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Abstract

Review of Ela E. Gezen. Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature. Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960. Camden House, 2018. 159 pp.

Keywords

Review, Gezen, Brecht, Turkish Theater, Turkish-German Literature

Ela E. Gezen. *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960*. Camden House, 2018. 159 pp.

To this day, Turkish-German cultural production is frequently viewed through the lens of the *Gastarbeiter* or ‘guest worker’ paradigm, which can have a limiting effect. Ela E. Gezen seeks to redress this state of affairs in her first book, *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960*, which investigates the various entanglements between Turkish and German and Turkish-German theater practitioners and authors in the second half of the twentieth century. Gezen, an expert on Turkish-German literature and theater, uses theater as a lens through which to examine the history of Brecht’s reception in Turkish theater and the “cultural-political constellations and literary affiliations between Turkey and divided Germany, both East *and* West” (4), going beyond the German archive to incorporate the Turkish archive into her investigation as well. This allows her to take a new perspective on, above all, the two Turkish-German writers Aras Ören and Emine Sevgi Özdamar, who, as she argues, are generally placed outside of the German literary landscape as its Others. However, Gezen shows in her study how these two authors’ writings in fact constitute reconfigurations of German worlds from within.

Gezen’s book is essentially divided into two parts. After showing in her introduction how limiting previous discussions of Turkish-German literature have been, Gezen retraces in her first chapter the history of Brecht’s reception in Turkey and the interactions between the Turkish and German theater landscapes, above all in the 1950s and 1960s. The next two chapters each deal with one of the two aforementioned authors. Both chapters begin by detailing the development of each author’s career in Germany after his or her permanent resettlement and end with a longer analysis of one of the author’s works.

In spite of attempts to consider and incorporate postcolonial theory into their analyses, German Studies forays into Turkish-German literature have frequently viewed the writers of this literature as outsiders, Others penetrating a German world. In her strongest, first chapter, Gezen utilizes her Turkish language skills to do what she sets out to, highlighting the Turkish-German literary and theater constellations that so far have been left out of the spotlight, putting, as she says, “the Turkish in ‘Turkish-German’ center stage” (12). She reveals the reciprocity of the exchange that took place between Germany and Turkey by examining the various journals, theater festivals (Erlangen and Istanbul, though with greater emphasis on the former), and directors and actors who spent time in both countries. She also provides a detailed report on the “Brecht Incident” that rocked Istanbul in 1964, when a performance of Brecht’s *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Person of Szechwan*) was interrupted by reactionaries, leading to a temporary ban on Brecht’s plays. It was in this climate, as Gezen shows, that both Ören and Özdamar had their first encounters with Brecht and German theater, both mediated through the figure of the Turkish author and theater practitioner Vasif Öngören, who spent a considerable

period of time at the Berliner Ensemble in the 1960s. Gezen convincingly demonstrates that the Turkish Brecht reception was not merely an attempt to adopt and implement Brecht in Turkish theaters, but rather an active adaptation. Gezen expertly details the level of interconnectedness between German and Turkish theater, especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, thereby filling in many blanks for the non-Turkish-speaking Germanist.

Gezen is also able to shine new light on each of the authors she portrays, revealing how embedded each was within his or her respective community. For example, Gezen reveals how heavily involved Ören was in the leftist literary and political scenes in Berlin, particularly in the group *Die Rote Nelke* ‘The Red Carnation’ and the publishing house Rotbuch Verlag. She similarly shows how essential Özdamar was to both the Berlin *Volksbühne* theater and the *Schauspielhaus* theater in Bochum. Gezen thus demonstrates that both authors were very much insiders within their respective German communities.

Gezen competently illustrates her claim that the theater can be used as a productive lens through which to view Turkish-German interchange, but it is not always clear why “Brecht” is the first word in the book’s title, and the author’s attempts to drive her narrative in the direction of Brecht can sometimes seem a little forced. It is clear to anybody familiar with this period of theater history that Brecht was one of the most influential and polarizing playwrights of the day, but in the chapter about Ören, for example, Gezen is sometimes prone to sweeping statements that reveal that she is not necessarily approaching this topic as a Brecht scholar. For example, Gezen talks about “Brecht’s realist aesthetics” (67) in a way that suggests that there is some kind of consensus about what such aesthetics might be. Moreover, she repeatedly makes reference to montage and the use of “Brechtian V-effects” (48) without convincingly explaining how she understands those techniques or their implementation. The reader sometimes has the impression that, for Gezen, there is one Brecht and one Brechtian theory that can be easily identified and implemented, although Brecht’s theater theory in fact changed throughout its lifetime and even contradicted itself at certain points. In the chapter about Özdamar, Brecht seems to play less of a role, and one of the real strengths in this chapter is how Gezen clearly identifies the various players around Özdamar, such as Manfred Karge, Matthias Langhoff, Manfred Wekwerth, Heiner Müller, and Benno Besson—all of them undoubtedly influenced by Brecht, but also thinkers and theater-makers in their own right.

Nevertheless, this valuable volume manages to do precisely what it sets out to: emphasizing the “Turkish” in “Turkish-German” while also painting a more comprehensive picture of Ören and Özdamar within their respective German communities and providing a far more detailed account of the cultural exchange and interchange that took place between Turkey and Germany in the second half of the twentieth century. It is an indispensable volume for anybody researching Turkish-German theater or literature in this period.

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