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Michael Wood. Heiner Müller's Democratic Theater: The Politics of Making the Audience Work. Camden House, 2017.

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Michael Wood. Heiner Müller's Democratic Theater: The Politics of Making the Audience Work. Camden House, 2017.

Abstract

Review of Michael Wood. *Heiner Müller's Democratic Theater: The Politics of Making the Audience Work*. Rochester: Camden House, 2017.

Keywords

German theater, avant-garde, literature & politics, socialist literature

Michael Wood. *Heiner Müller's Democratic Theater: The Politics of Making the Audience Work*. Camden House, 2017. xiv + 225 pp.

Michael Wood's first monograph adds itself to a short list of book-length studies on the East German playwright Heiner Müller to appear in English, and it is particularly notable for its close readings of four performances based on extensive archival work. Wood treats Müller's theater as a democratic, utopian, and revolutionary space that goes beyond and "democratizes" (159) his great predecessor Bertolt Brecht in insisting on remaining ambiguous and plural despite social or cultural pressure.

Wood anchors his study exclusively in three performance texts: *Der Lohndrucker* (*The Scab*, 1958-1960), *Der Horatier* (*The Horatian*, 1968-1973), and *Wolokamsker Chaussee IV: Kentauren* (*Volokamsk Highway IV: Centaurs*, 1986). One chapter is dedicated to each production, culminating in a fourth that is dedicated to the reimagining of all three in their combined 1988-1991 multimedial performance at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin under Müller's own direction. Wood dedicates significant attention to the historical context in which each text/performance is embedded, and a quick enumeration of them reveals a through line that tethers together the work as a whole: *The Scab* follows debates in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) concerning *Aufbau* ('construction') and Sovietization after the 1956 Khrushchevian thaw and the invasion of Hungary; *The Horatian* emerges from Müller's reaction to the Prague Spring in 1968; *Centaurs* expresses social frustration with the unwillingness of the GDR to begin implementing Gorbachev-style reform in the mid-1980s; and the revised *Scab* of 1988 harnesses this dissatisfaction as it reaches and then exceeds its breaking point. Writing under the conviction that "historical subject matter and form . . . are inextricably linked" (157), Wood's selection of texts for study are united by both their contextual affinities and their insistently open-ended and anti-centralist forms.

Taking his cue from a 1985 interview in which Müller expresses great admiration for "a democratic conception of the theater" (3-4) in which the audience must do the work of interpretation that amounts to a kind of "productive labor" (82), Wood approaches Müller's theater essentially "as a form of democratic theater" (1). This primary claim forces Wood on the one hand to consider Müller's texts and the manifold circumstances of their performance "as equal elements whose relation to one another was one of discussion and commentary rather than mere illustration" (140), which opens up a methodological challenge he meets with aplomb. On the other hand, Wood also faces the theoretical problem of conceptualizing audience experience, which he somewhat unsuccessfully tries to mitigate with recourse in part to Heideggerian phenomenology (19-22), a theoretical excursion that does not meaningfully inform the remainder of the study. Wood's more effective initial move is to invoke Jacques Rancière's notion of

dissensus—a *partage du sensible* ('division and distribution of the sensible') as an update to Brechtian *Verfremdung* ('de-familiarization')—to describe the pedagogical and democratic nature of Müller's theater in its attempt to confront social reality (9-15) and to "create disorder" and the conditions for "neues Denken" ('new thinking') to become discernible (122-23).

Wood's selection of three texts from Müller's vast and far-ranging output allows him to construct a robust argument that pays off in an admirable reading of one of Müller's final works. An argumentative strength that is based on exclusion, however, will inevitably open up various points of incompleteness that leave something to be desired. Wood's provocative insistence that Müller's theater forces the audience to work democratically could be made more visible, for instance, by showing how his poetry or prose operate in a similar manner on their readers. More decisively, one of the book's primary claims—that Müller's work was thoroughly if not primarily preoccupied with reimagining democracy within socialism—is somewhat undermined by the relatively narrow focus on essentially three short plays. Likewise, with the exception of looking with regularity back at Brecht, Müller's work appears here in relative isolation. Wood's study opens up Müller to be compared to earlier Soviet attempts to democratize the theater (Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Tretyakov) and offers new contours for contrasting his practice of audience engagement with contemporaries such as Peter Handke, Peter Weiss, and Robert Wilson, who receive only passing mention. But these constellations are left for other scholars to map out in more detail.

Some of these connections have been helpfully developed by Jonathan Kalb, whose *The Theater of Heiner Müller* (Cambridge UP, 1998) remains the most comprehensive book-length study of Müller to appear in English. Yet it is in contrast to Kalb's more extensive study that Wood's book most effectively displays its merit of gleaning valuable critical insight from meticulous archival work. For example, Wood uses the director's production notes to point out how the actor playing the titular role in *The Horatian* at times mimed his actions while other actors from the surrounding chorus would speak his lines, thus splitting the Müllerian subject into a divided and contested "dividual" that the audience must work individually and collectively to come to terms with (91). Such moments of new insight render Wood's repeated venturing into the Bundesarchiv 'Federal Archive,' the Landesarchiv 'State Archive' Berlin, and the Akademie der Künste 'Academy of Arts' in Berlin—among many others—well worth the trip. Indeed, such archival commitment, wherein Wood incorporates contemporaneous notes, published reviews, photographs, theatrical bills, marketing materials, textual drafts, correspondence, a video recording and much more into a kind of intertextual collective, testifies to a method one might call "democratic" in Wood's own sense of the word: by stressing "process over product" (83, 157) and by bringing together such a range of materials and perspectives, he allows for the possibility of new ideas

and *neues Denken* to emerge. Consequently, his work begins to mimic its object in productive and memorable ways. Like Müller says of his own theatrical practice, “Es wird ein Prozeß vorgeführt, nicht ein Resultat abgeliefert” (83), Wood’s scholarship in analogous fashion makes its notable contribution to Müller studies, in which ‘a process is shown rather than a result delivered.’

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