



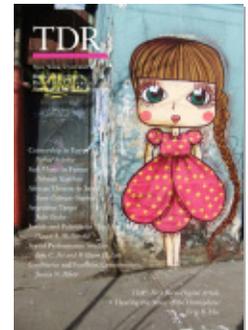
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The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy by Martin Puchner (review)

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The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy. By Martin Puchner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; 272 pp. \$29.95 cloth.

“It is time to revive Plato—not the discredited Plato of idealism, but a different one, the Plato of dramatic Platonism” (198). Motivated by this belief, Martin Puchner presents in *The Drama of Ideas* a “theatrical history of modern philosophy—a history of philosophy from the point of view of drama and theater” (8). The book features an eclectic cast including George Kaiser, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Tom Stoppard, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Kenneth Burke, Gilles Deleuze, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, Alain Badiou, Socrates, and, of course, Plato. Its key term, “dramatic Platonism,” carries the assertion that Platonic idealism (i.e., the theory of the world of forms) loses all potency and legitimacy when not developed in tandem with an analysis of the bodies that express those forms in the material world. According to Puchner, Plato’s philosophy is *practical* and *dramatic*, and we find it at work in his dialogues. When approached as dramatic texts, the dialogues reveal Plato as a reformist playwright (chapter 1). A book of enormous scope, fueled by extensive research and a lifelong enthusiasm for pursuing the connections between philosophy and theatre, *The Drama of Ideas* presents a model for a new generation of performance philosophers to scrutinize and build upon.

Dramatic Platonism is thus a “balancing act” (34) between idealism and materialism, and Puchner introduces his readers to the dramaturgy of such an act in the first chapter, where he develops a poetics of the Socrates play, a genre that mixes tragic and comic elements and to which Plato’s dialogues belong. “Plato’s conception of theater was at once a break with Athenian theatricality [...] and a hesitant attempt to envision a mode of performance that would coexist with writing. Plato’s dialogues are reformist texts that seem to change the very practice of theatrical performance, pointing the way to the theater of the future” (30). Through analyses of the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and other dialogues, Puchner develops an image of Plato as a protomodernist playwright. He lays out the basic principles of a Platonic poetics, which he sets off against Aristotle’s views on theatre and dramatic poetry by focusing on the features of character, action, and drama’s relation to the audience. He then locates this poetics in the dramatic works of numerous playwrights as well as in the texts of many philosophers.

Several of the book’s case studies present fascinating insights into modern theatre and philosophy by locating in plays and treatises antiheros modeled on the character of Socrates, philosophical arguments embedded in circuitous and sometimes ludicrous plots, and techniques that transform audience members and readers into keen participant observers capable of engaging in and enacting philosophical thought. Puchner’s reading of Stoppard’s *Jumpers* and Shaw’s *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* are particularly enjoyable and intriguing. In the former, Puchner finds a critique of philosophical relativism demonstrated through “theater’s supposedly relativizing effects” (118). In the case of Shaw’s play, and despite its poor critical reception at the time of its emergence, Puchner sees a British theatre of ideas following in the footsteps of Wilde that “mixes idea and character, argument and action by forging a drama from their collision” (98).

By yoking such a diverse collection of plays and playwrights together, Puchner runs the risk of finding precisely what he is looking for. If this is indeed his argument—that dramatic Platonism already exists and that, in order to fight off cultural and philosophical relativism, we must learn to recognize it—is Puchner not simply applying his creative Platonic reading to



dramatists whose works reveal a general philosophical tendency? Such a claim would not be unwarranted, but it is not something that Puchner avoids. “Platonic drama,” he writes, “does not describe a single tradition within modern drama, but rather a cluster of playwrights who find different solutions and forms to the same question or problem: how to use ideas in theater” (119). With such a statement, Puchner encourages readers to test his theory and to dive into the history of the Socrates play—a task that would be aided by the book’s 37-page history of such plays and an appendix listing 118 titles of Socrates plays written between the time of Lucian (167 CE) and the contemporary work of Steve Hatzai (2008 CE).

In chapter 4, Puchner turns his attention from philosophical playwrights to dramatic philosophers and offers, again, some compelling analyses that reveal Plato’s dramatic legacy in the works of 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century philosophers. Of particular note are the pages dedicated to Kierkegaard’s major works such as *Either/Or* and his use of characters such as A and B in that text. As was the case with the preceding chapter devoted to playwrights, Puchner, despite the unique signatures of the philosophers he treats, locates elements in both the form and content of their writings that link them to Plato’s theatrical reformation and devotion to Truth. Puchner’s Kierkegaard, for example, is not a disciple of Plato plain and simple but a reformer who manages to remake Platonic dramatism for a new generation (125–38).

This book’s subtitle—Platonic provocations—points to both the strength and weakness of *The Drama of Ideas*. Its strength is its many glimpses of dramatic Platonism at work, which provide numerous lines of sight onto the reciprocal relation between Ideas and everyday life. The weakness of these provocations is their *sprezzatura*; certain sections of the book forward bold claims through quick analyses and beg for more thorough treatment. But idiosyncrasies of style and content do not ultimately detract from the merit of this book, which presents Plato as a philosopher-dramatist engaged in the critique of sophistry and steps into the Platonic lineage by offering a contemporary critique of the philosophies of difference propounded by poststructuralism. The recent formation of the professional association Performance Philosophy proves that scholars of theatre and performance are attuned to the theatrical turn philosophy has taken in the 20th century. Puchner’s book provides a model research methodology for scholars of this new field, and his enthusiasm for the drama of philosophy speaks through its pages.

—Will Daddario

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