

Anneka Esch-van Kan

Representation of Crisis – Crisis of Representation

The Politics of Aesthetics and 21st Century Political Theater
in the United States

Ansgar Nünning, Vera Nünning, Norbert Finzsch (Hg.)

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*For my dearly-loved mother, who has taught me to live my dreams, to embrace risks,
and to always remain curious.*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Is Political Theater a “Dead Duck”? – An Introduction	1
2.	“The Sky Can Still Fall On Our Heads” – 9/11 on Stage	21
2.1	Theatre of Witness	27
2.2	9/11 as an Event – 9/11 Reinvented	39
2.3	Collapsing Images, The Sublime and the Aesthetic Regime of Art	52
3.	Taking Risks: Resistance in the Theater between Theory and Practice	65
4.	How to Read Political Performances	86
5.	21st Century Political Theater in the United States	96
5.1	Life – Art – Performance: Moments of Uncertainty in the Foundry Theatre’s <i>MAJOR BANG, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Dirty Bomb</i>	110
5.2	Political Musicals – Imperfection and Queerness in Taylor Mac’s <i>Red Tide Blooming</i>	121
5.3	Choreographies of the Documentary Turn – Epistemological Crises in the Civilians’ (<i>I Am</i>) <i>Nobody’s Lunch</i>	137
5.4	Myths of an Exceptional Nation – The Power of Images in Big Art Group’s <i>SOS</i>	149
5.5	Arab American Theater – The Power of Language in Yussef El Guindi’s <i>Back of the Throat</i>	163
5.6	(His)Stories of War – A Poetics of War in Quiara Alegria Hudes’s <i>Elliot, a Soldier’s Fugue</i>	176
6.	A Political Theater of the New Millennium? – Conclusions	194
	Works Cited	202
	List of Illustrations	233

1. IS POLITICAL THEATER A “DEAD DUCK”? – AN INTRODUCTION

Political theater is dead. It has lost its functions, if it ever had any. The great visions of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, the careful social analyses of Arthur Miller and Clifford Odets, the lively protest theater against the Vietnam War, the educational drive of documentary theater have all had their days, but they could not keep up with the times. Michael Billington already asked in the 1980s if political theater was a “dead duck” and thereby took up a widespread mood shift within London’s theater community (Billington qtd. in Holderness 1992: 1). By now, it is considered good form to doubt the political value and efficacy of theater and to resolutely reject any explicit address of current political themes on stage. Moreover, it is common practice to devalue topical plays and performances that still find their way onto the stage. Derived from Piscator’s (1979) stress on the imperative priority of political messages over artistic choices, many scholars and artists insist that political theater in nine cases out of ten equals aesthetically poor theater (cf. for instance LaBute 2003, Woods 1997). The resoluteness and normative dimension of this pessimistic assessment shows in apodictic formulations such as Hans-Thies Lehmann’s claim that it is “[n]on-arguably [...] a pragmatic, obvious fact” that an “intentionally political discourse is *already* pointless due to the simple fact that theater has *very obviously* lost the political place it occupied in former times” (Lehmann 2002: 13, trans. & emphasis mine).

The development of the main genres of political theater – such as documentary theater, Brechtian teaching plays, agitprop theater, or the living newspaper – is usually attributed to artists (mostly playwrights) from Germany, Great Britain, and Russia. By contrast, theater in the United States is seldom associated with a particularly political dimension. At times, it even appears as if American theater and political theater are in outright opposition. But the comparatively short history of American theater does in fact include some shining moments of political art. Despite the importance of a high entertainment value in American theater, partly triggered by the strong financial pressure to be attractive to the audience, there has always been a sizzling need and looming tendency to link art to critical reflections upon one’s own time. Hallie Flanagan used the short existence (1935-1939) of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) to popularize the format of living newspapers such as *One Third of a Nation* (1938) throughout the United States. At the same time – in the “red decade” (Zapf 2004: 295) of the 1930s – Clifford Odets wrote for a socially engaged, proletarian theater. Today he is best known for his engagement in the Group Theater and his agitprop drama *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), which had such an immense impact on audiences that Harold Clurman remembers it as “the birth cry of the thirties” (qtd. in Mann & Roessel 2002: 347). Arthur Miller secured an important place in international theater historiographies for his social domestic drama (Zapf 2004: 302) *All My Sons* (1947) and his trenchant critique of McCarthyism in *The Crucible* (1953). These are all memorable moments, yet they do not connect to a coherent story of political theater in the United States, and

they pale beside the much more influential political theater and the writing of manifestos and theoretical treatises on the subject in Europe (cf. Fiebach 2003).¹

The only period that had a major impact beyond the United States was the forceful revolt of American theater artists against the Vietnam War in the 1960s: The Bread and Puppet Theater, with their over-sized papier-mâché puppets, joined anti-war demonstrations and created internationally highly-visible pictures that powerfully revolted against the war; The Living Theatre toured through the United States and Europe to support public protests and, in their stage performances, transgressed (physical) boundaries to provoke spectators to take up an active position; the San Francisco Mime Troupe became important with their *commedia dell'arte* inspired, free-for-the-public street performances that used pantomime in a mocking way to express political critique. El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworkers Theater) pled the cause for Chicano culture and vehemently protested the Vietnam War in their trilogy *Vietnam Campesino* (1970), *Soldado Razo* (1971), and *Dark Root of a Scream* (1971).

Today, the names of the famous group theaters evoke memories of the glorious 1960s – a bygone era that in retrospect seems to have enmeshed itself in a wrongheaded subscription to leftist ideologies.² Yet even if the groups actually devolved and the communal aspects fell apart at the seams, in the dead space of theater historiography, the animating spirits have persisted with their politics and have to this day developed performances going by the name of the original groups. For decades, this happened largely unnoticed by the public and international scholarship, but in recent years the legendary performance groups have regained visibility. The Living Theatre returned to New York City and opened their new home at Clinton Street with a revival of Kenneth H. Brown’s *The Brig* in 2007.³ Judith Malina and Hanon Reznikov repeatedly declared that they returned to New York at a time when their art is needed to intervene and resist a conservative government of warmongers that overrules the human rights and democratic freedoms of people at home and abroad.⁴ The Bread and Puppet Theater,

¹ Of course this is not meant to diminish the contributions to the theory of the political in theater by American scholars such as Herbert Blau or Peggy Phelan, among others.

² The fact that the work of the theater groups is not considered as an ongoing practice of groups founded in the 1960s that still continue to create art and shape contemporary theater practice, but as part of a bygone era of political theater-making that now merely influences younger artists, shows in publications such as *Restaging the Sixties – Radical Theaters and Their Legacies* (Harding/Rosenthal 2006).

³ They also took the piece about inhuman conditions in (American) prisons onto the streets, e.g. to Columbus Circle, Union Square, and Ground Zero (Ryan 2012: 167). Dirk Szuszies’s 2003 documentary *Resist! – A dream of life with the Living Theatre* follows the anarchic group surrounding prematurely-deceased Julian Beck, Judith Malina, and Hanon Reznikov. Szuszies explores the development of their art from the group’s inception in 1947 to *Resist Now!*, which they performed on 16 September 2001 right at the Ground Zero site as a warning against the transformation of mourning into hate and longing for retaliation.

⁴ Malina and Reznikov emphasized the reasons and occasion of their return repeatedly, for example in the recent video documentary on their work *Resist Now! To Be with the Living*

founded in 1963, also followed the call for resurrection. Peter Schumann had never stopped distributing his self-made sourdough bread among audience members, yet the specifics of the political situation in the United States following the September 11 attacks clearly served as a motivation to concentrate his energy on the US-led wars of the recent past. The giant papier-mâché puppets were back at anti-war demonstrations, and the group presented full-evening performances throughout the United States.⁵ The San Francisco Mime Troupe also leapt at the chance and mounted one production per year that explicitly targeted the Bush administration and the ongoing “War on Terror.”⁶

In December 2002, more than two hundred artists and scholars of different generations assembled at the tradition-steeped avant-garde theater PS122 and discussed the potentialities of a collective protest of New York theaters against the Bush administration’s aggressive foreign policy. In this context, the artists’ network THEaters Against War (THAW) was founded in order to perform specific functions: It re-evaluated and encouraged various forms of political theater, offered information on upcoming events, provided space for open discussions, organized monthly “Freedom Follies” that featured excerpts of politically-minded performances, supported demonstrations and pro-

(2004) and at the performance of *Love & Politics* at New York’s Markor Theater on 12 May 2006.

⁵ Bread and Puppet Theater has for a long time been an annual guest at the Theater for the New City, and ever since 2001 their performances have addressed the political issues surrounding 9/11, recent U.S.-led military strikes, and the so-called “War on Terror”: *The Insurrection Mass with Funeral March for a Rotten Idea: A Special Mass for the Aftermath of the Events of September 11th* (2001), billed as a “non-religious service in the presence of several papier mache gods,” opened at Theater for the New City in December 2001; *The Battle of the Terrorists and the Horrorists* (2006) harshly criticized the simplistic ideology of terrorism and the War on Terror; *The National Circus and Passion of the Correct Moment* (2005) (re)presented the American history of the recent past and traced the seemingly unbreakable vicious circle of violence that leads to the eternal perpetuation of wars, inhumanness, and dreadful suffering; *The Divine Reality Comedy* (2007) blended Dante’s *Divine Comedy* with the dehumanizing practices in the U.S. prison camp in Guantanamo; the re-staging of *Attica* (2011) stuck with the same topic and was presented as a double-bill together with *Man of Flesh and Cardboard* (2011), a tale of Bradley Manning, the soldier who leaked classified military information to Wiki-leaks in hopes of revealing the brutality of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

⁶ *Mr. Smith goes to Obscuristan* (2002) tells the story of a 9/11 fireman hero (Jeff Smith) who is sent to Obscuristan as official Election Observer and who witnesses the absolute priority of corporate interests when oil is discovered in the country; *Veronique of the Mounties* (2003) fictionally sketches how American imperialism (leading to a war with Canada) goes in hand with the deadly dangerous neglect of domestic issues; *Showdown at Crawford Gulch* (2004) was directly targeted at the upcoming election and called for regime change; *Godfellas* (2006) tries to get to the bottom of the recent turn to religion and faith rhetoric in American politics; and *Making a Killing* (2007) goes into the matter of the Iraq War, exposes failures on all sides, and emphasizes how corruption and manipulation rules in Iraq and in the United States.

tests, and offered to coordinate independent impulses.⁷ On March 2, 2003, more than two hundred theaters throughout New York City included some kind of political protest against the Iraq War in their programs; these ranged from topical performances, to audience addresses and public speeches, to the simple distribution of materials such as the “Not In Our Name Statement of Conscience.”⁸ The following day, the Lysistrata Project reaped overwhelming success with more than one thousand readings of the classic Aristophanes play in 59 countries around the world and in every single American state.

The topics of the day became prominent subjects in contemporary drama, took pride of place in documentary theater, gained great importance for street performances and activist protest theater, infiltrated contemporary performance art, crossed up the world of experimental theater, inspired choreographers, bonded with the obscene acts of burlesque and drag, and even wormed themselves into Broadway musicals. All major downtown venues and many other hot spots of theater in New York City participated in an active response to the political situation, and so did theaters throughout the nation. Protest posters became part of Broadway shows (*Spamalot*), and in the burlesque world one could suddenly be confronted with the naked butt of a Bush caricature (*James Tigger! Ferguson*). The chastened mood, the smoldering discontent, and the swelling anger resulted in a colorful and multifaceted political theater landscape that Marvin Carlson (2004: 16) – professor of theater studies at the City University of New York – celebrated in his 2004 *Theatre Survey* article “9/11 – Afghanistan – Iraq: The Response of the New York Theater” as “the most concentrated and dedicated political theater to appear in America since the 1960s.”

Several theater festivals, such as The UnConvention (2004), Ignite (2006), and Armed and Naked in America: A Naked Angels Issues Project (2007), provided forums for engaged artists to connect and tried to enhance the visibility and potential impact of performances. Perhaps the most significant attempt to bundle forces and to claim the wave of topical plays and activist endeavours as a “movement” was the Culture Project’s 2006 festival IMPACT – Where Culture and Politics Collide. The programme included more than 50 events in 42 days: lectures, performances, artist’s talks, and ample room for exchange. It scheduled a fine selection of performances that had had successful New York runs before, but also a number of shows that were originally produced for the festival. Several other New York theaters were involved in the project as partner institutions and festival venues. The IMPACT festival, however, failed to meet its aims: it showed little (medial) repercussions, failed to enhance the political impact of performances, and could not mark the rise of political theater as a “move-

⁷ For further information and details consult the website of the network: www.thawaction.org (last accessed 26 October 2012).

⁸ The “Not in Our Name Statement of Conscience,” together with a list of its numerous signers that reads like a who’s who of American downtown theater and includes world-famous scholars such as Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, is available at: artists.refuseandresist.org/news4/news170.html (last accessed 26 October 2012).

ment” – in fact, the overall failure of the festival (in terms of its impact and economic success) rather turned into a piece of evidence for the scatteredness of impulses that could not possibly be united. The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a significant increase in political theater, but there was certainly nothing that could be described as a movement.⁹ Two aspects have certainly played into this: first, the reluctance of artists to fully identify wedded to the fear of getting labelled; second, the fact that opinions vary widely on the question of what political theater could or should mean nowadays.

Political Theater and The Political in Theater

To this day, the prevalent understanding of political theater identifies those plays as political that explicitly deal with politics on a thematic level, as all those trends and performances mentioned above also do to a certain extent. Yet this is exactly the notion of political theater that provoked the repeated proclamation of its death. Beyond the rumor that topical performances have a low aesthetic quality, the proclamation of opinions and political self-positioning have come under suspicion. Controversial public discussions have become an integral part of political systems. Critique is embraced and attests to the functioning of democracy. The political day-to-day business has also changed significantly. Politicians have become actors in a media spectacle that not only presents public persons in the right light, but carefully selects the topics of the day and their embedding. If political theater refers to what is covered in the news and tries to contribute to the shaping of public opinion on these themes, it risks echoing the public performance of politics. By “eating what is served,” it might easily play into the hands of the political system instead of offering any serious form of critique.

In the 1980s, many artists therefore withdrew from political theater altogether and – suspending the idea of a political impact of art – engaged in formalist experiments: In his stunning visual operas, Robert Wilson experimented with different paces and performances of excess length; the Wooster Group transformed performers into technically equipped processing machines; and Richard Foreman realized lightning-fast visions of the subconscious. Yet it did not take long until scholars started to fight the assumed apoliticality of theater in the 1980s. It was increasingly deemed necessary to change the course, to reclaim the social and political importance of theater, and to

⁹ Rumor has it that the festival still turned out to be a financial fiasco that had its part in the forced move of the theater into an office in 2008 (cf. Eisler 2006). Be that as it may, by now, the Culture Project is on the upswing, has moved back into its original home, and in 2012 even continued its ambition to create a broad and widely visible forum for political art with a second IMPACT festival. The intermedial and interdisciplinary impulses remained as an integral element, yet the festival concentrated much more on the creation of new works in artistic labs and significantly broadened its thematic focus from a concrete political situation in the U.S. onto all sorts of “injustice” – be it political suppression, physical violence, or economic inequality – around the globe.

fight dominant readings of postmodern variants of experimental theater as apolitical. In *Presence and Resistance* (1992), Philip Auslander claims that the theater of the Wooster Group and Laurie Anderson, among others, is indeed political in a much stronger sense than performances that directly refer to politics as subject matter. He introduces the distinction between *transgressive* and *resistant* performances¹⁰ and argues that critical art today can only resist the system from within.

Instead of spouting off political rallying cries and attempting to recruit audiences for activist engagements, postmodern artists strive for slight deferrals of meaning, for irritating interruptions of the readable world, for changes in the patterns of perception, for the exploration of tactics that subvert the system from within, and for active as well as passive resistance. One major indication of this change was the return of artists onto the proscenium stage that coincided with a metatheatrical discourse on working conditions, on consequences of inherent hierarchical structures, on the fixation and obvious limitation of audience perspectives, and on the inescapable entanglement in dominant ideologies and power structures. Even though protest theaters still roam the streets and special places continue to be transformed into stages, the return into theater buildings is a symptom of the more general, firm conviction that resistance in art and beyond has to acknowledge the impossibility of an outside position of critique and that it needs to develop tactical and subversive ways of resistance that usually focus on experiments in form rather than content.

Auslander’s impulse to rethink the political dimension of theater, instead of bemoaning the loss of its political functions and unintentionally affirming reactionary forces that call for the end of formalist experiments and for a return to realist and topical plays¹¹, broke the ground for a general shift in perspective and new branches of research. Scholars and artists alike realized that it would be too high a cost to abandon the social and critical function of theater, yet instead of revoking the announced death of political theater, it has – partly in further development of Auslander’s concept of resistant performance – become common practice to talk of *the political in theater* instead. In marked contrast to *political theater* that merely repeats the currently offered choice of volatile issues, conceptions of *the political in theater* are much more concerned with aesthetics and philosophy. This is evidenced by the choice of name that clearly sets *the political in theater* off from genre categories such as *political theater*.

The political in theater defies easy definitions and is based on its multidimensionality and ambiguity. It describes changed perspectives on contemporary performance; it refers to recent experiments with ways of perception and aesthetic structures; it often comes with a normative dimension that sketches out a favorable critical art of the twenty-first century; and it inextricably interlinks politics and aesthetics. In her lemma on political theater in the Metzler encyclopedia on theater theory, Erika Fischer-Lichte

¹⁰ Auslander bases his distinction between resistant and transgressive forms of political theater on the scholarship and distinction between resistance and transgression of Hal Foster (1985: 153).

¹¹ Cf. among many others Kreuder/Sörgel 2008 and implicitly Kritzer 2008.