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HOMAGE TO HANS-THIES LEHMANN

Remembering the Origins of Postdramatic Theatre

ABSTRACT: Upon his recent death, this article revisits the major contributions of Dr. Hans-Thies Lehmann to contemporary debates on theatre aesthetics. Lehmann’s concept of a postdramatic theatre – that is, a theatre that has moved beyond the central importance of dramatic texts—is surveyed some two decades after he made his primary interventions in the field. The article furthermore reviews Lehmann’s influence in the Anglophone discipline of theatre studies and in the global field of theatre production.

KEYWORDS: Hans-Thies Lehmann; Postdramatic Theatre; Contemporary Theatre; Performance; Theatre Aesthetics.

The year 2022 marked the passing of one of the world’s foremost thinkers on the contemporary arts, whose contributions to theatre as both an academic and artistic discipline amounted to a wholesale paradigm shift in the global field at the turn of the twenty-first century. Hans-Thies Lehmann (1944–2022) was Professor Emeritus at the Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt, co-founder (with Andrzej Wirth) of the influential Institute for Applied Theatre Studies at the Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, sometime president of the International Brecht Society, a renowned scholar of Heiner Müller’s dramaturgy, author of some six monographs, editor of numerous other scholarly collections, and an inspiration to many theatre artists worldwide.

He came to prominence for English-speaking readers in 2006 upon the translation and publication of his 1999 book *Postdramatisches Theater*, which furnished a new vocabulary for the stage in the wake of twentieth-century modernism. When the book reached its Anglophone audience after a long delay, it had already appeared in three German editions, had been translated into six other languages, and was being prepared for at least three more (Lehmann 2006, 188n1). By now those nine translations have more than doubled (Critical Stages 2018). Despite this prodigious impact, however, the 2006 publication of *Postdramatic Theatre* remains one of only two of his books translated into English, alongside *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (trans. Erik Butler, 2016). His death made newspaper headlines in the European press but reached me in New York only by word of mouth.

Lehmann’s 2006 debut in the English-speaking world was not uncontroversial. I first heard his name around that time—along with rumours about the new “postdramatic” book, already deemed ground-breaking—while pursuing graduate studies in drama at Yale University under Professor Elinor Fuchs. Fuchs later reviewed Karen Jürs-Munby’s

translation of *Postdramatic Theatre* for *TDR: The Drama Review*, a leading American academic journal of performance, and her response to the book set off a sharp transatlantic debate. She raised doubts about the novelty and comprehensive ambitions of its main claims, took issue with Jürs-Munby's translation, and objected to Routledge's abridgements, marketing, and copyediting of the volume (181). Lehmann and Jürs-Munby responded in a subsequent *TDR* issue, seeming to allay many of Fuchs's concerns (Lehmann et al. 2008), but this initial brouhaha only helped the book's main ideas to circulate more swiftly.

As Fuchs noted with some suspicion at the outset of her review, "One doesn't even have to read the book to adopt its central term" (178). Still, *Postdramatic Theatre* made for dazzling reading in 2006 and it continues to impress over fifteen years later. In it, Lehmann claimed that theatre as a medium entered a new period during the mid-twentieth century, one in which the dramatic text as such has been decentred from its previous role of importance in theatrical production. In his words, "the text" has come to be seen "only as one element" among many, "one layer, or as a 'material' of the scenic creation, not as its master" (17).

In more traditional Western theatres, one speaks of attending a staged production of a pre-existing playscript, but in recent decades, advanced theatre-makers have moved away from this production model. No longer conferring ultimate artistic authority upon the scripted drama, contemporary theatre artists have pushed *beyond* the larger artistic hegemony of "drama" as well, at least as it has normatively been construed in the West. Nowadays, on many global stages, one may just as likely see a performance whose script has been devised by an ensemble from found sources, or one with no dialogue and no recognizable characters, or a radical re-envisioning or subversion of a classical play, to name just a few possibilities. (German-speakers used to call this last approach *Regietheater*, director's theatre.)

While many terms have arisen for these radical forms of staging practice—Fuchs noted "'total theatre,' 'alternative theatre,' 'theatre of images,' 'landscape theatre,' 'neo-avantgarde'" (2008, 178)—Lehmann's book offered a totalizing explanatory model that aimed to put these other frameworks to rest. *Postdramatic Theatre* became a kind of aesthetic textbook for theorizing the work of artists as disparate as Robert Wilson, the Wooster Group, Tadeusz Kantor, Elfriede Jelinek, Sarah Kane, Reza Abdoh, Pina Bausch, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Romeo Castellucci, to name just a few who are now prominently associated with the term.

In the book's central section, which aimed at a panoramatic overview of the contemporary field's new formal and aesthetic conventions, Lehmann set forth a listing of common "Postdramatic theatrical signs" (82), arranged in a kind of taxonomy. Postdramatic theatre artists could be understood as working with forms of "parataxis/non-hierarchy" (86); undertaking a "play with the density of signs" (89); developing new forms of "visual dramaturgy" (93); and puncturing the stage illusion with "irruption[s] of the real" (99).

These concepts of performance appear in the book in descriptive terms, but Lehmann's position as co-founder of Gießen's laboratory-based Applied Theatre Studies Institute helped confer on them a pedagogical, or even prescriptive status too. In recent years, the Institute has gone on to produce some of Germany's most important contemporary theatre artists and groups, including René Pollesch, Gob Squad, She She Pop, and Rimini Protokoll, all in various ways creating work under the sign of the postdramatic. To this day, no comparable theatre or performance training program exists in the United States that has been able to match the Gießen Institute's combination of theoretical and artistic rigor, or its impressive rollcall of avant-garde alumni. (Lehmann set the bar high in Germany, and American institutions of higher education could try harder to reach it).

But for all the book and institute's ambitions, Lehmann also disavowed any easy, overarching aesthetic coherence made possible by the idea of the postdramatic. As he put it, "One thing is certain: today a Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who could develop 'the' dramaturgy of a postdramatic theatre, is unthinkable. The theatre of sense and synthesis has largely disappeared—and with it the possibility of synthesizing interpretation" (25). That may be so: there may never be another Lessing who could dictate new universalizing principles, methods, and standards of dramaturgical judgment, but Lehmann still managed to come close.

His prologue in *Postdramatic Theatre* offered a variety of explanations for the emergence of this new form of theatrical practice. He gestured to the eclipse of printed texts by newer, nonlinear media forms, the concomitant rise of new modes of perception, the tendency in contemporary capitalism toward the commodification and recirculation of images, and the side-lining of live theatre among the arts. "Theatre is no longer a mass medium. To deny this becomes increasingly ridiculous, to reflect on it increasingly urgent" (16). To further justify his main claims, however, Lehmann put forward not just these socio-economic and technological influences, but also an aesthetic argument about developing factors intrinsic to Western theatre's own history. He drew on and adapted Hegel's dialectical aesthetics to argue that the theatre had entered its latest postdramatic situation as the result of internal contradictions specific to the medium itself.

To make this argument about drama's fate in the twentieth century, Lehmann also drew on the work of his graduate mentor at the Freie Universität-Berlin, the Hungarian comparatist and critic Péter Szondi. Szondi had claimed that *drama*—far from being an ahistorical formal category, unchanging since the time of Aristotle—was instead an historical concept, bound intimately to the rise of a certain idea of human life that had been hegemonic in Europe from roughly 1600 to 1900. Drama, Szondi had argued, emerged around the Elizabethan period in England and was the creation of "a newly self-conscious being who, after the collapse of the medieval world, sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone" (quoted in Lehmann 2006, 5). "Drama" was an anthropocentric, logocentric, dialogic, and mimetic medium, one that, in performance, effectively relegated the spectator to the status of an unseen voyeur.

Szondi had further posited the modern plays of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, August Strindberg, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Gerhart Hauptmann as evidence that this notion of drama had fallen into crisis by the late nineteenth century, with various twentieth-century dramatists offering what he saw as divergent solutions to the crisis of dramatic form, including Luigi Pirandello, Thornton Wilder, and Bertolt Brecht above all (Lehmann 2006, 5; cf. Szondi 1983).

The major accomplishment of Lehmann's magisterial book was to unfold Szondi's argument another step past Brecht, generating a tripartite schema: "Ancient tragedy, Racine's dramas, and Robert Wilson's visual dramaturgy are all forms of theatre. Yet, assuming the modern understanding of drama [i.e. as Szondi has defined it], one can say that the former is 'predramatic,' that Racine's plays are undoubtedly dramatic theatre, and that Wilson's 'operas' have to be called 'postdramatic'" (2006, 34).

With this step, Lehmann developed what appeared to some as a grand epistemic narrative of the Western stage's invention and embrace of "drama" in the early modern era, followed by an increasing polarization between "dramatic" and "theatrical" elements of staging practice that would result in a schism between the two in the post-Brechtian period. Although he asserted that it was not his book's primary aim or thesis to set out this "epochal" history of artistic development, he nevertheless opened up "a horizon" for its theorization (Lehmann et al. 2008, 16).

One additional, major upshot of this narrative was to trouble the received category of "performance art," as Fuchs was right to note in her review of the book. As she saw it, taking Lehmann's argument seriously would invite aesthetic theorists to resituate performance art as a "subset of postdramatic theatre" (181). Recent years have not so much borne her prediction out as inverted it, with certain forms of contemporary theatre being conscripted into museum and art gallery spaces as if they were variant forms of performance art (Hatch 2019; Jackson 2022, 5–21). Several other questions Fuchs raised for Lehmann still linger, years later: Does the 'postdramatic' concept perform colonizing work when it migrates outside of Europe? Why should we not consider avant-garde theatre from the 1970s until today as an *extension* of early twentieth-century modernism, rather than a rupture from it? And, perhaps most pointedly, "[might] we . . . expect a return to the text after all? . . . Can drama absorb postdrama and move on?" (181).

These questions deserve renewed attention and debate in light of the historical and political upheavals of recent years across the globe. Indeed, Lehmann's work continues resonating across the Anglophone field of theatre scholarship, with recent years witnessing the publication of numerous titles, including three notable ones from Bloomsbury—*Postdramatic Theatre and the Political* (2013), *Postdramatic Theatre and Form* (2019), and *Postdramatic Theatre and India* (2022). How "postdramatic theatre" has been imbricated within the ascent of neoliberal political economy is a subject that requires further debate, but these new publications are a helpful beginning.

Speaking more personally, I have drawn influence from Lehmann in my own recent writings, in arguing that his history of the modern theatre's increasing independence

from drama (as an autonomous mode of theatricality) must be understood alongside Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory in the time of the baroque (2018, 99). The Benjamin-Szondi-Lehmann tradition of *Theaterwissenschaft* in Germany is one that is still largely underexplored among American theorists of theatre and performance, notwithstanding Fuchs's own writing on this subject ("Szondi Connection" 2019). Its trajectory deserves renewed attention today, at a time of mounting global crises and the need for artistic responses that can draw on the intellectual traditions of critical theory.

In the arena of American theatre production too, Lehmann's ideas have continued relevance to artists and writers as wide-ranging as the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, Fake Friends, Aleshea Harris, Julia Jarcho, Jeremy O. Harris, Young Jean Lee, Big Art Group, and Richard Maxwell, all working at the cutting edge of the field. As Lehmann put it in the closing pages of *Postdramatic Theatre*, outlining the stakes of his inquiry, "In an age of rationalization, of the ideal of calculation and of the generalized rationality of the market, it falls to the theatre to deal with extremes of affect by means of an *aesthetics of risk*, extremes which always also contain the possibility of offending by breaking taboos" (186–187, italics in the original).

In his scholarship and lifelong dedication to the modern theatre, in the example he set to future generations of artists and intellectuals alike, and in the face of an increasingly reified, alienated world, Lehmann embodied this aesthetics of risk. If recent years are any indication, the theatre of the future will continue responding to his call.

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