Hacks' Biographie seiner Vorliebe für Komödien. Auf der Oberfläche eine unterhaltsende Handlung mit vertrauten Figuren und zumindest im Nachhinein erklärlich scheinenden Wendungen, der amüsante Stoff hat eine geschichtliche Dimension, die dem Geschehen Gewicht verleiht, und kommt es zu den Details, dann scheitern an deren Widerspenstigkeit die großzügigen Erklärungen ebenso wie die Rückgriffe auf Figurenkliches. Wie im Leben so im Text.


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Martin Puchner
Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama

As many German language and literature departments have refashioned themselves into German studies programs, uncritical emulations of German-language culture via well-meaning student productions of Dürrenmatt's *Besuch der alien Dame* largely have become a thing of the past (fortunately, as some might say). A very unfortunate side effect of the shift away from a philology based on period and genre classifications, however, is the marginal role of theater and performance studies within the discipline. One of the most interesting sites of theoretical discussion in American studies (in Judith Butler's theoretical reframing of performance or in the research on African American theater) still has not rid itself completely from the association with academic conservatism in German studies. A quick glance at the 2003 program of the German Studies Association reveals that only 5 of the 167 sessions include talks on a dramatic work, most of them plugged into a larger theoretical discussion on themes such as spectatorship, alterity, or gender. It seems as though we do not expect analysis of drama as a genre to yield insights that might change our perception of our field, let alone other fields. Puchner's book proves this assumption wrong. In a breathtaking tour de force through different languages, genres, and millennia from Plato to the Wooster Group, *Stage Fright* opens up a theoretical path for the reintegration of theater studies into the German studies discourse, which puts a spotlight on modernism, but casts its dramatic literature as an extra.

According to Puchner, contemporary studies of modernism follow suit in solidifying the antitheatrical prejudice propagated by modernism (most prominently Nietzsche's attack on Wagner's theateocracy or Benjamin's critique of autocratic spectacles) by treating any reference to staging within dramatic texts as secondary or by ignoring the category of theater altogether. In contrast, Puchner argues persuasively that theater plays a constitutive role in modernism and proposes theatrical-
ity as the divisive aesthetical moment in the opposition between modernism and the avant-garde: while modernism resists Wagner’s theatricality and retreats into the closet drama, the avant-garde outdoes Wagner in its politicized embrace of the mass audience. Borrowing his title from Hitchcock’s noir classic, in which stage fright not only denotes the actor’s fear of the audience but in a sly turn also comes to represent the audience’s fear of the actor, Puchner analyzes different dramatic models of resistance to the actor and to theatricality. He traces the history of anti-theatricalism in modernist reactions to Wagner’s project of emphatic theatricality (Mallarmé, Joyce, Stein) and the more pragmatic theater reform projects of Yeats, Brecht, and Beckett. Although the modernists emphasized the status of drama as a literary text and catered to the solitary reader of their modernist closet dramas instead of servicing unruly mass audiences, their successors channeled their resistance to theatricality productively back into theater itself: the diegetic theater emerged. In a bold move worthy of comparison to Auerbach, who firmly grounded mimesis as a socio-analytical category of narrative, Puchner reclaims the term diegesis as a category of dramatic analysis by drawing on Plato’s definition of mimesis and diegesis as equal forces struggling within one text. Sensing an anti-theatrical agenda in Plato, Puchner uses diegesis to describe the narrative strategies that monitor or disrupt the theatricality of stage and actors in modern drama.

Puchner credits Wagner with transforming theatricality from a term merely relating to theater into a fraught commitment to actors and acting. Wagner’s ideologically charged sound gestures, theatricalization of music, and gestural theatricality forced Nietzsche (and later Adorno) into the anti-theatrical stance that laid the theoretical ground for modernism’s association of mimesis and theatricality and its deep-seeded mistrust of the emoting, gestulating actor. The actor became the scapegoat of modernism. However, Wagner himself was not free of anxieties about false theatricality, as an analysis of the gap between Mime’s speech and his intentions in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* shows.

For Puchner, it is modernism’s resistance to theatricality that places theater at the heart of modernist literature. Mallarmé’s closet dramas such as the genre-crossover *Le Livre* celebrate the act of reading and use stage directions that attempt to erase the actor or replace him or her with the disembodied opérateur. In *Ulysses*, it is the included closet drama, the *Circe* chapter, not the narrative that acts out the novel’s textual unconscious. Joyce’s theater transcends its conventional genre limitations: words act as gestures, thus changing sexes in one stroke and challenging conventional notions of sexuality. Despite her status within the canon of the avant-garde, Gertrude Stein’s theater experiments are based on high modernist values and political conservatism. Capturing this tension and its resulting narrative contradictions, Puchner defines her strategy of constantly interrupting mimesis with diegetic fragments as *cubist diegesis*. His discussion of early stagings of Stein’s texts reveals the connection between modernist theater practice and Brechtian drama theory: conceived of as a pragmatic, make-shift solution, the creation of two distinctly different spaces for mimesis and diegesis on
stage becomes in Brecht’s epic theater a performed separation, a separation that takes place within every actor.

Yeats also implemented many now-classic theoretical and practical elements of the diegetic theater in his search for depersonalized modes of acting: he turned to the highly stylized Japanese Nôh tradition, privileged lyrical speech, worked with amateur actors, and stuffed them into barrels for rehearsal. His work with the Abbey Theatre marks the beginning of a long tradition of antitheatricality coupled with a political mission (in his case a rather conflicted mission of Irish nationalism) of which Brecht is certainly the most productive and influential ambassador. Brecht’s epic theater integrates reading and writing onto the stage, appropriates Nôh theater for the Lehrstück and evokes the idea of the actor as a functionary. In Brecht’s school of acting, the struggle of mimesis and diegesis is present in every single actor. Diegetic text and mimetic scenes fight for primacy and leave it up to the audience to resolve the resulting interpretational gap. With pantomime plays without words and radio plays with gestures, Beckett’s theater represents another significant assault on the actor. Mallarmé’s symbolism makes its reappearance in Beckett’s isolation and control of gestures; however, Beckett’s gestures are devoid of meaning and serve to create their own repetitive patterns. Although Beckett’s dramatic work has often been interpreted as a retreat into formalism, Puchner argues that it represents a critical response to theatricalized mass politics. Puchner closes with a reflection on the dire state of diegetic theater in the age of technological mediation and of newfound appreciation for collective experience. Whether and how these developments can be resisted in the current dramatic literature remains to be seen.

Puchner’s book is original and exciting even in its asides and footnotes; for example, the footnote analysis of how Wagner turned the ideology of Germanic philology into aesthetic practice creates an interesting dialogue with Marc Weiner’s and David Levin’s recent work on Wagner. Many of these asides beg further exploration in their own right, such as the sexual politics of the closet in the closet drama in regard to Stein. Puchner’s characterizations of Brecht’s theater as a “theater on a leash” defined by its suspicion of visual pleasure seem overly rigid and stand in contrast to the complexity that his own analysis unfolds. A more thorough account of Brecht’s visually dramatic and shocking stagings during the Weimar Republic (for example, the scene of a grotesquely giant clown being sawn apart down to his bloody socks in “Flug der Lindberghs” in front of an enraged audience in 1929) could have enhanced Puchner’s description of this phase as operatic and would not have taken anything away from the cogency and conciseness of the overarching argument. Stage Fright provides a solid overview of crucial moments in the history of drama while implementing an original theoretical framework and an innovative reading practice for stage directions. It is an intellectual treat and a must-read for any scholar dealing with twentieth-century literature and culture.

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