coined by the German theatre studies scholar, Hans-Thies Lehmann in his book *Postdramatisches Theater*,¹ the concept refers to tendencies and experiments defining theatre outside the paradigm of the dramatic text. Also known, somewhat imprecisely, as postmodern theatre, it questions fundamentally the very tenets of the dramatic theatre. Postdramatic performances usually eschew clear coordinates of narrative and character and require therefore considerable effort on the part of the spectator. For this reason, it has been termed, in the words of New York theatre critic Elinor Fuchs, ‘spectator’s response theatre: we write our own script out of the “pieces of culture” offered’.² Like Lehmann, Fuchs tries to find an overarching frame within which to make sense of the manifold experiments in theatre and performance that were taking place in the 1980s. Whereas Lehmann sees postdramatic theatre primarily as a question of form and history which affect the configuration of time, space and mediality of theatre, Fuchs regards the same developments as a response to the massive critique of Western models of subjectivity that we associate with terms such as poststructuralism and deconstruction.

The main protagonists of postdramatic theatre are familiar, although their work may be better known by other epithets. Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor and Heiner Müller represent a first wave. Groups and artists such as The Wooster Group, Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, Reza Abdoh and Forced Entertainment have become a dominant presence in the late 1980s and 1990s. Their work has pushed and blurred the boundaries of theatre and performance art so that today a sharp distinction is probably obsolete. Despite manifest differences, we also find common strategies. These include a preference for the visual image over the written word, collage and montage instead of linear structure, a reliance on metonymic rather than metaphoric representation, and a redefinition of the performer’s function in terms of being and materiality rather than appearance and mimetic imitation.

The articles gathered here engage with this tradition of performance from a variety of perspectives. The authors come from the USA, Germany, Great Britain, Poland and Holland. Although most make at least passing reference to Lehmann’s study, they seldom attempt to merely annotate or gloss it. They explore instead some of the many questions that this paradigm shift in theatre aesthetics raises. Martin Puchner’s

discussion of the French Situationist movement draws out the expanded notion of theatre that is crucial to so much postdramatic theatre. The article provides also an important contribution to its historical contextualization, not only in terms of direct connections with the Situationist movement but within the wider stream of avant-garde theatre and performance which has its roots in the provocations of the Dadaists and Futurists.

Although much postdramatic theatre is not primarily textual in orientation, the term itself makes explicit reference to the paradigm of dramatic theatre. In her contribution Małgorzata Sugiera examines how the reception of new texts for the theatre, particularly by young German writers, has encountered considerable difficulty in Poland where critics still operate with normative expectations of drama defined by Peter Szondi in his now classic work *Theory of Modern Drama* (1956). This raises the question of definition: what name do we give to a text such as Heiner Müller's *Description of a Picture* (*Bildbeschreibung*) (1985) or indeed to Sarah Kane's last text for the theatre, *4.48 Psychosis* (2000)? The many productions of the latter throughout the world in mainstream theatres suggest that postdramatic writing is beginning to gain acceptance outside the restricted frame of festivals and small studio productions.

Postdramatic theatre is often accused of being confusing and disorientating for spectators because it appears consciously to confound accepted frames and conventions of perception. Maaike Bleeker's point of departure is a comparison drawn by Lehmann and others between drama and perspective in painting. Both adhere to tightly controlled aesthetic 'framing' that postdramatic theatre attempts to deconstruct by multiplying the frames that determine our perception. Bleeker asks if this account is really as straightforward as Lehmann suggests. By analysing several productions by the Dutch director Geraldjan Rijnder which literally expose the frames at work in theatre, Bleeker argues for a more complex of model of subjectivity.

Another field of experiment of postdramatic theatre is the search for material signs that seem to defy representation. Using examples of the appearance of animals on stage in recent work by the Italian group Societas Raffaello Sanzio and the Belgian director Jan Fabre, two of the best-known protagonists of the movement, Nicholas Ridout argues that when animals are coerced into the making of meaning in theatre, the unease which their appearance provokes can be seen as an uncomfortable reminder of the history of exploitation in the theatre and elsewhere. This is political theatre of a completely new kind.

Often accused of being apolitical and overly esoteric, postdramatic theatre does have a strong political emphasis as Nikolaus Müller-Schöll argues in his contribution. Lehmann describes postdramatic theatre as 'post-Brechtian' theatre, i.e. as a development that redefines the overly didactic understanding of politics on stage. Müller-Schöll distinguishes therefore between a 'political theatre' which still adheres to the dramatic paradigm, and theatre 'done in a political way'. The latter works to redefine the forms and mediality of theatre itself, in particular the function of the spectator: The radically interrogative nature of postdramatic theatre may offer a possibility or a 'potentiality' to create a new sense of community among spectators by illustrating a new sense of a shared medium.

Creating a sense of community, albeit an uncomfortable one, is the strategy followed by the German director Eva Diamantstein in her production *Nachtmahl* (*Supper*) analysed by Anja Klöck. Here spectators enjoy a five-course meal with four women who were associated in some way with the Nazi regime. This production is postdramatic in two ways. Firstly, the spatial arrangement and the act of eating together work on the principle of metonymic rather than metaphoric space. Instead of a clearly demarcated fictional and symbolic realm where the story is enacted (the proscenium stage) performance and spectatorial space are contiguous. Secondly, the production blurs temporal and ontological distinctions familiar from the dramatic paradigm. The women appear to be our contemporaries which is at odds with empirical chronology. Also, some performers are not even recognizable as performers. Are the waiters actors or waiters? The tramp in the foyer a real tramp?

As this is the first issue of a new three-year editorial period, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my predecessor Brian Singleton who negotiated the journal through a difficult transitional period. Thanks are also due to the contributing and book-review editors whose collective endeavours are crucial to maintaining the standards of a journal dedicated to representing theatre and theatre scholarship from an international perspective.

NOTES

- 1 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater: Essay* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999). For a French translation, see *Le théâtre postdramatique*, trans. by Philippe-Henri Ledru (Paris: l'Arche 2002). Translations into a number of other languages, including English, are in preparation.
- 2 Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 111.