

Book Reviews

Franziska Bergmann. *Die Möglichkeit, dass alles auch ganz anders sein könnte: Geschlechterverfremdungen in zeitgenössischen Theatertexten.* Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015, 347 pp., € 48.00.

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Ever since Judith Butler’s seminal writings, Queer Studies have heavily relied on theatrical language in their description of gender and sex to reveal the performative, and therefore contingent, character of these seemingly dichotomous categories. It is precisely this affinity between the deconstructive project of Queer Studies and the characteristics of the theatre that is explored in Franziska Bergmann’s insightful study *Die Möglichkeit, dass alles auch ganz anders sein könnte* (*The Possibility That Everything Could Be Entirely Different*). Indeed, with reference to Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia and in line with Christina Wald’s reassertion of “theatrical performance’s particular capacity to stage and negotiate questions of (gender) performativity” (17), the book seeks to apply the Brechtian concept of alienation in order to show how contemporary theatrical texts challenge conventional patterns of gender, sex and desire. While the significance of Brecht’s alienation, which aims to encourage “an attitude of inquiry and criticism” (Brecht 184) in the audience by de-familiarising ordinary incidents, has long been acknowledged by feminist theatre practice (see for example Elin Diamond’s call for a gestic feminist criticism in her influential essay “Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism”), Bergmann extends the category to include so-called queer alienation effects. As Chapter 1 examines, this concept of queer alienation reflects the inherent critical potential of queerness as such.

Mirroring the concerns of Queer Studies, Bergmann’s investigation of queer alienation in contemporary drama offers an extraordinary degree of diversity. The author pursues a transnational approach by choosing examples from American, British and German plays, which emphasises the fact that the discussion of gender-related questions can be considered an international phenomenon, even though certain national tendencies emerge, as Chapter 2 shows. Thus, questions of gender have played a particularly important role in the English-speaking theatre world, while in Germany, gender-related topics are comparatively under-represented in theatre practice and research. The choice of texts is itself characterised by a rich variety, featuring examples of documentary theatre, postdramatic theatre, in-yer-face theatre and collective theatre practice, besides more

traditional variations on comedy and tragedy. Moreover, Bergmann's study succeeds in encompassing a wide range of aspects under examination in Queer Studies, featuring references to trans- and intersexuality, racial issues and animal studies. Impressively, the author draws on multiple theoretical frameworks for the analysis of the plays, including psychoanalytical, poststructuralist, postcolonial, economic and ethical perspectives, which reflects the appeal of Queer Studies as an interdisciplinary field.

Characteristically, Bergmann does not consider the relation between theory and text as one-dimensional and hierarchical but as reciprocal: the queer reading of the plays serves as a critical approach to queer theory, both questioning and expanding the respective theoretical concept. This productive method is applied in Chapter 3, which focuses on Lee Edelman's notion of 'reproductive futurism,' i.e. the necessity to ensure the survival of mankind through reproduction, and its unmasking as a heteronormatively controlled discursive strategy on stage. Inspired by the Lacanian concept of the *sinthome*, which does not represent a signifier and thus does not carry any meaning, Edelman understands queerness as *sinthomosexuality*: queerness turns out to be entirely anti-social insofar as it refuses to conform to the reproductive teleology inscribed in the social order. Instead, *sinthomosexuality* is characterised by a pure enjoyment and narcissist excess that resists any integration into the symbolic order and therefore constitutes a deadly "impasse in the passage to the future" (Edelman 33). Bergmann applies Edelman's approach to her reading of Elfriede Jelinek's *Krankheit oder moderne Frauen* and Thomas Jonigk's *Du sollst mir Enkel schenken*, which stage *sinthomosexual* protagonists who expose the discursive mechanisms of heteronormative futurism and their constitutive role within capitalist and Nazi ideology. In Jelinek's play, lesbian vampires – an example of female *sinthomosexuality*, which is neglected in Edelman's approach – undermine conventional patterns of femininity based on motherhood. The destabilisation of the symbolic order initiated by the liminal identity of the vampires is reflected on the level of language, which gradually decomposes throughout the play, as well as on the level of form, with postdramatic aesthetics breaking with conventional, heteronormative dramatic categories. Jonigk's play, by contrast, employs a farcical mode to depict heteronormative role constraints and reproductive expectations within a family. However, despite the gay protagonist's *sinthomosexuality*, he appears as a collaborator rather than a critic of the social order because of his misogyny. Thus, against Edelman's assumptions, gay rebellion against reproduction and society does not necessarily entail a disintegration of heteronormativity as such, as Bergmann's analysis reveals.

Taking such aesthetically diverse plays as Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife* and Nora Mansmann's *zwei brüder drei augen* as powerful examples, Chapter 4

investigates recent developments in Transgender Studies, discussing plays in which trans- and intersexual protagonists disrupt the seemingly natural causal relation between sex, gender and desire in the heteronormative matrix through their ambiguous gender identity. Indeed, transgender phenomena run counter to the imposed coherence between sex and gender and challenge the dichotomous nature of sex itself. However, acknowledging the terminological confusion that surrounds transgender concepts such as trans- and intersexuality, transvestism and cross-dressing, Bergmann also stresses an inherent tension between this undeniable subversive dimension on the one hand and a possible affirmation of the hegemonic order on the other, particularly in terms of transgender people's desire to establish a coherent identity. Thus, the characters experience their transgender identity as both threatening and liberating, a feeling which is reinforced by the political context of totalitarianism to which queerness is, once again, closely connected in the plays. Wright's semi-documentary text undertakes a queer re-writing of history, staging the hazardous life of a transvestite in Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Working with cross-dressing and camp aesthetics, including camp props to mirror the protagonist's struggle materially, the text reverses the heteronormative matrix to celebrate transvestism and femininity. By contrast, Mansmann's play is set in an apocalyptic universe of grotesque and monstrous creatures whose hybrid identity between human and animal, man and woman is, in Baudrillardian terms, symptomatic of the postmodern condition. The characters' disintegrating, unstable identity goes hand in hand with the dramatic text: dissolving traditional dramatic categories, the text refuses, in a postmodern spirit, any formal categorisation. However, drawing on Bakhtin, Bergmann identifies this lack of (textual) identity and the increasingly grotesque nature of both text and characters as a potential for resistance to totalitarianism and, hence, a utopian moment amid chaos and loss.

Chapter 5 expands the field of Queer Studies by taking into account developments in postcolonial studies, arguing that sex, gender and race are intimately connected and subjected to similar heteronormative pressures. Bergmann's investigation of this intersection between queerness and race in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and DeObia Oparei's *Crazyblackmuthafuckin'self* represents a significant contribution to research on racial performativity. Drawing on multiple postcolonial concepts (Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity, Muñoz's disidentification, Sieg's ethnic drag and Cheng's racial melancholia), Bergmann identifies, in an explicitly Brechtian approach, a wide range of alienating devices which disclose the performative nature of race. Hwang, for example, exploits various intertextual and metatheatrical strategies, which stem from the interplay between Puccini's opera and Hwang's play, to reveal the ignorance inherent in Western discourse on orientalism. This criticism is reinforced by a deliberate play with

gender, since the Chinese protagonist, who plays a woman in the opera, turns out to be a man, thereby undermining any idealised, Western conception of oriental identity. In Oparei's comedy, race crossing is used as a central alienating device to challenge the continuity of racial identity, while also critically reflecting the extent to which these strategies may be considered an expression of assimilation. Crucially, the play, which is set in the context of performance rehearsals, represents a perceptive meta-theatrical comment on ideological cultural politics, calling for a theatre practice which leaves conventional patterns of identity behind. Thus, according to Bergmann, theatre does not only emerge as a privileged space for the staging of contingency but also as a conservative institution which is framed by and upholds heteronormative principles.

This self-reflexive approach is pursued further in Chapter 6, in which the progresses of Queer Theory are critically examined in the light of neoliberal ideology. Indeed, as Bergmann's analysis of Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* illustrates, the increasing presence and acceptance of queerness has gone hand in hand with the establishment of neoliberalism: (sexual) otherness has proven to be a highly profitable, and therefore much appreciated, factor in neoliberal societies. This has produced ambiguous effects, since homosexual emancipation has to be thought of in terms of its alliance with consumer society, thereby producing new forms of exclusion rather than liberation, as Bergmann argues. Ravenhill's play does not only reveal this through its time structure, which confronts an eighteenth-century setting with conditions at the turn of the millennium to attest to the connection between sexual liberation and capitalist excess, but also through its formal hybridity, which includes elements from commercialised genres such as the musical. By contrast, René Pollesch's *Heidi Hoh arbeitet nicht mehr* investigates how neoliberalism can also perpetuate patriarchal structures, since women are presented to be still much more likely to suffer from precarity than men. Pollesch succeeds in exposing this paradox through his specific postdramatic aesthetics, which combine and stage theoretical discourses with the aim of critically examining them.

Chapter 7 reinforces the timeliness of Bergmann's study with its focus on recent developments in Human Animal Studies, since the concept of queerness has begun to challenge the distinction between human and animal. Thus, influenced by philosophical and ethical considerations, Queer Animal Studies aim at reconceptualising communities by destabilising hierarchies and by finding ways of confronting the Other, including animals, on an egalitarian basis (e.g. Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto*). These debates are highly significant for theatrical texts, as Bergmann's analysis of Edward Albee's *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?* and René Pollesch's *Das purpurne Muttermal* reflects. Both plays stage love relationships between humans and animals to expose the contingency of

these boundaries. Albee, for example, draws upon the dramatic tradition of tragedy to examine, in a self-reflexive approach, the origins of theatre, which lie precisely in such a transgression of the distinction between human and animal. In her reading of Albee, Bergmann emphasises the mythical, symbolic and meta-dramatic complexity of the play, which supports processes of queer deconstruction on multiple levels. Simultaneously, the play foregrounds ethical questions with regard to the necessity of these anthropological distinctions. Pollesch, by contrast, creates a comic role-play in order to destabilise notions of coherent subjectivity. Experimenting with alternative conceptions of identity and community, the theoretical considerations of Queer Animal Studies are tried out on stage in an explicitly postdramatic approach to theatre.

In conclusion, Bergmann's queer reading of contemporary British, American and German drama represents an important contribution to both Queer and literary studies: the detailed and well-informed analyses testify to the significant role of queerness in the theatre. Unfortunately, however, Bergmann fails to exhaust the full potential of her intriguing definition of queer alienation. Indeed, explicit references to Brecht and his theoretical and aesthetic interventions are rare and therefore the queer Brechtian perspective adopted in Chapter 1 tends to get lost in the course of the book. This is regrettable, since a Brechtian approach to these texts could have led to fruitful results, establishing an important connection between Brecht's Epic Theatre and recent developments in Queer Studies. This reservation aside, however, the study makes for a rewarding read by virtue of its accessible language and its focus on theoretical and textual diversity. Critically engaging with issues of queerness on stage, the book substantially expands the field of Queer Studies and successfully fills a gap of German criticism and research on queerness.

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