

***Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).**

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The English translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, a study of theatre practice from the 1970s to the present, was finally published in early 2006, seven years after its original German publication. In the meantime, the French (2002), Japanese (2002), Slovenian (2003), Croatian (2003), Polish (2004) and Persian/Farsi (2005) translations were available, meaning that English-only readers had to rely on their bilingual colleagues or read secondary accounts of its content and impact. The effect is a certain feeling of *déjà vu* because the debate about postdramatic theatre has already had a good airing. Moreover, scholars have been adept at applying postmodern theory to performance practice and so in many ways Lehmann's study is a revisiting of postmodern theatre, replacing the operative term postmodern with postdramatic. The principal exponents of this new theatre are widely-known and highly-regarded in intellectual and artistic circles if not the box-office—the Wooster Group, the theatres of Robert Wilson and Heiner Müller, Germany's *Regietheater*, Jan Fabre, Forced Entertainment and so on—that have been the subject of debate for some time. What Lehmann attempts in this book, and it is to be valued for this, is a relocation of the postmodern debate within theatre history, setting the 'the profoundly changed mode of theatrical sign usage' found in the postdramatic against the modernist paradigm of textual, fictional or narrative-based theatre (17).

Postdramatic theatre is contemporary theatre, although it is almost a generation old, and is represented by Lehmann as an evolving form. It is a theatre in search of a new aesthetic logic. In Lehmann's account, narrative, text, action and character have fragmented into *bricolage*, theatricality, architectonics, physicality, para-ritual forms and states of presence. He proposes and endorses the replacement of the textual dynamic with a scenic, communal dynamic and 'the emphatically or monumentally accentuated ostentation of the presentation' (69). The tenor of the book is the celebration of this new direction.

The delayed translation has, productively, allowed for some updating. Karen Jürs-Munby's translation has pruned the original, added an author's preface and a translator's introduction that recognise the changing circumstances of the book's original publication and its contemporary reception. Jürs-Munby draws with economy and intelligence on the controversies that have attended the launch of the postdramatic era, summarising its central thesis as the final separation of theatre and literary drama and the emergence, perhaps even triumph, of theatre as performance. At the same time, she orients the work towards a British theatre culture in which the enduring power of the text is evident in the in-*yer-face* movement. Principle among these, as Lehmann admits in his

new preface, is Sarah Kane whose *4.48 Psychosis* is recognised as the necessary and inevitable counterpoint to the theory of the postdramatic. With the acknowledgement of the textual innovation of Kane's dramatic writing, Lehmann takes the opportunity to clarify his interest, which is not in the abolition of the text, but in the theatrical means of its production. This allows for a certain retraction in relation to the status of the text and its enduring role that will soften opposition to the more radical pronouncements in the original German publication.

Lehmann's book is panoramic, at times repetitious, but it is true to its topic in that its elaborations are primarily descriptions of theatrical works. There is sparing use of theory; Artaud and Grotowski take precedence over other academic scholars. The first task is to trace the gradual overturning of the dominant text-based paradigm of European theatre. With its demise, the emphasis on mimesis, illusion, action, plot, the *fictive cosmos*, the unities of time and space and catharsis wanes. Postdramatic theatre is significantly, given the German genesis of the study, post-Brechtian. It is the non-narrative, fragmented, non-polemical, quixotic and uncommitted theatre of Heiner Müller. Yet there is something of the structure of Brecht's famous table that compares dramatic and epic theatre in Lehmann's opposition of dramatic and postdramatic, so that, like Brecht's epic for its times, the latter merges as the favoured option. In the same way, postdramatic theatre relies on its difference from and its backwards glance at the text, which structures Lehmann's binary of the dramatic and postdramatic. Where dramatic theatre is about representation, postdramatic is about presence; the communicated experience of the former is a shared experience in the latter; product becomes process; signification becomes manifestation; information becomes energetic impulse; cohesion is replaced by disparate heterogeneity, surprising correspondence, rupture and extremes. Robert Wilson's theatre of metamorphosis, dreamscapes, ambiguities, plateaus and flows becomes as important as the former unities of the dramatic narrative and the distance of epic theatre.

For the actor, postdramatic theatre is a break with the two great movements of modern drama: realism and epicism. It discards the humanist struggle (traditionally located in the masculine hero) with its probing of the inner life, of consciousness and motivation and also the Brechtian *gestus* of showing, demonstrating and communicating the social relations of class. Instead, drawing on the alternative trajectory of Artaud and Grotowski, the actor is a performer in a ritual, a ceremonial figure and a body breathing and moving in space. Rather than actors playing humans, bodies are manifested and made present as sites of inscription. There is no longer embodiment of character but selves present in real time. Rather than the individual's story, performers enact a more collective history, functioning as sites of memory in collaboration with the spectator. Movement takes place without underlying motivation and performers appear as accretions of energies and affects. Landscapes, panorama, geometrics and light become the dynamic elements rising up the hierarchy of stage signification. If dramatic theatre is 'subordinated to the primacy of the text' and the 'making

present' of speeches and deeds in the mimetic space of the stage, then postdramatic theatre is theatre without text (21).

The argument is set out historically in chapters that touches on drama theory from Aristotle to Szondi, from catharsis to naturalism, and on to Brechtian dialectics and Barthes. He rejects Szondi's model of epic theatre as the resolution of the nineteenth century's 'crisis' in drama, arguing that 'epicisation' no longer explains the diversity of recent developments. Szondi's thesis, more influential in Europe than elsewhere, is a background to Lehmann's study. He positions Szondi on the intellectual side of the theatrical spectrum and attributes a privileging of the semiotic, of signification and of dialectics to his influence. Lehmann argues that Szondi's mapping of the historic evolution from pure drama to epic theatre, derived from Brecht, and developed and promoted by Barthes, contributes to the hegemony of rational, distanced, representational theatre models, that took insufficient heed of the influence of Artaud, Grotowski, and the theatre of the 1960s.

There follows a chapter tracing the prehistory of the postdramatic through the historical avant gardes including symbolist, expressionist, surrealist and experimental theatres, theatre of the absurd and the documentary play. The contribution of designers, poets and radicals – of Gordon Craig, who wanted the text to 'recede' from the theatre, and Gertrude Stein, whose 'Landscape Play' finds its contemporary counterpart in Robert Wilson's spatial aesthetics - is recognised. Lehmann refers to the emerging rift between 'the great works written for theatre' in the twentieth century and the problematics of their scenic realisation in the present. The emergence of film and photographic arts have also played their part, freeing theatre from the onus of representation and paving the way towards a 'retheatricalization' (51) of the theatre that is, its repositioning in relation to culture and aesthetics. The shift in Europe towards directors' theatre (*Regietheater*) is cited as 'arguably a precondition for the postdramatic disposition' (52). Readers are reminded that if the historic avant garde directors dispensed with or cut up the dramatic text, it was as much a reaction to the banality of their contemporary stagings as a desire to break with tradition. The way in which postdramatic theatre 'rescues' dramatic texts from deadly stagings, as Peter Brook would have it, and revivifies them in striking productions should not be underestimated. The final section of the prehistory draws a distinction between the Theatre of the Absurd and the Postdramatic arguing that by virtue of its textual basis, the former belongs to the dramatic theatre tradition whereas in the latter, 'the theatrical means beyond language are positioned equally alongside the text and are systematically unthinkable without it' (55). Lehmann's revised history of modern theatre, that focuses on performance rather than plays, reveals the logic of the postdramatic as a natural progression.

Moving on to the 'panorama' of postdramatic theatre, Lehmann examines the exemplary forms of postdramatic theatre in the work of Tadeusz Kantor, Klaus-Michael Grüber and Robert Wilson. He begins with a tribute to Kantor, whose

ceremonial and scenic works of the 1980s, replete with memory, death, ghosts, catastrophe and history, mark a significant departure from dramatic theatre and a return to the ritual origins of theatre. Working on memory and the past, Kantor makes the break with linear time preferring the circularities and repetitions of ritual time, the *danse macabre* and the dance of death. German directors of the 1980s – Klaus-Michael Grüber, Peter Stein, Heiner Müller, of course, Einar Schlegel and theatres such as the Berlin Schaubühne deconstructed the classical theatre, creating the postmodern theatre that Lehmann claims for the postdramatic. Grüber's *theatre of the voice* 'pushed' classical drama into the background while emphasising voice, enunciation and the moment of speaking. His staging of classical and modern dramatic texts in monumental spaces such as his *Winterreise* at the Berlin Olympia Stadium is typical of the postdramatic engagement with architectural space. But in postdramatic terms, the exemplar of the exemplary is Robert Wilson. Wilson invents 'the most far-reaching response' to the question of theatre in the age of media (78). His theatre is one of constant metamorphoses connecting heterogeneous realities and energies. In Wilson we have Deleuze and Guattari's thousand plateaux on the stage. Lehmann goes so far as to attribute a quasi-metaphysical dimension to Wilson's theatre, of human actors moved by mysterious forces, of their being manifestations of the ancient fates. Scene, situation, landscape, sound, media and image come together in Wilson in a way that moves the theatre towards the 'post-anthropocentric' stage, an advance on the historic avant garde's marionettes, but part of the same logic. It gives the postdramatic its post-humanist dimension, that is, its renunciation of human autonomy and, in an ecological sense, imagines a reality where humans no longer dominate nature. But in rejecting the secularisation of modernity, Lehmann also appears to re-instate both the mystical and the mythological, which also manifest as fable, as narrative and the texts that he would see receding from the theatre. Acknowledging the historic disjunction between magical modes of imagination and the modern world, Lehmann insists that the elements of ritual, ceremony and the physical ordeal have been productive for theatre arts and ought not be subject to the prejudice of 'an "enlightened" aversion to the religious' (139). A more secular view sees in the emphasis on ceremony and ritual, the postdramatic theatre's insistence on presence.

This brings us to the problem with Lehmann's panorama of the postdramatic. As with any historic term, it begins to run itself out, lose its specificity and become ubiquitous. Over time, the differences within exert their own pressure. The aesthetic coherence of Wilson's theatre, his minimalism and high formalism makes his work entirely different from other postdramatic directors like Jan Fabre or Michael Laub. Fabre's excesses in *I Am Blood*, for instance, work with a different economy from Wilson's spare luxury; Laub's *Total Masala Slammer* not only loosens the threads of the dramaturgical weave, but exposes the holes, shows the unholy stage stripped of the magic of theatre. *Slammer*, which lures audiences with Goethe's romantic *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, splices it with an Indian TV-soapie and the 'real' thwarted romance between the actors, among other texts, annoys patrons in a way that Wilson's theatre never does. Lehmann

does, however, offer a useful broad overview of the stylistic traits of postdramatic theatre, that is not intended as a checklist but as a guide to the viewing of what can be baffling and obscure theatre. This section is augmented with several examples.

In a following chapter entitled 'Performance', Lehmann considers the blurring of the boundaries between theatre and Performance Art, considering the latter an undeniable influence on the evolution of the postdramatic theatre, while allowing for their continuing difference. He will claim, however, that the area of overlap between the two belongs to the discourse of postdramatic theatre. But do David Blane's stunts belong to the discourse of the postdramatic in the same way as say Orlan? The principle influence lies in the way in which the performance artist does not represent an artistically transformed reality, but undergoes or engages in self-transformation. 'Aspects', the chapter that follows, is a further stylistic analysis of postdramatic theatre, dealing with sections on Text, Space, Time, Body and Media. Of these, the discussion of text places further qualifications on the role of text in the new theatre and leads into a section on 'Textscape, theatre of voices'. For it seems that *chora-graphy*, the resonance of sound and space, of language released from signification. A variation is to be found in 'the principle of polyglossia', in which national languages are shot through with the foreign-spoken texts.

By the book's epilogue, the absence of the political and the sociological from the discussion has become critical. There is a distinct lack of social and historical determination in the theory of the postdramatic that Lehmann attributes, quoting Habermas, to the problem of the unsurveyable present. I don't think Habermas intended by that that we should forgo historicisation. Yet, the epilogue acknowledges the social element, if not the historical in the theatre and holds that not being able to measure the political does not mean theatre is ever depoliticised. The problem for Lehmann is how best to understand theatre's politics. Given the book's careful discussion of the postdramatic and its deconstructive tendencies, it would be pointless to place it on a political grid. On that score, Lehmann remains dubious about the claims of intercultural theatre as a means of creating better understanding between cultures. He sidesteps feminist theatre that has concerned itself with image and physicality, but for which the telling of stories remains a potent force. He is wary of the theatre as a moral institution. Rather, the whole idea of political theatre, he writes, changes in the conditions of the information society. The best that can be hoped for is a revised 'politics of perception' and an 'aesthetics of responsibility' (185) that applies to theatre precisely because, unlike media, it takes place in a shared space, in a gathering of performer and spectator who are both implicated in the event.

Postdramatic Theatre emanates from the western European theatre tradition, it responds to differences within that tradition and engages with the attendant debates. It remains to be seen, however, how far it applies beyond its European

boundaries. Lehmann's insistence on a paradigm shift from literary, text-based theatre to a performance-based one has generated much critical debate and its valuable critical insights are well-recognised. Some of the questions that might usefully be asked are whether postdramatic theatre involves not so much a paradigm shift from a European status quo, but a recognition of what was always a globally diverse art form. The diversity model would recognise that the pressures on European dramatic theatre are not just internal or stylistic, but arise from post-colonial, hybrid, feminist and community theatre practices. A further question is the extent to which, beyond the subsidised festival circuit and the fringe, postdramatic theatre has changed the way theatre is made and viewed. Sarah Kane's dramatic writing, acknowledged in the author's new preface, suggests that the text has enormous capacity to reinvent itself and be responsive to the times. For all that, Lehmann's book is an indispensable guide to postdramatic theatre that provides scholars and artists with an exciting new vocabulary and frame of reference for contemporary performance.