Book Reviews

Lara Stevens. *Anti-War Theatre after Brecht: Dialectical Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, x + 224 pp., € 80,24 (hardback), € 62,99 (PDF ebook).

Reviewed by **Anja Hartl**, E-Mail: anja.hartl@uni-konstanz.de

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2018-0004>

In her compelling study, Lara Stevens combines two key strands of discussion in contemporary drama which have received increasing attention in theatre criticism lately: the question of how theatre and performance engage with and protest against the ‘War on Terror’ on the one hand and the relevance of Brechtian epic theatre for twenty-first-century political theatre on the other. Interested in particular in “how contemporary anti-war plays work to influence spectator responses to the violence of war after the terrorist attacks of 9/11” (1) and with a considerable personal investment in the topic, aiming “to understand how deeply I [as a Western subject from an allied nation] was implicated in these conflicts” (1), Stevens examines the role of theatre as a locus of resistance where alternative spaces and perspectives can be created “outside the normative and highly controlled frames of the mainstream media” (2). Integral to the book’s investigations and to its understanding of political theatre is Bertolt Brecht, whose model of epic theatre is fruitfully brought into dialogue with the political and philosophical conditions of a post-Marxist, globalised and postmodern world in order to shed light on the – as Stevens convincingly argues – significant value of Brecht’s ideas for the contemporary stage.

Employing a Brechtian framework for her analysis of anti-war theatre, Stevens’s contribution to both of these domains is substantial because it offers fresh and exciting perspectives on post-9/11 drama through a critical re-reading of Brecht’s theory and practice in chapters 2 and 3, which elaborate the book’s overarching theoretical concerns. While it could have profited from a more detailed contextualisation within the vibrant field of research on war plays, the study’s appeal lies in its subtle treatment of Brecht and its careful revaluation of the relation between dialectics, Brechtian epic theatre and Marxist ideology, which helps to develop the considerable potential of Brecht for contemporary political theatre. Yet, as chapter 2 argues with brief reference to Sara Brady’s and Rustom Bharucha’s work on terror(ism) and performance, this question of political theatre’s form and function today is complex. Particularly in the light of the problematic treatment of terrorism and war in politics and its instrumentalisation

in the media, conventional notions of political art have to be re-thought. Turning to Jacques Rancière as an inspiration for re-imagining political theatre for this context, Stevens identifies significant parallels between Rancière's definition of the relationship between aesthetics and politics for the post-Marxist world and Brecht, whose dialectical understanding of theatre and reality she posits as an essential prerequisite for realising Rancière's vision for art "to shift the coordinates of the visible and the invisible in the public sphere" (15) and thereby to challenge the status quo.

Further developing this argument, chapter 3 proposes a complex and well-researched analysis of epic theatre, its origins in Marxist dialectics and the (often neglected) political motivations behind Brecht's artistic innovations. While Stevens persuasively problematises the fact that Brecht's optimistic dialectical model may seem obsolete and too reductive for responding to our postmodern and late capitalist world, her conflation of Brecht's biography and post-Marxist notions of politics and philosophy to explain his relevance for the twenty-first century does seem, at times, far-fetched (for example her line of reasoning that Brecht supposedly "pre-empts the postmodern 'epistemological uncertainty' in his refusal to join the Communist Party"; 47). This reservation aside, however, Stevens successfully counters widespread dogmatic readings of Brecht and compellingly argues, with reference to David Barnett's ground-breaking work on post-Brechtian aesthetics, for "new understandings of what Brechtian theatre is now" (3), establishing Brecht as a postmodernist *avant la lettre* and thereby unlocking the potential of Brecht's dialectical theatre for the contemporary stage.

This pertinence of twenty-first-century Brechtian aesthetics in the context of anti-war drama is conclusively elaborated in in-depth analyses of plays and performances, to which the remainder of the book is dedicated. While the selection of primary material – six texts altogether – may seem limited, the aesthetic diversity and international (albeit Western-centred) perspective of the study, focussing on the work of playwrights and theatre practitioners from around the globe, ensure its representative quality. What particularly enriches scholarship on Brecht is Stevens's close reading and detailed discussion of the plays, which underscores her critical approach to contemporary forms of dialectical theatre and helps to establish a comprehensive picture of the range of Brechtian aesthetics today. While the analyses are concerned with how these Brechtian-inspired strategies are employed as a means of challenging dominant discourses – especially as spread by the media, an issue which is for example thematised by Théâtre du Soleil's *Le Dernier Caravansérail* (chapter 5) and Elfriede Jelinek's *Bambiland* (chapter 7) –, they also explore the aesthetic and political potential of the media for anti-war theatre, foregrounding the question of how newspapers, the internet and other new technologies affect dramatic aesthetics and offer new

opportunities for the distribution of, access to and spectatorial interaction with the pieces, as Tony Kushner's *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy* (chapter 4) or Caryl Churchill's *Iraq.doc* and *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (chapter 6) exemplify.

Chapter 4 focusses on American playwright Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* (2001) and *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy* (2003–4), both of which critically engage with Western perspectives on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq through a Brechtian dialectical approach. Above all, the plays make use of Brecht's concept of historicisation in order to undermine conventional first-world views of history, to offer new perspectives on the past, present and future and to create space for debate. *Homebody/Kabul* enables this destabilisation through a confrontation of different, both politico-historical and personal, narratives, thereby problematising, in postmodern spirit, notions of an official, fixed history and foregrounding "multiple and alternative histories" (55) through its discontinuous aesthetics which mirror "Brecht's zigzag view of history as irregular and unpredictable" (56). By contrast, *Only We* pursues a different strategy of historicisation. Creating a liminal, "purgatorial" (79) space in-between mysticism and historical reality, the play updates Brecht's technique not to "encourage spectators to look back and reflect upon past events, but, rather, to look forward to the future consequences of actions and decisions being made in the present" (79), as Stevens convincingly argues.

Chapter 5 enters an aesthetically and thematically different terrain by focussing on French theatre company Théâtre du Soleil's *Le Dernier Caravansérail* (2003), a collaboratively developed, eclectic production with a text written by Hélène Cixous. The piece examines the ethical challenges of the 'War on Terror,' specifically the question of human rights and the treatment of refugees. The notion of hospitality represents its core, both on a more literal, political level, where the concept "as constructed in the national rhetoric" (91) of Western countries (in this case France and Australia) as well as in the media is attacked, and on an aesthetic level, where *Le Dernier Caravansérail* "[interrogates] its own ethical dilemma in representing these stories in a Westernized context" (114) through its use of Brechtian dialectics. Aiming to "create an ethical model for theatre hospitality" (92), the performance integrates refugee testimonials as a way of offering, in Rancièrian spirit, the refugees' voices a stage, while also self-reflexively "expos[ing] its own vulnerability in attempting to accurately represent the absent body and silenced voice of the other" (119). Through this profound Brechtian-inspired self-consciousness, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* succeeds, as Stevens proposes, in encouraging spectators to adopt a different perspective.

British playwright Caryl Churchill's *Iraq.doc* (2003) and *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009) pursue a more provocative approach in their response to the

invasions of Iraq and Palestine respectively by confusing conventional role attributions of victim and perpetrator, as chapter 6 investigates. Stevens particularly focusses on the Churchill's use of the new media as a way of "updat[ing] the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic for the digital age" (126). In its gestic use of verbatim quotes from reports and internet chatrooms, *Iraq.doc* estranges and historicises these narratives and creates an eclectic "online chat-room aesthetic" (5) which helps to explore the potential and limits of the internet as a space for discussion. Such a creation of "communities of dissensus" (143) has been achieved by the online distribution of *Seven Jewish Children*, which has immediately triggered highly controversial reactions from an international public. Stevens's analysis of this challenging play is compelling and represents an important contribution to the lively discussions in theatre criticism. Through a meticulous examination of the play's dialectical use of poetic language, the chapter reveals with reference to Elin Diamond how "an aesthetic of terror" (156) emerges out of the increasing breakdown of poetic language, capturing "the prejudice, violence and fear that filter through to everyday domestic conversations" (154) as a more universal concern of the play beyond the immediate context of the Israel-Palestine conflict to which it is primarily tied.

The study closes with a consideration of Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek's *Bambiland* (2004) in chapter 7. The play's critique of the Iraq War and its representation in the mainstream media materialises in its profoundly intertextual and juxtapositional aesthetic, whose "erratic form and structure" mirror "the chaotic social, political and economic upheaval in Iraq and the multiplicity of voices and attitudes" (183) conveyed by the media. While the analysis could have benefitted from a more detailed examination of the play's postdramatic tendencies in relation to Brecht's dialectical theatre, Stevens persuasively shows how intertextuality, self-reflexivity and irony combine to create a form of dialectics which employs postmodern epistemological uncertainty as a means of politicising the audience. Stevens's conclusion that "[u]nlike the work of Tony Kushner or the Théâtre du Soleil – who offer suggestions or practical models for real-life political engagement outside the theatre –, *Bambiland* does not offer "any closure or suggestions as to how a praxis of resistance might take shape" (197) seems, however, unconvincing and runs counter to the overall assertion of the book, which argues for an "open-endedness" in Brecht's own work and for an understanding of dialectics which "[invite] spectators to continue the process set in motion by the issues raised in the performance" (43), thereby acknowledging the tension between modernism and postmodernism inherent in Brecht's theory and practice themselves.

Stevens's *Anti-War Theatre after Brecht* is an insightful study which investigates anti-war theatre from a new angle through its Brechtian framework. Espe-

cially for those interested in Brechtian aesthetics, contemporary political theatre and its attempts at offering counter-discourses and imagining alternative spaces, it represents a valuable contribution to these ongoing debates. In this respect, Stevens's monograph paves the way for an indispensable reconsideration of Brechtian epic theatre on the contemporary stage – within, but certainly also beyond the book's context of anti-war plays.