

THE DRAMA OF DRAMA

I

If there is a drama of drama, it needs to be acted out in a soap-opera setting. Enter dramatis personae: History, Tragedy, Comedy, Romance, Pastoral, etc. Main character: History. Counter-character: Tragedy. Dramatic demand: Freedom. Question: Freedom for History to love or to rule? Classical conflict: History wants to marry Romance, but is prevented by Tragedy. This is the *exposition*: Act I. Now it is getting complicated: Act II. By their interactions, all the figures become interwoven like threads in an elegant knot (*complication*). Time for *peripeteia*:¹ Act III. History and Romance beg Pastoral to help them, together they make a plan, but all of a sudden History gets into a fight with a distant relative of Romance and kills him. Further complications: Act IV (*retardation*). History must escape, Pastoral has to change plans and gives Romance fake poison. The story comes to a climax and ends in *catastrophe* in the final act, Act V. History hears rumours about Romance's Death, enters the tomb, sees the body, commits *hara-kiri*. Body count, end of story: Tragedy. Alternative: History is not really dead, both wake up, everything was a mere interplay of confusions that is resolved by mass-marriage rather than massacre. Happy ending: Comedy. Two faces, one laughing and one crying: Drama. But today, Drama is History.... This analogy drawn from *The most lamentable tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* is not chosen arbitrarily. The Elizabethan Renaissance perceived the birth of European drama as the re-birth of humankind: no longer was it ruled by a transcendent power; it lived in a radically immanent world based solely on interpersonal relationships.

European drama starts and ends with Shakespeare, who is simultaneously at the centre and the margins of dramatic tradition. While drama was constituted as an absolute form – pure, primary and present, eliminating all other means (prologue, chorus, epilogue) – Shakespeare's use of these elements in his *Histories* contaminates them with older forms of theatre (*moralties*). There is a conflict between drama (as a classified form) and theatre (as a practice) that has existed since the beginnings of 'high drama' (1570–1580). The English Comedians were originally travelling people, like gypsies, but then the first public playhouses opened in London. Just outside the City, they attracted the masses, as did cock-fighting, bear-baiting and other blood sports: this was theatre as spectacle, bloody revenge-tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark* and other tragedies of blood, state and intrigue, domestic tragedies, and citizen's comedies, romantic comedies, comedies of humours and so forth. While a poetic system such as Sir Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poetry* (1583) was an attempt to upgrade the developing form of drama by classifying genres (*Heroick, Lyrick, Tragick, Comick, Satyrick, Iambick, Elegiack, Pastorell*), Shakespeare ridiculed them, putting these terms into the mouth of the chattering Polonius to announce the arrival of Hamlet's friends, the actors: 'The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral...' (II, 392–395). Shakespeare's rival and friend Ben Jonson praised and mocked him as 'nature's child' for not obeying the basic rules of drama, while Voltaire, an epigone of the French classicist age, called him a 'drunken barbarian'. The rediscovery of Shakespeare in Europe in the eighteenth century began as an insurrection against the hegemony of absolutist theatre in the French tradition. Paradoxically, it seems it is especially the irregularities and mistakes that made Shakespeare the primary reference for dramatic art in the following centuries. Three hundred years later, drama was getting into crisis, according to Peter Szondi's *Theory of the*

¹ Reversal of circumstances, turning point.

Modern Drama (1880–1950), first published in 1956, the year Bertolt Brecht died.² Drama itself, as a form, had become ‘problematic’. To dramatists such as Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, Maeterlinck and Hauptmann, these problems are technical ones pertaining to the creation of a form that unfolds only in the here-and-now, only focuses on interpersonal relationships through dialogues and monologues. Dramatists such as Wilder, Miller, O’Neill, Pirandello, Piscator, Bruckner or Brecht tried to solve the problems by experimenting with new techniques such as montage, *monolog intérieur*, political revue or ‘epic theatre’. A hundred years later this crisis has not been resolved, but the problem has disappeared, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann.³ There has been no final act, no tragic failure of a form, but instead an old norm had faded away. Postdramatic theatre starts as Act VI of the drama of drama....

II

Dramatic conflict: in truth there is no clash between different kinds of drama, but between the three forms or genres that all poetic systems are based on: epic, lyric and dramatic. From Aristotle’s *Poetics* until the correspondence between Goethe & Schiller, the most frequently discussed distinction was the one drawn between epic and dramatic poetry. While epic poets such as Homer tell their stories in manifold aspects, jumping back and forth in time, dramatists must concentrate on one main character and organise the action such that it unfolds along a single line from exposition to *peripeteia*, straight to catastrophe and *anagnorisis* (re-cognition, for example Oedipus: ‘I am the murder of my father!’) All explanations and digressions which hinder the flow of the dramatic action are to be abolished; drama is by definition a strict organisation of time in linear sequence. The plot, or *fable*, has to present a whole: a beginning, middle and end. Since Aristotle, drama means *mimesis praxeos*, the imitation (*Nachahmung*) of an action (*Handlung*); its effect is *catharsis*, a purging of fear. But Aristotle had tried to develop categories for describing the craft of Ancient Greek theatre makers, not a set of absolute rules. It is the fate of authoritarian logocentric Western culture that Aristotle’s loose and incomplete compilation of notes about epic and tragedy (the entire part on comedy was lost) were turned into a normative system after their rediscovery during the Italian Renaissance. Drama, after coming to life in Elizabethan England at the end of the sixteenth century, flourished in the classicist period in absolutist France until Voltaire’s death in 1778, and reached a final peak in Weimar classicism at the turn of that century with Goethe & Schiller. But after the failed revolution of 1848, the bourgeoisie lost its dramatic impetus. The nineteenth century saw a decline of drama in spite of the dramatists Büchner, Grabbe, Hebbel and Grillparzer. It was the time of *The Epigones* as a novel by Karl Immermann was titled, when a popular dramatist like Gustav Freytag wrote a handbook about *The Technique of Drama* and Otto Ludwig conducted intense Shakespeare studies. But the ‘great drama’ just did not appear; it was the century of the novel, from Balzac to Tolstoy. The emancipation of theatre from the norm of drama stems from the revolt against this *faux* tradition of merely ‘staging paper’ in times of restoration, and chauvinist celebration of the classical national canon. Postdramatic theatre – just a German idea? Not quite. Perhaps the old European dramatic tradition is connected to this German model, because Germany is a ‘belated nation’ (Helmuth Plessner) and the institution of theatre is also founded on a foul old compromise between feudalism and civic society. Around 1900, ‘literature theatre’ was attacked by a movement of ‘re-theatricalisation’, but in spite of all attempts to reform, the logocentric foundation was unaffected by the avant-garde. Authorship and script continued to dominate

² Szondi, Peter. *Theory of the Modern Drama*, translated and edited by M. Hays, foreword by J. Schulte-Sassen, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987.

³ Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, London and New York 2006.

over the *mis-en-scène*, theatre was thus seen as representing a reality *prior to* the act of representation rather than being produced *by* the act. In this sense, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century the nineteenth century is alive and kicking.

Subject matter (*Stoff*) and action: since Aristotle, the central issue for dramatists has been how to find the right subject matter to be transformed into tragedy. According to Goethe & Schiller, the plot, the action (*dran* in Greek, *Handlung* in German), must take place in a dramatic present and not as a story set in the epic past. The Weimar classicists were re-reading Aristotle to develop categories for a well-grounded distinction between epic and dramatic art (epic elements were prohibited because they served as agencies of narration). The rules of the classical unities of time, place and action, are grounded in the specific requirement that drama function without narration – it has to get by without explanations such as ‘Now we leave the conspirators in the forest and see what is going on in the castle.’ The correct choice of *Stoff* is fundamental to fulfilling the dramatic form, but besides that, the work of the dramatist will always be possible: the dramatic form is seen as an eternal, universal category – outside of history. This idea was challenged around 1800 when classical neo-Aristotelian poetics was overcome by idealist philosophy, culminating in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics. Hegel held these lectures several times without ever publishing them, just like Szondi, whose lectures about *Poetics and the Philosophy of History* would only be published after his suicide in 1971. Szondi’s aesthetics can be considered neo-Hegelian since it refrains from being a normative system or a handbook, but attempts to offer a model for the historical development of various art forms. The Hegelian *science of the spirit* describes a story of development from A to B and through AB and BA to C. According to this scheme of progress we reach higher grounds on a third level in a synthesis whereby A and B are gone but still present, eliminated as well as conserved and elevated (*Aufhebung* combines all three concepts). In the typical Hegelian approach to poetry during the nineteenth century, drama is the crowning glory on the evolution of poetic art. The theatre is the temple of fine arts, the heart of the nation, and dramatic art is the synthesis of the epic narration of tales to be told (the rise and fall, the love and death, of kings, queens and citizens) and the lyrical outburst of the soul (poetry as melody of the heart). The epic (objectivity, outer-world events, history or mythology, heroes or gods) is the *thesis*, lyrical poetry is the *antithesis* (subjectivity, inner self) and the *synthesis* is drama in which outer events are executed before our eyes: we witness the collision of characters and the values they stand for, while we hear them reflect on and react to each other. Drama is dialectical by nature, it is a synthesis of epic and lyric tendencies, but also of inter-character conflicts resolved in the final act. Drama is the model for a process based on conflict, collision and resolution on a higher level: *Versöhnung* (reconciliation). This model is teleological, which explains the affinity of poetics and the philosophy of history: Marx put Hegel’s idealist dialectics on materialist feet by retelling world history as a drama between oppressor and oppressed that will be resolved in a classless society. Thus, the proletarian revolution is the final act in the drama of humankind. For Szondi, the dialectical correlation between content and form is the driving factor of the development of modern drama. Consequently, a change in content can put the form in question. In all his studies Szondi shows how forms have a history, how drama develops, enters into crisis, cracks, breaks into pieces. . . . *Stücke*, pieces, is the common German word for ‘plays’. Brecht referred to himself not as a dramatist or poet but as a *Stückeschreiber*, a writer of pieces. Wrapped in this self-description is a rejection of the central Aristotelian demand on dramatists to represent a ‘whole’, a totality. Brecht’s theory and practice as a young dramatist violated all basic Aristotelian assumptions of imitation, empathy and *synopton* (overview). But after the return of the Brecht family from exile, his work at the Berlin Ensemble in the GDR became more representational, providing a ‘whole’ picture onstage, one that was once again suitable for the old *Guckkastenbühne* (looking-box stage).

Brecht had only limited opportunities in East Germany, and he never realised his idea of creating mobile ‘theatre squads’ to enact problems encountered by the new socialist society. Szondi’s reference to Brecht is based on his work within the dramatic tradition, not on his *theatre in performance*. Brecht wanted his pieces to be like dynamite in the bourgeois theatres blowing up the ‘dramatic apparatus’ just as the free flow of labour and uninhibited productivity were to explode the circumstances of production in capitalism. To Brecht ‘theatre’ always meant ‘production’, living labour. Only when the corpus of Brecht’s texts is read as ‘performance writings’ (Tim Etchells) can they again be put to practice – against the resistance of dramaturges and philologists, against the German tradition of plaster and paper. He differed from his heirs and epigones in that he insisted on theatre being *performance* rather than *dramatic literature*: a ‘piece’ was not finished until it had been tested in practice. Instead, the post-Brecht dominance of dramaturgy in the *Epigonentheater* suffocated live production, an all too German problem – crisis: Act III. While in Szondi’s view the synthesis is achieved by Brecht’s epic theatre, which solved the problems of drama (in later studies he also observed the development of a lyric drama), in postdramatic theatre the certainty of reconciliation is lost. *Now we leave the theatre and see what is going on in the streets.*

III

The breaking up (*Aufbrüche*), or opening up, of theatre into text and situation, a *Leitmotiv* of Lehmann’s studies,⁴ is linked to the arrival of Brecht’s theatre in the 1920s, but departs from the orthodox reading and practice that had developed in the following fifty years. Brecht’s awareness of the fragmentation of drama, of plays breaking into pieces, was constitutive for his attempt to develop a non-Aristotelian dramaturgy, because in his work he tried to grasp the new *Stoffe*, the raw material of twentieth-century reality: oil, inflation, wars, social struggles, religion, the wheat exchange and trade in slaughterhouse animals. The new material breaks the old form open from the inside; the fight for oil-prices ‘resists the fifth act’ said Brecht. The Shakespearean tradition, the high drama of great individuals whose great passions get them into trouble (they cause them to commit great crimes or do silly things, about which they speak at great length), is discredited as ‘culinary’, cannibalistic theatre. The audience wants to identify with Romeo, Othello, Hamlet and Lear, to feel the passion, love, envy and loathing of a Shakespearean character, like emotional parasites. The *catharsis* became opium for a decadent class, the theatres were like drug dealers, selling an evening’s entertainment. In a radical shift, theatre was to acquire an entirely new function within a network of interactive media institutes. Brecht’s pieces no longer depended on development of events and situations which culminated in a clash between fictional characters, but instead functioned as narrated events that were shown rather than acted out for a cold-blooded audience indifferently smoking their cigars and thinking themselves ‘the audience of the scientific age’. Their main capacity is a philosophical one: *thaumazein*, Greek for ‘to wonder’ – to wonder about what is going on. Realism is not the photography of reality – for what does a photo of IG Farben say about IG Farben? Rather, it is a representation of reality alienated (*verfremdet*) in such a way, that the reality onstage no longer resembles normality: ‘Behind the usual, recognise the abuse’ (*‘Hinter dem Brauch erkennt den Mißbrauch.’*) – the exception and the rule. Brecht called for a theatre in which utilitarian and hedonistic aspects are inseparable, which activates rather than pacifies. ‘Don’t stare so romantically!’ was said a sign over his stage, to confront the visitors with their dull expectations. Brecht wanted to break the spell that hypnotises audiences; modern cinema audiences, for example. The auditorium was also brightly lit. Brecht coined the German expression: *‘bis zur Kenntlichkeit verändert’* by altering the expression ‘changed beyond recognition’ into ‘made recognisable by change’. Accordingly,

⁴ Primavesi, Patrick and Olaf Schmitt (eds.). *Aufbrüche. Theater zwischen Text und Situation. Festschrift* presented to Hans-Thies Lehmann on the occasion of his 60th birthday, Theater der Zeit, Berlin 2004.

the stage was changed until it was recognisable as a stage, as an artistic and artificial space, not a naturalistic setting. Brecht's famous V-effect as A-effect: recognisability through alienation. Thus actors act out the parts of actors: 'I play Mack the Knife....' The text was quoted rather than enacted, precluding emotional identification, *Einfühlung*. Brecht demanded *Ausführung* from his actors, that is to 'get out of the character' in order to show it – and to show that this showing is taking place: to expose the quotation marks. Thus the shortest formula of epic theatre for Brecht was 'to make gestures quotable'.⁵ A precondition therefore was the *interruption* of the action. The actors no longer delivered speeches as dialogues or monologues, but turned to the audience to address them directly – *ad spectatores*. This turn towards the audience was already known from Shakespeare's aside speeches, which in turn derived from the vice figures of popular pre-Elizabethan theatre,⁶ but here the dialogue was no longer limited to the characters, but were opened up for communication with the audience: the invisible 'fourth wall', behind which the actors acted as if they were onscreen, was suddenly ripped open. This break with basic theatre convention was as much a taboo as talking straight to camera in today's mainstream movies. For theatre audiences between 1924 and 1933 it was as if a two-dimensional actor had stepped out of the screen and become three-dimensional. Drama died with the end of the illusion that it was being played in a separate reality; it died upon the rediscovery of theatre – *theatron* – and interaction with the audience. This is not the *peripeteia* of the drama of drama, but the point of departure for new forms of theatre at the moment of negation of drama, radicalised in Brecht's form experiments of the *Lehrstücke* (teaching plays) in the early 1930s. The 'teaching plays' (a term that Brecht translated into 'learning plays') do not teach the audience, for it is the performers who learn – by performing. The audience is only invited when useful for the performers. The gap between Grotowsky's work and Brecht is not as wide as certain orthodox Brechtians (and the corresponding orthodox anti-Brechtians) would have us believe! Early twenty-first century theatre will overcome such divisions. It already started to mix Brecht and Beckett in 2006, the year constellations collided: Beckett's 100th birthday and Brecht's 50th deathday – *where extremes meet*, the shortest formula of theatre in the postdramatic condition.⁷ 'There is no lack of void', Vladimir says to Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*.⁸

In the 1920s, Brecht undermined the norms of drama by emancipating his pieces from the interaction of character/action/situation onstage, by treating *theatre as a situation*, as a place of communication and interaction with the visitors. No longer interested in 'characters', Brecht was looking for 'historical types' such as Lenin or the deserter Johann Fatzer. His best plays of the 1920s, for example *Mann ist Mann*, demonstrate the destruction of normal individuality. But at the same time he also uses dramatic characters like Schiller's Joan of Arc to tell a tale about the international slaughterhouse market and the wheat exchange. BB considered the drama usable; it had good 'material value'. It is not Joan Dark's heroic failure that is of interest, but her sacrifice, the process of being sacrificed and victimised (*Opfer* covers both meanings). Accordingly the audience should not mourn with Mother Courage, but learn the lesson that she does not: war is the extension of business, but only of big business, not of small people's businesses. It has often been remarked that Brecht failed in this endeavour, because his most famous piece became a modern-day tragedy. When it was performed in East Berlin in 1948 the audience was deeply moved, *erschüttert*, shaken to the

⁵ See the memoirs of his co-worker Elisabeth Hauptmann in 'Notizen über Brechts Arbeit', in Hubert Witt (ed.) *Erinnerungen an Brecht*, Reclam, Leipzig 1964, p. 52.

⁶ Weimann, Robert. *Shakespeare and the Popular Theater Tradition: A Study in the Social Impact of Dramatic Form and Function*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore Berlin 1987.

⁷ See especially Hans-Thies Lehmann, et al., 'brecht & beckett in theatre I', pp. 43–64, in Antony Tatlow (ed.), *Where Extremes Meet: Rereading Brecht and Beckett*, The Brecht Yearbook, vol. 27, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2002.

⁸ Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1971, p. 162.

core. The 1954 Paris tour of the Berlin Ensemble with *Mother Courage* likewise had a major impact on the French intellectual scene. Guy Debord felt inspired to write his analysis of the *society of spectacle* and Roland Barthes refused to watch any other form of theatre that lacked the clarity of Brecht: 'I used to love go to the theatre, but nowadays I hardly ever go there....'⁹ The two revolutionary elements are connected: *the showing of the showing* and the activation of the audience. These impulses remain vital to this day. Other elements of Brecht's theory have turned into a new dogma of 'realistic theatre'. According to Szondi, Brecht revolutionised the dramatic form; according to Lehmann he rescued it. Einar Schleef called it an attempt to 'reform', in contrast to his own work, which tried to reach back to the Ancient chorus, the tragedies before Shakespeare.¹⁰ As Lehmann stated in his book about the discourse of Ancient Greek theatre, there is more than *Wahlverwandtschaft* (affinity of choice) between pre-dramatic tragedy and postdramatic forms of theatre.¹¹ The dominance of European drama was a 400-year-long interruption: exit drama, re-enter tragedy....

IV

Postdramatic theatre is also post-epic: in his studies on 'the other Brecht' Lehmann shows how Brecht manages a last-minute rescue of the dramatic form.¹² Brecht's project of a non-Aristotelian dramaturgy remained Aristotelian in its insistence on the *fable*, the plot, as 'the soul of the play' as Brecht quoted from Aristotle's 'excellent' *Poetics*.¹³ Ultimately, the old authorial *logos* took hold in BB's production. But put to practice, texts get the chance to break free, are liberated from the haunting ghost of the author: Heiner Müller called his last piece *Germania 3: Ghosts around dead man (Gespenster am toten Mann)*. Dead man walking: BB at the BE (Berliner Ensemble). Today, ten years after his death, there are hundreds of 'Heiners' onstage. In Germany, the 'death of the author' (Barthes) still means the experience of the loss of a master writer, not the call to deconstruct the national canon. The dream of a national theatre in the tradition of Lessing and Schiller is still strong in a country accustomed to using theatre to compensate for failed revolutions and repressed freedom. So the lack of a tradition of a national theatre implies opportunities: freedom from abusing theatre as *Ersatz* for the revolutionary tribune or the democratic podium as well as freedom to play with the pieces – as the works with German repertoire in Belgium and the Netherlands show. According to Heiner Müller, texts must resist theatre. His writings undermine the logocentric foundation of Brecht's dramaturgy and transgress the boundaries of genre, gender and sense. Texts such as *Bildbeschreibung (Description of a Picture)* unfold a wild imagery in one monstrous sentence, an 'explosion of a memory in a dead dramatic structure'.¹⁴ More recent texts by Elfriede Jelinek, Rainald Goetz, Werner Schwab and René Pollesch can only be described as 'no longer dramatic theatre texts' (Gerda Poschmann). Postdramatic texts mark the shift from *logos* – not just from the word, but from the idea of causal logic, hierarchical order, *telos* – to a textual landscape.¹⁵ These new pieces are no longer dramas, they are written as scenographies rather than scripts, material not for role-play, but for a theatre beyond

⁹ Barthes, Roland. 'Ich habe das Theater immer sehr geliebt, und dennoch gehe ich fast nie mehr hin', in *Schriften zum Theater*, Jean-Loup Rivièrè (ed.), Alexander, Berlin 2001.

¹⁰ Schleef, Einar. *Droge Faust Parsifal*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1998.

¹¹ Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Theater und Mythos. Die Konstitution des Subjekts im Diskurs der antiken Tragödie*. Metzler, Stuttgart 1991, p. 2.

¹² Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 'Der andere Brecht', in 'Das Politische Schreiben' in Lehmann, et al.(eds.), *Das Brecht Jahrbuch*, Lehmann, Berlin 2004, pp. 207–281. See especially 'Fabel-Haft', pp. 219–237.

¹³ Brecht, Bertolt. *Über experimentelles Theater*, Werke, vol. 22.1, Schriften 2, pt. 1, Suhrkamp and Aufbau, Berlin and Frankfurt, 1993, pp. 540–557.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 'From logos to landscape', in *Performance Research*, vol. 2 (1), Routledge, London and New York 1997, pp. 55–60.

individual characters. By refusing to function in the medium of speech and counter-speech, the texts negate the fundamental feature of drama according to Szondi: ‘Drama is possible only when dialogue is possible.’¹⁶ So Szondi’s neo-Hegelian theory must be used to go beyond Brecht: Heiner Müller explains the development of a post-Brechtian theatre by exploring the technical problem of formulating dialogues in that time. *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977) can be read as the author’s farewell to the Brechtian idea of ‘learning plays’. When the actor playing Hamlet says that he is no longer playing a role, this means he wants to stop acting, but also that his fate as Hamlet has become irrelevant. Müller was using Shakespeare’s irregular dramaturgy as an antidote to Brecht’s overly calculated later plays. Hamlet’s monologues become the expression of the dawn of an era whose beginning they witnessed in Elizabethan England at the end of the sixteenth century: ‘The time is out of joint’ (I, V, 196) refers to both historical and dramatic time. The end of speaking characters onstage does not mark the ‘end of history’ as proclaimed in the 1980s, but the end of the prehistory of the modern global capitalist system. There is no postdramatic theatre without postcolonial theatre, as demonstrated in Müller’s *Der Auftrag* (*The Task*). When history no longer develops dialectically, drama is no longer possible – the drama of white Western culture. Modern European drama is the drama of modern Europe, of its colonial adventures on the way to global EMPIRE (Negri & Hardt). The first act of *The Hamletmachine* describes the landscape of the postdramatic theatre ‘*Im Rücken die Ruinen von Europa...*’ (‘Behind the ruins of Europe.’)

BRECHTBLOCK: the drama of drama ends with Brecht, but besides Brecht there is another line of theatre connected to Artaud, Kantor, Grotowsky & Co., which is blocked or blinded by Brecht’s authority, contends Lehmann.¹⁷ Groups such as the Living Theatre, other New York avant-garde groups including the Wooster Group, Richard Foreman and his Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, the early performances of Robert Wilson¹⁸ and the Flemish wave (Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers and the Needcompany) cannot be described using the terminology of Brecht’s dramaturgy of *Grundgestus* (founding gesture). For this we need the radical language of Artaud and his call for a ‘theatre of cruelty’, physical rather than psychological theatre. In their didactic intentions, the sensual, formalist performances of Carmelo Bene’s Shakespeare pieces in Paris, as described by Gilles Deleuze,¹⁹ contrast with Brecht’s work. Bene’s work was not representational, but hybrid and fluid. By destruction and repetition of the original text the figures start to change, transmute into perverse polymorphous rites instead of embodying a ‘character’ or representing a ‘type’. While French intellectuals such as Lacan and Deleuze celebrated Bene, the enemies of the stage from the right to the (dogmatic) left condemned its decadence and decay. Postdramatic theatre appears highly formalist, cosmopolitan, absurd and surreal *as-you-like-it* postmodernism; it is the theatre after the debate about realism, which was dominated by categories of content, message, *Aussage*.²⁰ Instead the term *Anrede*, addressing, has inspired development towards a theatre of performers rather than actors, of theatre as a gathering; instead of a representation of reality. Performances are presentations of heterogeneous elements such as bodies, gestures, sounds, words and lights, thus radicalising Brecht’s central idea of the ‘separation of elements’.

¹⁶ Szondi, Peter. *Theory of the Modern Drama*, translated and edited by M. Hays, foreword by J. Schulte-Sassen, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987, p. 10.

¹⁷ Lehmann, Hans-Thies. ‘Brechtblock’, in *The Drama Review* 43, 4 (T164), MIT Press, 1999, New York, pp. 50–52.

¹⁸ For a description of the more recent New York theatre scene, see the introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby in Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*, Routledge, London and New York 2006, pp. 1–15.

¹⁹ Deleuze, Gilles. ‘Ein Manifest weniger’, in *Kleine Schriften*, Merve, Berlin 1980.

²⁰ See Hans-Thies Lehmann. *Beiträge zu einer materialistischen Theorie der Literatur*, Ullstein, Frankfurt 1977; and Hans-Thies Lehmann, ‘How political is the postdramatic theatre?’, in Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben*, Theater der Zeit, Berlin 2002, pp. 11–21.

Postdramatic theatre is a theatre of pleasures, the *pleasures of the text* (Roland Barthes). It should be both decadent and committed to a progressive course, lyrical and epic, distant, but also **culinary**, no longer fable-based, but deeply connected to texts, absolutely formalistic and entirely unpretentious at the same time. Instead of illusion, mimesis and action (*dran*), postdramatic theatre follows the logic of a dream. It endeavours to liberate the body from prescribed roles – it sees the scene as a place to dance outside of time and space: ‘impossible theatre’. There is no Act V in the drama of drama, no final failure, but only the process of failing and trying, again and again, like in theatre; not a scene filled with blood and slain corpses, rather a collective polysexual organism as in the performances of the Living Theatre. ‘Pick up the bodies,’ as Fortinbras said after arriving on the horrific scene in Helsingör at the end of *Hamlet*; ‘Make Love Not War’ practiced publicly onstage and in the streets by the Living Theatre – Apocalypse or Paradise Now? ‘There! Not a soul in sight! Off you go. Quick!’ *Vladimir pushes Estragon towards auditorium.*²¹

After V

Coming soon to a theatre near you...

The caesura of the ‘post’ prefix described in Lehmann’s study came between 1970 and 1980 when theatre productions became more performance-like, and were organised on a project basis as a theatrical process rather than as an execution of a dramaturgical plan. In this respect it implies a radical break with the German model of the *Stadt- und Staatstheater* (municipal or civic/ state theatre) in its function of institutionalising dramatic theatre in accordance with the idea of *Werktreue* (loyalty to the canonical work or the intention of the author). In Germany, collective work could only take place outside the traditional apparatus characterised by a fixed hierarchy (from *Intendant* to *Regisseur*). An independent repertory group such as Maatschappij Discordia could not have developed its work in Germany; it was only possible under the flexible circumstances of production in the Netherlands and Belgium whereby houses and groups are funded (independently from one another) by a four-year *Kunstenplan*. Although Discordia has a strong connection with literature and theatre from German-speaking cultures (Heiner Müller, Peter Handke, Botho Strauß, Thomas Bernhard), their working method is completely different from the German or Austrian tradition of ensembles subordinated to a house. The decision to work without directors is more an echo of the working structure of the pre-bourgeois theatre of travelling Comedians in Shakespeare’s time than a reaction to the specialised division of labour in the civic/state theatre system. Shakespeare was himself an actor; for the actor to become emancipated from the author (and thus from the director in his role as author’s mediator) another action is required, such as the *Actie Tomaat* in the Netherlands in 1969 when members of the audience threw rotten tomatoes at the stage during a performance of the Hollandse Comedie. Theatre, according to Brecht, is collective process *per se*, a model of cooperation & collaboration. Instead of using the author as icon, the script corpus as a closed entity, groups such as Discordia experiment with a collective dramaturgy opposed to the function of the dramaturge as the director’s intermediary: ‘Dramaturgy is about connections. In his most authoritarian guise the director is usually seen as a general. The dramaturge is then the ‘liaison officer’ with contacts everywhere, including the secret services.’²² This allusion to the military in Jan Joris Lamers’ description is echoed in Discordia’s tactic of operating like a mobile guerrilla squad on theatre’s rough terrain, always rearranging forces, forming new alliances with other groups; with Stan and Dito Dito in the temporary group De Vere, or with special events such as De Republiek. By practice, the model of collective dramaturgy abolishes the whole system of

²¹ Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*, Grove Press, New York 1954 p. 182.

²² ‘Jan Joris Lamers: A continuing dialogue’, an interview conducted by Marianne Van Kerkhoven and Elske van de Hulst on 22 September 1993 in Amsterdam, published in *Theaterschrift*, 5–6, Brussels 1994, see p. 284.

mediations, and opens the way for a living theatre beyond the culture of representation. In a unique way, independent producers and their self-determined working methods have created a new generation of theatre makers in the Netherlands and Belgium (Johan Simons and the now defunct group ZT Hollandia, and Stan, Dood Paard, 't Barre Land and De Rovers) that work with flexible repertoire and a mix of genres. The basic difference between the *Stadttheaterbetrieb* and the Belgian–Dutch model of independent production is the extent to which actors (and sometimes directors) can choose one another. As the story of Discordia & Co. shows, it is the working conditions, the circumstances of production, that bring forth or obstruct new forms of theatre! The German *Stadttheater* represents the culture of representation, while groups like Discordia, The Living Theatre and Forced Entertainment present a counter-example of a culture of production. Politics of production means fighting for your means, according to Brecht, and this is as true as ever in times such as these when a pioneering group like Discordia is kicked out of the *Kunstenplan* by the cultural bureaucracy. In the seventeenth century the municipality of London closed the theatres, ending the most fruitful period of drama production, of flowering private theatrical enterprises, known in modern history. To paraphrase the feelings Goethe expressed when he finally resigned as director in Weimar: in the end, the enemies of the theatre will always win! The concept of 'state theatre' is a contradiction in terms. For although the political system of representative democracy will always need theatre as a fixed location for and of representation, bureaucrats fear the free production process of independent theatre making, because it leads to active anticipation of a cooperative culture that opposes competitive corporate culture. This manifested itself as communism in the case of Brecht, Benjamin and Tretjakov, and love & anarchy in the case of The Living Theatre. Brecht saw in East and West only the agents of anti-production; the enemies of free labour. The struggle of literature had become murderous during his time in exile (Brecht's friend and translator Sergej Tretjakov was killed in the Soviet Union under Stalin, as was the world-famous Wsewolod Meyerhold). After Brecht's return to East Germany, his Berlin Ensemble became an *Ersatz* for a socialist national theatre, not an institute for scientific scandalisation, as he had hoped. Only when we strive for theatre freed from the function of representation will we have a living theatre. The system of civic/state theatres is part of the *society of spectacle*, a factory producing for the cultural industry. This system's greatest illusion is that theatre is always possible. But theatre is the exception, not the rule; a strike, not the fulfilment of a labour task. *Stop!*

VI

Forwards, back to the theatre!

The emancipation of theatre from drama must be seen as an opening, not an ending. Although postdramatic forms of theatre want to liberate theatre from literature and science, they are not hostile towards texts; they become a 'scene of language – theatre as site of literature' (Theresia Birkenhauer). This is demonstrated by the work of Heiner Müller who, as a director, was convinced that the time for text in theatre was yet to come.²³ 'Speak the speech, I pray you,' said Müller in the words of Hamlet, staging *Hamletmachine* at the Deutsche Theater in autumn 1989, 'not as actors, but like robots.' The words had to be spoken as if they were written in a foreign language. Brecht's V-effect becomes a B-effect: alienation in the sense of *Befremdung*, estrangement, rather than *Verfremdung*, changed, unfamiliar appearance; Kafka's world that Brecht tried to ignore. Here the gestures have no clear references, they are alien rather than alienated (Müller). Brecht's pieces could have great 'material value' in the theatre after drama if they could only be torn to pieces to come to life again and be celebrated by ghostly workers, as envisioned by Brecht in his working journals. This potential is

²³ Birkenhauer, Theresia. *Schauplatz der Sprache – das Theater als Ort der Literatur*, Vorwerk8, Berlin 2005.

exemplified by site-specific durational performances by Josef Szeiler and Angelus Novus, Claudia Bosse and Theaterkombinat in Vienna, and Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Fatzer* project at the IG Farben Haus in Frankfurt.²⁴ Postdramatic theatre is the deconstruction of drama *in practice*. The Wooster Group dismembers canonical dramatic texts such as Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* in their piece *Brace Up!* And their recent production of *Hamlet* copies the Broadway performance with Richard Burton (1964). See also the six Shakespeare productions by Jan Lauwers' Needcompany or Forced Entertainment's use of traditions such as the Shakespearean world theatre that place the plays and themselves in quotation marks.²⁵ In contrast to the absolute, primary form of classical drama described by Szondi, the hybrid, secondary nature of these plays (their capacity to quote freely from different plays and periods) provides them with the opportunity to simultaneously connect and disconnect texts. It is an unprecedented *theatre of texts*, playing with genres and forms. It is 'play' in the senses of both game and gamble. Accordingly Müller made a note in his transcripts for *The Hamletmachine*: 'End of drama – start of game.'²⁶

Postdramatic forms of theatre are not less interested in people and stories. On the contrary. In 2000 the performer and archaeologist Mike Pearson left the theatre building to go to the countryside – to return to the landscape of his memory and perform as a storyteller in his Welsh hometown. He developed a performance of storytelling that had no relation to fictional characters. 'For me,' he writes, 'dramas need no longer be restricted to their dialogue. The monologue of a storyteller can exhibit different forms of 'dialogue', a high degree of intertextuality, of dialogue between texts.'²⁷ The dialogue between listener and teller, between place and action, text and landscape, replaces the dialogue between actors onstage. Postdramatic theatre is polylogical, intertextual and transgressive. It is about communication – sometimes even communion – of genres, forms, texts, bodies, voices, lights, sounds....

Rollbacks happen all the time. 'Progress doesn't mean *having* progressed,' said Brecht, 'but *progressing*'. In Avignon 2004 Jan Lauwers felt that the postdramatic avant-garde occupied the big stages, while the fringe had turned into a site for traditional theatre. The division between indie underground and established theatre has never aided the debate: works by Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, The Wooster Group et al. could only be realised in an international network formed by co-producers like Mickery (Amsterdam), Kaaitheater (Brussels), Hebbel (Berlin) and TAT (Theater am Turm, Frankfurt) which had financial resources comparable to a large *Stadttheater*. At the same time, the TAT provided newcomers like Stefan Pucher & René Pollesch with a separate stage at the OFF-TAT. Post-postdramatic forms do exist, see for example how the formalism of the 1980s was challenged in the 1990s by pop-culture-conscious and discourse-based forms of theatre that developed outside acting and directing schools, in the context of the universities such as the Institute of Applied Theatre-Science in Giessen that Lehmann built up with Andrzej Wirth in the 1980s and later at the Institute of Theatre, Film and Media Science at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. Stefan Pucher's early pop pieces and René Pollesch's serials (*Heidi Hoh*, *World Wide Slums* and *City as Booty* to name but a few),²⁸ which are inspired by Andy Warhol and John Jesurun rather than by Frisch

²⁴ Karschnia, Alexander, Nicola Nord & Co. 'BRECHTBEATZ', in Patrick Primavesi and Olaf A. Schmitt (eds.), *Aufbrüche. Theater zwischen Text und Situation*, Theater der Zeit, Berlin 2004, pp. 208-214.

²⁵ Lehmann Hans-Thies: 'Shakespeare's Grin. Remarks on World Theatre with Forced Entertainment', in: Judith Helmer and Florian Malzacher, *Not Even a Game Anymore. The Theatre of Forced Entertainment*, Alexander-Verlag, Berlin 2004, pp. 103-120.

²⁶ Archiv Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Nachlass Heiner Müller 3899/11.

²⁷ Pearson, Mike. 'Bubbling Tom', in Adrian Heathfield (ed.), *Small Acts: Performance, the Millennium and the Marking of Time*, Black Dog, London 2002, see p. 175.

²⁸ Karschnia, Alexander. 'Stadttheater als Beute: René Pollesch Resistenz-POP. Spoken Words', in Hajo Kurzenberger and Annemarie Matzke (eds.), *TheorieTheaterPraxis*, Theater der Zeit, Berlin 2004, pp. 183-191. See also the interview with René Pollesch by Florian Malzacher, 'Wir sind ja oft so glücklich, wenn wir

and Dürrenmatt, have a ‘hidden formalist agenda’. Neither performance art nor well-made plays, these productions function outside of the dichotomies of epic vs. dramatic, formalist vs. realist, absurd vs. political. It is a new game now. And rather than presenting the world’s problems as solvable, as the older Brecht demanded, these works follow along the lines of the young Brecht’s insight that it is the act of representation itself that has become problematic – and it shows. As a member of Forced Entertainment said: ‘Somewhere after Marx, Brecht, and Structuralism, performance has often strapped its conception and articulation of politics to the exposure and examination of exactly these traces – labour, attempt, failure, versions – all of which are presented side by side or in dialogue with the ‘image’ conjured in a work. Certainly, many Forced Entertainment performances are built on the interplay between an image or a text on the one hand and the exposure of the (rhetorical, theatrical, linguistic) mechanisms necessary for producing it on the other. Labour and process here remain, quite deliberately, in view – undeleted.’²⁹ Pollesch developed his unique de-subjugated speech style with those fellow students who wanted to make theatre without putting themselves through the classical actor’s training. Others formed groups such as Gob Squad, She She Pop, Showcase Beat le Mot from Giessen, and frankfurter küche (FK), andcompany&Co. and red park from Frankfurt. They see theatre as an opportunity to do something together.³⁰ As Tim Etchells said about the beginnings of Forced Entertainment in Exeter in 1984: ‘We were a group of friends who somehow convinced ourselves that we would be able to make some things together. At the beginning, we were still students, and, in various combinations, we worked together and began to make things. Then, once we finished our studies, we started the company properly. But more than anything, at that point it was an idea or an inclination that we could perhaps make something together.’³¹ In a culture of specialised labour, this naïve wish is a radical political statement. It is about the cooperation & collaboration of performers, DJs, musicians, technicians – and ‘certain fragments’ of sounds, lights, words....

THEATERTOD (death of theatre): Ritsaert ten Cate closed down the Mickery Theatre on 31 July 1991 to have an honourable conclusion to its 25 years as one of the most important international production units, but when the TAT finally died on 31 May 2004 it was the consequence of a long and painful illness – LAST EXIT TAT. My group andcompany&Co. were in residency for the TAT’s final season under the title *Why only now?* And we were thus able to witness the sinking ship at the moment it went down. ‘*Das TAT ist tot – lang lebe das TAT!*’ (‘The TAT is dead – long live the TAT!’) As an act of protest we put a black flag with white quotation marks on the roof, transforming the TAT into the *ZITAT*, quote theatre unquote. Because what is put in quotes is waiting, waiting for revenge.... If politicians continue to close theatres, the time will come again for us to return from the off-spaces to the theatres, to squat them like Julian Beck & Judith Malina in Paris in May 1968, to defend them against neo-liberal deregulation. Today, high culture is no longer a protected resort, so it is time to re-enter the houses like the ghost in the first act of *Hamlet*. The urge to move forward did not die with the old idea of an avant-garde, but it is a movement back and forth, out of and back to the houses, just like the Living Theatre did.³² After the authorities had closed all the Living Theatre’s venues the group became a nomadic touring ensemble until its return to the theatre in the 1980s. And in 2007 they finally open a new home in New York City, and in so

überhaupt Reaktionen bekommen’, in Leonore Blievernich (ed.) *ZELTSAGA René Polleschs Theater 2003/2004*, Synwolt, Berlin 2004, pp. 180–187.

²⁹ Interview with members of Forced Entertainment in *Variant*, vol. 5, 1998.
http://www.variant.randomstate.org/5texts/Michelle_McGuire.html

³⁰ Nord, Nicola. ‘Making theatre is a promise to do something together’, in
http://www.dasarts.nl/dodge/dasarts_digitaldodge25.pdf, p. 16f.

³¹ <http://new-art.blogspot.com/2006/07/interview-with-tim-etchells-from.html>

³² See Patrick Primavesi. ‘Orte und Strategien postdramatischer Theaterformen’, in Heinz Ludwig Arnold, (ed.), *TEXT + KRITIK: Theater fürs 21. Jahrhundert*, pp. 8–25.

doing they fulfil their mission to ‘move from the theatres to the street / and from the street to the theatre.’³³

Another interesting example is *Carrying Lyn* by Mike Brookes & Mike Pearson in 2001, in which a group of men carried the disabled, transsexual performer Lyn Levett across the centre of the city – twice – rendering the city *uncanny*. A question arises: where is the theatre? ‘Is it the practice of performance or of documentation or the presentation of the documentation of the performance?’³⁴ The distinction between ‘pre-’ and ‘post-’ phenomena becomes blurred in this work, just as performance itself has become a *set of deterritorialised practices*. This also highlights the fact that the reason theatre is changing so rapidly is not only the onset of the information society at the end of the 1970s, but also the shift from a Fordist to a Postfordist regime of production.³⁵ The luxury to work solely as an artist, actor or director, is being undermined by changes in the economy. The necessity for most practitioners to make a living with side jobs is a flawed solution to the old problem that artists work in splendid isolation from the rest of society. ‘The theatre of the future will only begin when this separation has come to an end,’ said Brecht, ‘and artists do their work among many other things.’ Today, most practitioners of postdramatic forms of theatre experience this situation as dystopic, as the bare necessities for survival in the late capitalist period. But it is also an anticipation of another culture of work, a self-determined culture of cooperation & collaboration, described by Robin Arthur of Forced Entertainment as a ‘pragmatic socialism’ that derives from the work – and the process of working – itself: ‘The work always dictates its own politics rather than politics dictating the work.’³⁶ Here, the ‘post’ prefix formulates a connection similar to that described by the post-feminism of Judith Butler, which does not seek to abolish other forms of feminist activities, but rather to correct a course by ‘pointing at the fundamentalist foundation of the practical discourse, shifting and subverting its structuring dichotomies instead of destroying them’.³⁷ Accordingly, it is not about site-specific performance vs. rehearsed acting, state theatre vs. ‘free scene’, nor the destruction of the boundary between performer and visitor, stage and auditorium, but it *is* about the undermining of these distinctions: theatre after the end of drama, history, humanism, the Western canon, the Gutenberg-galaxy and colonial occidental phallogocentric civilisation – progression as transgression, making the petrified conditions dance: TRANS-THEATRE EXPRESS.

³³ See the homepage of The Living Theatre: www.livingtheatre.org. See also RESIST! (director Dirk Szuszies; Best European Documentary Film, 2003 Europa Cinema Festival). See also www.karinkaper.com.

³⁴ Pearson, Mike. ‘Where is the theatre?’, in Patrick Primavesi and Olaf A. Schmitt (eds), *AufBrüche. Theater zwischen Text und Situation*, Theater der Zeit, Berlin 2004

³⁵ Karschnia, Alexander. ‘Theat:Re:Search’, in Maaïke Bleeker, et al. (eds.), *Theater Topics 2: De Theatermaker als onderzoeker*. Amsterdam University Press Amsterdam 2006, pp. 145–146.

³⁶ Interview with members of Forced Entertainment in *Variant*, vol. 5, spring 1998.

³⁷ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London and New York 1990.