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The vexed question of the text in Postdramatic Theatre in a cross-cultural perspective

It is interesting to observe how Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999) and its various translations have intervened – or have been *perceived* to have intervened – in the particular debates and institutional situations of theatre in countries outside of Germany. In Britain, *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006) has mostly been highly welcomed – especially by experimental theatre practitioners who have seen it as legitimating their practice and as a new way of describing their work to audiences and funding bodies alike.[1] Yet, it has also been hotly debated, for example at a Leeds conference on "Performing Literatures" in 2007.[2] One of the most contentious and vexed issues in the British reception of *Postdramatic Theatre* has been the question of the text and how Lehmann's theory relates to "new writing" for theatre and performance. Thus, Liz Tomlin, a theatre academic and practicing playwright, has recently claimed that the reception of *Postdramatic Theatre* has inadvertently reinforced a pre-existing binary distinction between "text-based" and "non-text-based theatre" in Britain, in such a way that dramatic theatre has usually been associated with "text-based" and postdramatic with "non-text-based theatre". Tomlin argues that Lehmann's

> Postdramatisches Theater *lent an academic authority to the segregation of dramatic text from 'non-text-based' practice that had previously been expressed through a range of different, but related, binary oppositions. By the*

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[1] This appreciation of the new discourse and vocabulary provided by *Postdramatic Theatre* also seems to be the case, for example, in Australia. See Margaret Hamilton (2008) on "Postdramatic Theatre and Australia".

[2] See the special issue "Performing Literatures", *Performance Research*, Vol. 14. 1 (March 2009), which emerged from this conference.

time the English translation was published in 2006, the new binary of dra-
matic and postdramatic was common currency in British university depart-
ments, giving significant legitimacy, and a new vocabulary, to bolster further,
and define more clearly the boundaries already in place. While Lehmann
never explicitly aligns dramatic with text-based and postdramatic with non-
text-based practice, I will argue that his conclusions, inconclusive as they are,
are ultimately more likely to consolidate than to fracture the existing binary.
(Tomlin 2009: 58)

Similar to the British binarizing reception, an Australian review of *Post-*
dramatic Theatre by Denise Varney at one point even (mis-)understands the
book to say that "if dramatic theatre is 'subordinated to the primacy of the text'
and the 'making present' of speeches and deeds in the mimetic space of the
stage, then postdramatic theatre is *theatre without text*" (Varney 2007: unpagi-
nated, my emphasis).

This is clearly not the perception in Germany, where it is generally recog-
nized that a significant body of postdramatic theatre has evolved out of new
and often irreverent directorial treatments of pre-existing texts. The so-called
Regietheater (directors' theatre), which regards the text as only one element
of the staging and which, as Gerda Poschmann states, in its most radically
deconstructive form of the so-called *Klassikerzertrümmerung* (demolition of
the classics) even understands itself as a "theatre *against* the text" (Poschmann
1997: 20), has been an important driving force for postdramatic theatre forms
since the late 1960s. At the same time, new dramaturgical methods of postdra-
matic theatre have evolved in response to challenging *new* texts for the theatre
by writers like Peter Handke, Heiner Mueller, Elfriede Jelinek, Ginka Stein-
wachs and others, which Gerda Poschmann described early on as "no longer
dramatic texts" (Poschmann, 1997).

Institutional and infra-structural differences

In part, this different perception certainly has to do with the different in-
stitutional situations for theatre practitioners and writers in Britain and Ger-
many. Britain – like Germany, but unlike countries such as Belgium – has a
long national tradition of literary, dramatic theatre, which takes place mostly
in commercialised repertory theatres. Only a handful of theatres, such as the
Royal Court and the Bush Theatre, foster new writing. At the same time, a
parallel tradition of collaboratively devised, experimental performance theatre
has grown up at the 'fringe', which has often come out of the historically young

university theatre departments and usually been toured in independent arts centres and touring venues, and at festivals like the Edinburgh Festival.

In this institutional division, which is only slowly changing, the single author of formally innovative texts can find him – or herself – marginalized despite the success of the British new wave of 'In-Yer-Face' playwriting in the 1990s. David Barnett, a British scholar of German theatre, has argued that the comparatively lavishly funded theatre system in Germany can better support the sustained theatre work with difficult texts:

> *One specific result of the heavy subsidy and the decentralized system in Germany is that theatres are able to work with difficult texts in a productive fashion. Plays may be written in such a way that they openly expose themselves to the imaginations of their realizers […], the system actively encourages plays that are not easily performable and thrives on the challenges they pose.* (Barnett, 2010: 155)

As Barnett further states, this productive encounter is facilitated not only by comparatively generous production budgets and an infrastructure of extensive and varied training opportunities but by the collaborative work of committed permanent ensembles over long rehearsal periods and with the creative input of "production dramaturges" (Produktionsdramaturgen), who form close working partnerships with directors and ensembles (ibid., 154).

By contrast, theatres in England traditionally tend to employ "literary managers" instead of dramaturges. Their job description involves the selection and development of new plays in collaboration with the authors, and they rarely help to workshop and rehearse plays (see Luckhurst, 2006: 205). While this picture is currently changing in England (ibid., 206), there are still structural and infrastructural hindrances to formally innovative texts. Thus Barnett quotes a British playwright, Simon Stephens, who had trouble getting his new play about the London bombings staged in Britain: "I've been told that the play is far too German", he reported (Barnett, 2010: 150). Like other formally innovative British texts, Stephens' play, *Pornography* (2007), which consists of six texts unattributed to specific characters, was successfully staged in Germany – in four different productions no less – before finally being shown in Britain at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

At the same time, however, independent British experimental theatre companies have for a long time cultivated innovative writing and the inventive use of text in performance – a fact that is sometimes overlooked. Companies such as Forced Entertainment, Uninvited Guests, Lone Twin, Apocryphal Theatre

and Proto-type Theatre all work with original (single-authored) texts, as well as with texts developed by the company in improvisation or sourced from sites such as the internet. This independent "scene" of experimental practice is arguably more developed and certainly of longer standing than the *freie Szene* of independent companies in Germany, and often emerges from the context of university drama and theatre departments, which are overwhelmingly practice-oriented in Britain. To name just one example of an experimental use of text that came out of this "scene", we could think of Forced Entertainment's show *Speak Bitterness,* which was first presented in 1994 and revived in 2009 in its six-hour durational version at the PACT Zollverein in Essen. The show consists of seven performers reading confessions from sheets of paper strewn across a long, brightly lit table. As a text, *Speak Bitterness* is a kind of reinvention of Peter Handke's *Sprechstück* (speaking play) *Self-Accusation* (*Selbst--bezichtigung*, 1966) and, as such, testament to the fact that there is more traffic between the world of "playwriting" and the world of 'devised theatre' than first meets the eye. The twist in Forced Entertainment's performance is that the confessions, collectively written by Tim Etchells and the company, are not simply memorized and then spoken, but are visibly present as written texts from the very outset, demanding to be addressed and confessed to, either whispered reluctantly, shouted out loud, or proudly proclaimed. A major scenographic element on stage, the text confronts the performers as material to be worked with and contextualized in the live situation. Although this is clearly an example of postdramatic theatre, as there is no dramatic story represented by characters, it is just as clearly anything but "theatre without text".

Heterogeneous trajectories for postdramatic performances

As the above glimpse of a spectrum indicates, postdramatic theatre can emerge in all sorts of contexts and by many different trajectories. The distinction between dramatic and postdramatic – which is *not a binary opposition* in any event, but a dynamic relationship in which the postdramatic continues to engage with the dramatic – cannot be reduced to such distinctions as "text-based" versus "non-text-based" (avant-garde) theatre, or "verbal" versus "physical" theatre, as Lehmann himself stresses (2006: 145). The point is that there are many heterogeneous ways of arriving at performances that could be described as postdramatic.

If you will excuse my pseudo-scientific diagram, one could schematically illustrate this as follows:

"Text-based" postdramatic performances can result when directors stage traditional dramatic *texts in such a way that a 'de-dramatization' occurs in performance, as Lehmann argues for Klaus Michael Grüber's work with classical texts, which emphasizes the temporality and spatiality of the scenic process and relegates the dramatic plot to the* background (Lehmann, 2006: 74).

"Text-based" postdramatic theatre can also be the result of working with "no longer dramatic texts", as for example in the case of productions based on texts by Sarah Kane (especially *4. 48 Psychosis*) or Elfriede Jelinek that lack a dramatic plot, psychological characters, dialogue form or even assigned speakers (as in Jelinek's famous – *Sprachflächen*).

Alternatively, postdramatic theatre can be the result of "devised" productions that are not text-based in the sense of using a pre-existing single-authored text, but which *do* use written texts that are spoken in performance and which can subsequently be transcribed and published as 'texts'. Such was the case for Forced Entertainment's already mentioned *Speak Bitterness*, which has been published (in Etchells, 2009) and theoretically could now be performed by another collective of people – although it would presumably lose much of the (seemingly) authentic connection with the original performers. Alternatively, the published text can now be read as a kind of "postscript", conjuring up the language and voices of past performance events.[3]

Furthermore, postdramatic performances can of course be the result of non-text-based, devising and rehearsal processes that use *no* language. Examples would be the sometimes entirely non-verbal visual productions by Robert

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[3] Carl Lavery (2009) has proposed such a reading of text as 'postscript' for other devised performances, in his essay: "Is there a text in this performance?"

Wilson or Societas Raffaello Sanzio, or other physical theatre or dance theatre productions (which does not mean that, conversely, physical theatre could not also tell a 'dramatic' story!).

It is also possible, however, that physical, non-verbal postdramatic performances are actually 'text-based', for example, if they start with a text that essentially consists entirely of stage directions or descriptions, as in productions of Peter Handke's play *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*, which describes hundred of characters crossing a square without a word being uttered.

Finally, there are also a number of hybrid possibilities not covered by my schematic diagram above, for example, the possibility of devised or improvised speech being inserted in a production otherwise working with a pre-existing single-authored text. What would previously have been scorned as 'add-libbing' is deliberately encouraged by some contemporary writers and directors.

Theorizing the relationship between text and performance

But, can the theoretical approaches indicated by Lehmann cover all these possible forms of postdramatic theatre? And might his different articulations of the relationship between text and postdramatic theatre throughout the course of the book perhaps have contributed to some of the international (mis-)perceptions in terms of narrow binaries? It is perhaps fair to say that the question of the text is one of the more under-developed issues in the book (more so in the abridged English version), and consequently one of the most vexed areas in the discussions around it – especially for those scholars and practitioners who, like Tomlin, want to engage with the book from the point of view of innovative *new writing and playwriting* for performance. In the following paragraphs, I would like to look at four main formulations or perspectives offered by Lehmann that affect the conception of the role of the text in relation to postdramatic theatre.

Early on in the book, postdramatic theatre is defined by way of its avoidance of teleology and dialectics, and of the dramatic logic of totality and surveyability of Aristotelian drama. Samuel Beckett and Heiner Mueller are mentioned in this context as examples of authors who have avoided the dramatic form because of its implied teleology of history (Lehmann, 2006: 39). Tomlin notes that in this initial discussion of the philosophical ideal of drama,

> the 'text-based' medium through which drama has conventionally been communicated is not highlighted, suggesting, at this point, that, for Lehmann,

the medium of the written text has merely been the historical vehicle for the philosophy of drama rather than intrinsic to it. (Tomlin, 2009: 58)

She consequently suggests that a focus "on the philosophical framework as the distinguishing factor between the dramatic and the postdramatic, rather than the particular medium through with the philosophy is conveyed", could "at least begin to productively problematize the existing opposition between 'text-based' and 'non-text-based' theatre" (ibid.). Yet, while I agree that this philosophical framework is an important distinction, I would argue that the emergence and consolidation of drama as a form historically went hand in hand with a rise in print culture, so that the printed text as a 'historical vehicle' for the philosophy of drama was not entirely coincidental or arbitrary. Likewise, it is not coincidental in my view that the philosophical framework of 'drama' is beginning to lose its foothold at a time in the twentieth century when the medium of print is increasingly in competition with other, newer media such as radio, film, television and the internet.

In a second theoretical approach, Lehmann – now taking his cue from Artaud's critique of Western theatre – goes on to define postdramatic theatre also in relation to the predominance and primacy of the pre-existing text in dramatic theatre. Whereas in dramatic theatre, the text is considered to be a work of language that is 'complete in itself' and determines the staging, in postdramatic theatre it is seen as a 'material' – and only one element among others. Tomlin argues that this approach, based on what she calls the 'predicatory' role of the text, does not map neatly onto Lehmann's first approach via the philosophical framework of drama. Writing from the perspective of a contemporary playwright, she argues that

the written text's originary position in the artistic process does not, of itself, constitute compliance with teleology [for example] on the occasions when the text-world may only appear to be "complete in itself" but, on closer reading, is seen to be merely one, albeit significant, element of the performance text. (Tomlin, 60)

She quotes Martin Crimp's play *The City* (2008) and her own *Roses and Morphine* (2005) as examples that have all the *markers* of a traditional dramatic text, but are in fact designed 'not to comply with the teleological implications of the dramatic but to overturn them' (60), "to effect an autodeconstruction of their own authority" (62). These kinds of texts, she says, rely for their success on performance strategies that are also often employed by companies such as Forced Entertainment in performances that can signal that the text does not "belong to the speaker" (61) and cast doubt over the reliability of language.

When texts are read for their predicatory function or their dramatic markers, she implies, one might miss their postdramatic potential for performance. Tomlin speaks from personal experience with directors and literary managers trained in the dramatic tradition who have misread her plays. "Lehmann's own conflation of the functional markers of the dramatic with the logocentric implications of the 'drama' is less than helpful in this regard" (62), she concludes.

Yet, I would argue that it is ultimately not part of Lehmann's intention to judge texts *as* text. A third formulation – and one which Tomlin does not address – makes this clearer, and is, I believe, more productive as a basis for discussion. Here Lehmann clarifies:

> *Postdramatic theatre is not simply a new kind of text of staging – and even less a new type of theatre text, but rather a type of sign usage in the theatre that turns both of these levels of theatre upside down through the structurally changed quality of the performance text: it becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information.* (85)

This formulation, variously repeated throughout the book, firmly shifts away from what Patrice Pavis calls 'philological' positions which 'appeal to the authority of a text for its interpretation' (Pavis, 2003 [1996]: 204).

Thus, for Lehmann, the object of study is ultimately the performance text, the whole concrete situation in the theatre, not the text *per se*. This has not kept scholars from studying 'no longer dramatic texts' in relation to the postdramatic – and the question is indeed whether there is not still a dramaturgical role in the careful analysis of texts with a view to their postdramatic performance *potential*. In an article called "When is a play not a drama?" Barnett argues that, "the (potentially) postdramatic text suggests itself as a relativized element for performance from the outset and points to its own indeterminacy and status as uninterpreted material" (Barnett, 2008: 16). Elsewhere he has argued (following Poschmann [1997]) that a text can be studied for its "'new performativity', one in which the text resists prescriptive interpretive practice in performance" (Barnett, 2003: 140). However, just as Tomlin found that the postdramatic potential in a text could be overlooked by directors, Barnett finds cases where a potentially postdramatic text, in this case Albert Ostermeier's *The Making of B-Movie* was turned into a "dramatic" reading of the text by the director, Volker Hesse (ibid., 152). While Ostermeier's text relied for its postdramatic realization on a production that could create tension between

live action on stage and mediated images on film, Hesse's staging consistently harmonized these two worlds and did now allow for "medial indeterminacy" (ibid., 151). Clearly then, there are no guarantees that a 'no longer dramatic text' will also result in a postdramatic performance: "the performative potential of a postdramatic theatre-text cannot be taken as read" (ibid., 157).

The above underscores the fundamental ontological difference between text and performance and brings us to the fourth theoretical articulation offered by Lehmann. Here, in a sub-chapter on "Text" in postdramatic theatre (145), Lehmann considers the conflict between text and scene. As he reiterates in a more recent essay on "Text and Stage", there has always been an inherent latent tension and conflict between text and theatrical practice:

> *Small wonder: the text is and remains a literary phenomenon, even if it is drama, and the text proper literally disappears on the stage of the theatre. With the exception of devices for having written words on stage […] the drama as a literary linguistic reality all but vanishes and makes room for "something completely different": for the paralinguistic dimension, for voices and intonation, rhythm, speed and slowness of speech, sexual and gendered auditive information, gesture and the expressivity of body language in general.* (Lehmann, 2007: 37)

Lehmann goes on to suggest that postdramatic theatre can serve to highlight rather than conceal this inherent tension and turn it into the very principle of the staging. I have found this insight to be enormously productive, for example when thinking about recent German stagings of Elfriede Jelinek's theatre texts. Directors like Nicolas Stemann have increasingly found the key to their directorial concepts in staging the resistance of *and* to Jelinek's texts, while Jelinek herself has made her texts increasingly open to these productively tension-ridden collaborations: "Do with it what you want", her stage directions will provocatively say (e.g. in *Sportstück*). And just as she frequently writes herself as an author figure into her texts, the written script has also increasingly appeared on stage in Jelinek productions, for example in Stemann's *Ulrike Maria Stuart* or *Kontrakte des Kaufmanns*, where the actors can be seen, script in hand, to be physically struggling with its enunciation. The text here precisely does *not* disappear as in conventional productions, but makes its reappearance as a resistant object (see Jürs-Munby, 2009).

As a I have discussed elsewhere (Jürs-Munby, 2010), a new wave of a "revenge of writing", as Elinor Fuchs (1985) called it in the mid-eighties, is also observable in much contemporary experimental theatre in Britain – be it in Forced Entertainement's work, or in Apocryphal Theatre's *Besides you lose your*

soul, where the author herself, Julia Barclay, sits in the space with her laptop changing her onscreen text (projected onto a larger screen) as the performers improvise with the previously memorized text around her. The openly explored tension between text and stage is thus not a one-way process: while Lehmann tends to emphasize the postdramatic performance's "dispersal of the logos" across bodies and space (Lehmann, 2006: 145), the text as written word can also "reappear" in its own materiality.

In conclusion, I would contend that it is the last two theoretical formulations in *Postdramatic Theatre*, the 'changed quality of the performance text' and the deliberately marked tension and 'mutual disruption between text and stage' in performance (ibid., 146), that are the most productive approaches for considering the question of the text in both British and German contemporary theatre. These two formulations also shed a different light on the first two formulations: when we consider the changed quality of the performance text in postdramatic theatre, we can see that this strong emphasis on the performance situation in itself tends to undermine the construction of a fictive cosmos and hence the development of dramatic teleology and dialectics; and when we consider the performance situation of an exhibited tension between text and performance, we can also see why postdramatic theatre tends to dethrone the "primacy of the text" (its "predicatory" role in Tomlin's words) while at the same time honouring the written text in its very own materiality and dynamic.

Finally, to return to the challenges facing the contemporary British playwright, a firm theoretical perspective on the innovative *performance* of challenging new writing may ultimately be the one thing that can hope to affect a gradual shift of institutional structures and practices in Britain which currently hamper the staging of formally innovative new texts. Furthermore, in this **endeavour, the binary opposition of "text-based" versus "non-text-based"** theatre is not only unhelpful but increasingly unrepresentative of the existing broad and heterogeneous spectrum of working processes and productions in contemporary European theatre.

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Summary

This contribution, devoted to the "vexed question" of the text in *Postdramatic Theatre*, has developed in response to a perception that Lehmann's book has reinforced a pre-existing binary distinction between "text-based" and "non-text-based theatre" in Britain, in such a way that dramatic theatre has usually been associated with "text-based" and postdramatic with "non-text--based theatre" (Liz Tomlin). Considering that this is not the perception in Germany, where innovative productions of "no longer dramatic texts" (Gerda Poschmann) have been recognized as one of the driving forces for postdramatic theatre, I first discuss major institutional and infrastructural differences in British theatre production from that of Germany, which currently hamper creative dramaturgical engagement with challenging new writing for the theatre in mainstream British theatre (as argued by David Barnett). This is contrasted with the work of independent experimental British companies which have developed innovative new uses of text in performance. Against this backdrop, I show that there are many heterogeneous ways of arriving at performances that can be described as postdramatic, a spectrum that cuts across the "text-based" versus "non-text-based" division. Wondering whether Lehmann has inadvertently contributed to a (mis-)perception in international reception through an underdeveloped theorization of the role of text in postdramatic theatre, I then proceed to discuss four theoretical formulations of postdramatic theatre offered by him that affect the conception of the role of the text: 1) the avoidance of dramatic teleology and dialectics, Aristotelian totality and surveyability, 2) the defiance of the primacy of the pre-existing text in determining the staging, 3) the changed quality of the performance text and 4) the openly exhibited tension between written text and performance. I argue that the latter two theoretical formulations might offer the most productive approaches for thinking further about the relationship between text and performance in postdramatic productions, and that Lehmann's perspective is ultimately always focused on the text *in performance*, not the text *per se*. This is also because the postdramatic potential of a text cannot be guaranteed to result in a postdramatic performance, as Barnett has argued. In conclusion, I propose that a firm theoretical perspective on the innovative *staging* of texts may ultimately also be capable of affecting a gradual shift in the institutional structures that currently hamper the creative engagement with new writing for the theatre.

Karen Jurs-Manbi

SPORNO PITANJE TEKSTA U POSTDRAMSKOM POZORIŠTU IZ INTERKULTURALNE PERSPEKTIVE

Rezime

Ovaj prilog, posvećen „spornom pitanju teksta u postdramskom pozorištu", razvija se kao odgovor na shvatanje da je Lemanova knjiga osnažila već prisutno binarno razlikovanje između tekstualnog i netekstualnog pozorišta u Britaniji, u smislu da se dramsko pozorište obično dosad povezivalo s tekstualnim, a postdramsko s netekstualnim (Liz Tomlin). S obzirom na to da ovakva perspektiva nije prisutna u Nemačkoj, gde inovativne postavke „ne više dramskih tekstova" (Gerda Pošman) bivaju prepoznate kao jedna od pokretačkih snaga za postdramsko pozorište, ja najpre raspravljam o glavnim institucionalnim i infrastrukturnim razlikama u pozorišnoj produkciji između Britanije i Nemačke, koje u ovom trenutku koče kreativni dramaturški angažman oko provokativnijeg novog pisanja za pozorište u mejnstrim britanskom teatru (kako tvrdi Dejvid Barnet). Suprotnost ovome je rad nezavisnih eksperimentalnih britanskih trupa koje su razvile inovativne upotrebe teksta u predstavi. U ovom radu pokazujem da, nasuprot takvoj postavci, postoje raznorodni načini stvaranja predstava koji se mogu opisati kao *postdramski*, čitav spektar koji premošćuje podelu *tekstualno vs netekstualno*. Postavljajući pitanje da li je Leman nehotice doprineo ovom pogrešnom razumevanju, u okviru internacionalne recepcije, svojom nedovoljno razvijenom teoretizacijom uloge teksta u postdramskom pozorištu, nastavljam da ispitujem četiri teorijske formulacije postdramskog teatra koje nam autor nudi, a koje utiču na shvatanje uloge teksta: 1) izbegavanje dramske teleologije i dijalektike, aristotelovskog totaliteta i preglednosti; 2) otpor primatu preegzistirajućeg teksta u determinisanju izvedbe; 3) izmenjen kvalitet scenskog teksta i 4) otvoreno pokazana napetost između napisanog teksta i predstave. Dokazujem da bi poslednje dve od navedenih formulacija mogle da ponude najproduktivnije pristupe daljem promišljanju odnosa teksta i izvedbe u postdramskim predstavama, kao i da je Lemanova perspektiva ultimativno i uvek fokusirana na tekst *u izvedbi*, a ne na tekst *per se*. Ovo je tako i zato što postdramski potencijal teksta ne može biti garancija da će on i rezultirati postdramskom predstavom, što je tvrdio i Barnet. Izoštren teorijski pogled na inovativne inscenacije tekstova, kako navodim u zaključku, može na kraju da bude kadar da utiče na postepenu promenu unutar institucionalnih struktura, koje su u ovom trenutku prepreka kreativnijem angažmanu u novim pozorišnim tekstovima.