

Book Review

The Contemporary Political Play by Sarah Grochala (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)

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Dramatist and critic Sarah Grochala's *The Contemporary Political Play* confirms by way of conclusion some of the shortcomings of a too-fixed political theory of the theatre. Grochala's formalist, dramaturgical aspirations regarding what political theatre is does not regard a genre of dramatic or postdramatic writing for performance, but rather a changing theory of it. Case studies involve instances where new dramaturgical strategies for making theatre of political consequence have emerged in our contemporary moment. Grochala joins a school of theatre and performance thought that theatre is political when it challenges how audiences confront spectacle and spectacle-making. Don't misunderstand the title, though. However general and theoretical the book might sound, the survey of plays substantiating Grochala's dramaturgical analyses is limited to the British Isles and does not extend beyond the English Channel, nor the Irish Sea for that matter. That choice behoves that the author assemble from the specificities of their context a case for that context's influence upon the general category of "the contemporary political play". The question of Grochala's achievement in this area I will return to later in the review. Numerous works of contemporary British theatre are considered across five chapters of the book's six (Chapter 1 rethinks the category of "serious drama" and politics in modern theatre in general), including Mark Ravenhill's *The Experiment* (2009), debbie tucker green's *Generations* (2007), and Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* (2012). Broad categories such as "Time", "Space", and "Character" structure a discussion of dramaturgical experiments initiated by unconventional playwrights whose plays reshape theatre as we know it and force us to rethink what we consider to be of political consequence there.

Like many theatre and performance scholars today, Grochala structures her materialist anatomy of contemporary theatre by engaging with the notion of liquid, as opposed to solid, modernity as the condition of representation today. The source of this comparative historical model is theorist Zygmunt Bauman. Alongside brief utilisations of Fredric Jameson (*The Political Unconscious*), Jacques Rancière (*The Emancipated Spectator*) and, curiously, John Searle (*The Construction of Social Reality*), it is this foundational turn in capitalist logics described by Bauman through which Grochala correlates experimental

dramaturgies to our epoch's subjective pressures. A comparative notion of the solid versus the liquid under capitalism and therefore for representation scaffolds much of Grochala's critique of the genre of so-called political theatre in pursuit of a more contemporary dramaturgical framework adequate to the uniquely liquid political problems of our age:

The post-Thatcher plays whose dramaturgies are explored in the final four chapters of this book are political because their dramaturgical structures reflect and attempt to negotiate this shift: temporal dramaturgies shift from a successive towards a more simultaneous understanding of time; spatial dramaturgies become less concrete and more virtual; plot structures question linear mechanical and socio-psychological models of causation; the focalization of the social subject moves from an objective to subjective viewpoint. Through their liquid dramaturgical structures, these plays tackle the question of how to have agency within a society made up of ever-shifting social structures, offering ways of rethinking how "to act, to plan actions, to calculate the expected gains and losses of the actions and to evaluate their outcomes under conditions of endemic uncertainty" (17)

For Grochala, understanding the circumstances of liquid modernity helps us to inquire about how the rise of serious drama comparatively corresponds to logics of solid modernity: where "[s]erious drama was born out of the rise of socialist politics in Britain in the nineteenth century and its campaign for a more organized and compassionate form of capitalism," innovative British plays after the Thatcher era "tackle the question of how to have agency within a society made up of ever-shifting social structures" (77, 17).

Grochala's most novel contribution to the field lies with her rethinking of so-called serious, political drama by way of this historical schema inherited from Bauman. Beginning in the last nineteenth century with the figures of George Bernard Shaw and William Archer, such a type of realism became in Britain mainstream and correspondingly up-to-date in the twentieth century with plays such as mid-century *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne and then in the late-century with plays such as David Edgar's *The Shape of the Table*. These works in Grochala's view show that serious drama's forms "are inadequate to capture the complex and ever-shifting social structures of liquid modernity. They misrepresent the complex mechanisms that underlie the processes of thinking, planning and taking action in a globalized world" (87). Elsewhere, Grochala calls this dramaturgical approach to political change "reactionary" (87). By contrast, contemporary figures such as Sarah Kane, Tucker Green, and Anthony Neilson, figures of the so-called "in-yer-face" movement of post-1990s British theatre, solicit the dramaturgical possibilities of theatre and performance to reconstruct political consciousness and subjectivity in a context of liquidised subjective conditions. This more confrontational dramaturgical field shared by diverse dramatists is seen to offer new political modalities for representation and subjectivity and the possibility of a more-than-reactionary political theatre. Tucker Green and Neilson join Caryl Churchill's established place in such discussions of politics, agency, and innovative dramaturgy we find in the critical work of Elin Diamond and, more recently, Mary Luckhurst. But Grochala distinguishes her critical approach by a thoughtful willingness to engage with the less likely

work of Mark Ravenhill and Simon Stephens and their challenges to characterological expectations of audiences. So, more than simply denoting the kinds of opposition the audience should adopt, as serious drama does in terms of content, Grochala provides compelling evidence from the contemporary British theatre to argue that political theatre must be understood from many angles and not simply by way of content analysis. Grochala's theoretical resources are vast as well as disciplinary, Viktor Shklovsky and Diderot appear along with Elinor Fuchs and Keir Elam.

Grochala's most prominent contemporary in this area of contemporary theatre and performance studies would be Erika Fischer-Lichte and the significance of Grochala's book can partly be illuminated by comparing *The Contemporary Political Play* with Fischer-Lichte's work. Like Fischer-Lichte, Grochala locates the agitational possibility of theatre in examples of formal innovation, because formal innovation, as Fischer-Lichte has urged, can create the possibility of a new "ephemeral community" (qtd Grochala 217). However creative her compilation of disparate theoretical resources, and however rigorous her consolidation of those resources into categories of dramaturgical construction – structure, time, space, plot, character – Grochala appears to be reluctant to develop a theory of political theatre of her own. Here then Grochala's monograph's resemblance to the work of Fischer-Lichte ends. Rather than articulate a revised theory of what political theatre is, the thesis of *The Contemporary Political Play* essentially regards logics of mimesis on the British stage and how the reorganisation of dramaturgical principles of mimesis have changed in nature and urgency with a new era. Thus the standout contemporary figures of British theatre embody those changes; only our nomination of what constitutes a political play, and not its manifold manifestations in contemporary theatre, understate its political power. As the author concludes:

Any rethinking of representations of social structures that better enables the social subject to understand how to have political agency within the complex mechanism of a globalized society is a political act as it provides the social subject with a more accurate "overall map of how these power relations connect and of their resistances". (221)

Those seeking out this book in the hope of understanding a changing genre are likely to be disappointed. So, the monograph articulates the political valency of dramaturgical innovation and not the more easily locatable tendencies in the genre of political theatre, such as more explicit presentations of progressive content found in new examples of so-called "serious drama" where, Grochala urges, heeding Jameson's call for reading political value at three different levels, progressive content nevertheless remains quite apolitical at the level of "form".

We must remember how British theatre, and British culture, is often understood in a global field of cultural production in relation to the question of political significance. In a sense, Grochala's critical opponents are those who would leave contemporary British theatre out of a theory of political theatre due to its distance from real revolution, just as Britain lies separate to Europe's history of revolutions. How can Churchill or Ravenhill ever carry the

title of political theatre in the same way that Vaclav Havel's or Brecht's do? Other recent books on the subject of political theatre, such as Lara Stevens's *Anti-War Theatre After Brecht* (2017), remind us of the centrality of Berlin and other mainland European contexts to this discussion, and thus how difficult it remains to talk about political theatre without speaking about the Brechtian legacy. Although unequipped to advance a new theoretical perspective on *sui generis* concepts of political theatre such as dialectical aesthetics, *The Contemporary Political Play's* achievement lies in endorsing other dramaturgical structures than dialectical ones. That is, Grochala's most sophisticated argument involves an engagement with the heritage of Brechtian epic theatre and the question of contemporary playwrights' adoption or rejection of those principles of dramaturgy found in its theorisation.

Consider her chapter on "Plot". Here, Grochala concludes that Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* (2008) intentionally rejects Brechtian politically-motivated opposition to Aristotelian approaches to drama. Through this counter-intuitive approach to the politics of plotting in drama, Grochala locates Bartlett's reproduction and Žižekian over-identification with what is called "linear mechanical causation" as structured by capitalist financialisation of contemporary life as well as the Aristotelian shape of dramatic plot, a type of plotting Brecht famously rejected in Stanislavskian dramaturgy to conceive of epic theatre. Grochala explains:

Contractions presents an image of a financialized society, in which the social subject assumes they are free and able to bend the rules, but in which indebtedness and the need to accumulate capital controls their every move. Bartlett's strict adherence to linear mechanical causation viscerally conveys the inescapable situation Emma contractually ties herself into by "propelling the spectator along a single track where he can look neither right nor left, up nor down". Bartlett employs the very structure Brecht dismisses as inscribed with the logic of capitalism to critique the socio-economic relations of capitalism itself. (165)

Through such readings of different shapes that contemporary theatre makes of dramatic plot, *The Contemporary Political Play* thus offers another way to understand political British theatre which relates, but doesn't necessarily adhere to Brechtian principles of audience transformation, alienation, and dramatic structure. Now, Grochala's monograph mentions, but does not rethink the ideas of theorists on matters of representation and political change, unlike Lara Stevens's. In this sense, Grochala appears to be reluctant to contend with theories of political theatre, content instead to seek out examples of dramaturgical innovation which promise ways alternative to dominant ones. However, Grochala does find alternatives to the Brecht-dominated theories of theatre by assaying unconventional shapes that contemporary British theatre can take.

The Contemporary Political Play continues the work of Fischer-Lichte, Sean Carney, Hans-Thies Lehmann, and Elinor Fuchs in viewing revisions of and innovations in dramatic and dramaturgical pacts with the audience as what defines the political valency of a performance work, not the so-called seriousness of its content. Brecht gives way to Sarah

Kane as a foundational figure in the development of this political theatre. I even think that trajectory of political theatre deserves more faith than Grochala gives it considering the critic's ultimate reluctance to lend too much political credit to her ambiguous case studies in her slightly renegeing conclusion:

By reproducing the liquid social structures produced by the rise of global financial capitalism within their dramatic structure, these plays may actually reaffirm them, so articulating a progressive but capitalist politics, rather than the progressive socialist stance that is imagined in this book. (221)

Perhaps Grochala is too bound to the formulae of her very systematic study of numerous post-Thatcher plays. Such a willingness to abandon the objects of her study troublingly diminishes the book's quality readings of political dramaturgies even as such a statement attempts to consolidate the book's "progressive socialist" politics by proposing to allow for error. Grochala is saying that the same radical mimetic strategies which once troubled "the liquid social structures produced by the rise of global financial capitalism" and constituted the plays which deployed them as political works now "may actually reaffirm" the same capitalist logics. In my view, such a critical gesture as this works precisely in reverse to its intended effect; the critic's materialist and conceptual reduction of otherwise politically important experiments in plot, character, spatial and temporal structure to a so-called "reaffirm[ation]" of contemporary capitalist liquid environments of subjectivity discredits the critical structure employed in the monograph and not works by Kane, Churchill, Green, Ravenhill, and others. Certainly the monograph's persuasiveness is limited in cases such as this where simplification of her argument reduces otherwise nuanced readings of major contemporary plays to the category of another liquid modern play, conduit for capitalist logics of representation. Fascinating earlier arguments are unfairly reduced to a complicit liquidity and, as we will see in the book's conclusion, are nearly disowned as important political works.

Furthermore, Grochala's readings of plays are actually much better than such a moment of disowning. She reads Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2007) as a play that constructs an antagonistic chorus which challenges the audience to imagine new forms of collectivity. She reads Churchill's *Love and Information* as a play experimenting with simultaneous logics of temporality and thus subjective presence. The attentiveness of these readings to the many factors of contemporary dramaturgy will hopefully prove influential to future studies of these writers. So, Grochala's enormous success with this monograph lies in articulating the political valency of an established lineage of plays from the British contemporary and one singular to it. Grochala does so in such a way that the British dimensions of that political valency latent to performance can be understood.

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