

Is there any good reason for hope? Political Theater in the U.S. and U.K. post 9/11

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Abstract:

Political art and theater have recently experienced significant blooming periods in the U.S. and U.K. In context of the so-called "War on Terror" artists – especially in the theater world – produced projects and performances that partly line up with internationally relevant theory-driven developments and partly draw from largely discredited models of political theater. Jenny Spencer's *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11 – Patriotic Dissent* brings together essays by key scholars and theorist-practitioners in the field, which offer the so far most comprehensive view on the decidedly significant moments in British and American theater history. Sara Brady's *Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror – "Whatever it Takes"* explores the role of performance in the "War on Terror" in all its complexity, covering both the performance of politics and politicians as well as various approaches to and instances of political performance in the aesthetic realm.

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Spencer, Jenny (ed.): *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11 – Patriotic Dissent*. New York/London: Routledge, 2012. 245 pp., Hardcover, 113 Euro, ISBN: 978-0-415-89551-4.

Brady, Sara: *Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror – "Whatever It Takes"*. New York/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 203 pp., Hardcover, 63 Euro. ISBN: 978-0-230-23490-1.

There has been much talk about the far-reaching effects of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. '9/11' has variously been stylized as a 'cultural fissure' and 'radical event' that has not only influenced American and world politics, but fundamentally unsettled ways of meaning making, thereby irreversibly transforming U.S. and Western cultures. It almost seemed to be common courtesy to announce that since '9/11' nothing had remained the same and everything had changed. In recent years many scholars have revoked their claims and now emphasize unused opportunities for change and obvious continuities with the past. While the attacks have erroneously been connected to all sorts of developments, it is valid to claim that they triggered the reemergence of a vivid political theater in the U.K. and the U.S. Yet, the impact of '9/11' should not be overestimated, as the generation of a 'culture of fear' and the aggressive foreign policies of the Bush and Blair administrations showed much stronger and more significant effects on contemporary theater.

Playwrights immediately responded to the developments, activist street performers aired their discontent, new genres of political art were created, (activist) artist networks were formed, and various festivals brought together successful performances to put the diversity of aesthetic approaches and activist endeavors into perspective. The most successful developments in British theatre – especially so the new writing of famous playwrights such as David Hare, Caryl Churchill, Mark Ravenhill and others, and the blooming of verbatim theatre and tribunal plays – immediately found public and scholarly attention. The historic prosperity of political art and theatre in the U.S., though, has mostly escaped the radar and has to this day hardly gained any international visibility. The essays collected in Jenny Spencer's *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11 – Patriotic Dissent* and Sara Brady's monograph *Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror – "Whatever it Takes"* take measures against this unequal distribution of attention and attest to the relevance of political theater and performance in the years between '9/11' and the changes of presidencies in the U.S. and the U.K.. Beyond the mere documentation of historic periods in British and American theater history both volumes

are meant to contribute to ongoing discussions about (new) ways of relating politics and aesthetics.

Spencer's *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11* and Brady's *Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror* are expressive of the "anger, sadness, and dismay over a post-9/11 course of events" (Spencer, 12) that also fueled the various forms of artistic protest introduced in the books. Both volumes, however, are aware of the historical remoteness of the depressing political climate and of the documented heyday of political theater in the U.S. and the U.K. Yet, Spencer and Brady emphasize the ongoing need for critical artistic practices and challenge the deceptive reassurance in response to the changes of government in both countries. In the introduction to her compendium, Spencer suggests that the disinterest in and invisibility of American political theater in response to the 'War on Terror' is itself partly a symptom of a tendency in public media to obscure the dimensions and relevance of (leftist) protests. Her prime example – which is also a repeated reference in Brady's study – is the largely ignored though enormous antiwar protest of 15 February 2003, which had all too soon turned into a "forgotten event" (James Harding). Even though large parts of the projects, events and collaborations introduced in the two volumes are not performed any longer or have ceased to exist, the growing tendency to take up the (political) issues of the time and the search for inspiring ways of bringing art and politics together persist. (Scholarly) engagement with the theater and aesthetic practices of the time, then, is not only relevant for the respective national theater historiographies but for any contemplation of contemporary British and American theater, as well as for a theoretical consideration of the relationship of politics and aesthetics.

Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11 assembles essays on contemporary political theater in Great Britain and the United States by major theorists in the field. Many contributors have recently published monographs or edited their own volumes on related topics. The contributions differ significantly in their theoretical complexity. On the whole, there is no attempt to arrive at a new definition of or coherent perspective on political theater and performance. Instead the diversity of artistic practices documented and more or less closely analyzed in the volume shows the relevance of political theater and offers itself as material for further theory-oriented explorations. Of course – as Spencer emphasizes – the compendium could not and does not aim to give a complete picture of the rich Anglo-American political theater of the last decade. Yet, the choice of objects of investigation might easily come under criticism. The selection criteria are somewhat obscure, as some essays introduce the work of artistic collectives or individual playwrights, while others emphasize the development of new movements, or the political impact on programming at specific venues, and yet others focus on theatrical genres or on ways of engagement with concrete topics and motives.

Even though the dedication of the Culture Project to political causes is highly valuable, it is unjustified to single the theater out and ignore the engaged programming of other venues, such as The Flea Theatre and Theater for the New City, or the double-edged role of the New York Theatre Workshop. Hence, it is even more striking that the network of (mainly New York)

venues Theaters Against War (THAW), which was founded in 2002, is only mentioned in passing and does not appear in the index to the volume. The core problem of *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11*, however, is the division of the book into two parts – "Mainstages" and "Alternative Stages" – and the herein suggested relation between American and British theater. The political entanglement at the time, but also strong ties between New York and London theater perfectly justify discussing the blooming of political theater in both countries in one volume. The question, however, is in which kind of relation the respective developments are put. While there is no single essay reflecting on the role of guest performances or the reception and staging of new plays from abroad, or even on the exchange between artists from both countries, the structure of the compendium makes a strong argument. Part I – titled "Mainstages" – starts with an article on politics in Broadway musicals but then focuses on British theater only. In Part II – titled "Alternative Stages" – Hughes's essay on tactical street performance in the U.K. is the only exception to the section's exclusive focus on American theater. It is – of course – correct that the new wave of political theater was more warmly embraced and received greater attention in Great Britain than in the U.S., yet, the contrast created in the volume obscures the complexity of the case.

In her introduction to *Political and Protest Theatre After 9/11* Spencer addresses her regret for the absence of a contribution of Sara Brady and, indeed, her perspective could have very well added to the volume. Brady's *Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror – "Whatever It Takes"*, however, needs its book-length to unfold its complexity and it also differs from the essays in Spencer's compendium in most significant ways. Brady emphasizes that "[i]n the early twenty-first century, politics is performance and political theatre is all but irrelevant" (xii) and instead of challenging this assumption by confrontation with the numerous new plays and instances of (traditional forms of) political theater introduced in Spencer's book, she takes an entirely different and much more theory-inspired path that explodes the confines between art and (political) life, between aesthetics and politics. In close connection with Jon McKenzie's study *Perform – or Else* which elaborates on various paradigms of 'performance' that have been shaping the 20th and 21st century, Brady argues that the recent "collapse of politics and theatre can be best identified and analyzed by scholars of performance" (xv). Careful analyses of the election campaigns, political performances and public speeches by George W. Bush and Barack Obama (touching on the cultural phenomena of "Bushismo" and "Obamania") serve as a frame that gives coherency to Brady's investigations into "the military-industrial-entertainment complex" (Brady, 66).

The second chapter, "Protest Visible and Invisible," pays particular attention to the inadequate reporting on and consequent relative invisibility of demonstrations and artistic protests following the September 11 attacks. Repeatedly drawing comparisons to the well-documented protest movement against the Vietnam War, Brady gives detailed accounts of major demonstrations, military protests and artistic performances to compensate for the unequal distribution of attention. The focus of the chapter is on performances – mostly adhering to Performance Art and postdramatic theater – that are either based on the accounts of or created/performed by veterans of the Iraq War. Brady introduces Coco Fusco's *A Room of One's Own* and

Operation Atropos, IVAW's revival of Winter Soldier and their street performance Operation First Casualty, Evan Knappenberger's Watchtower, and the performance Resist, Refuse, Rebel by the German collective Rimini Protokoll. In all of these performances – and others touched upon in the chapter – the military uniform and its role in practices of resistance to war is carefully explored. A discussion of Joseph DeLappe's intervention into the video game America's Army (dead-in-iraq, 2006-ongoing) leads over to the third chapter, which offers a stunning analysis of the nexus of art and life, of play and war, by casting a light on the use of video games in the U.S. Army. Brady starts from her first-hand experiences at a by now closed-down Army Experience Center in Pennsylvania, highlights the use of video-games for military training and for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and develops an interesting perspective on these usages in terms of e.g. the relation of art and life; furthermore she emphasizes the particular role simulation plays in the military and contemporary society. The fourth chapter takes up the concept of simulation and reflects upon its role in the dispute over the legitimacy of torture in military interrogations. Starting from and repeatedly returning to Steve Powers's installation Waterboarding Thrill Ride (Coney Island, 2008) Brady reflects on waterboarding as a widely used method of torture that is defined as the 'simulation' of drowning and suffocation. She is therefore sensitive to the ways in which reality and fiction, life and simulation, politics and aesthetics are twisted and inextricably interwoven in contemporary societies. Regarding to this sensitivity Brady reflects on ways in which artists and activists took up the practice of waterboarding to make a strong point for its definition as torture and its remoteness from 'simulation' in the way the concept is used in political rhetoric.

Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror – "Whatever It Takes" is an inspiring read that offers a well-conceived perspective on resistant artistic practices in the contemporary world. Yet, there is also ample room for criticism. The analyses of the public performances of Bush and Obama are too strongly tinged by Brady's anger and frustration. Beyond the personal tone that at times sounds quite out of place, the analyses themselves do not reach the complexity of Brady's contemplations on artistic and activist projects. One might also miss a closer alignment of her thought with recent scholarship in Performance Studies, e.g. a more extensive section on the various concepts of 'performance' – which are partly assumed as common knowledge. Brady's reflections on 'simulation' and the complex relation between art and life, however, are highly valuable and the compilation of background information on military practices and introductions to protest performances will certainly arouse interest in most readers.

In conclusion, it might be emphasized that both Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11 and Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror refrain from a clear-cut definition of contemporary political theater (or performance) to the benefit of an appreciation of an enriching plurality of approaches. And, in fact, both volumes succeed in documenting an inspiring cross-section of artistic projects – that will certainly serve as a pool of material for further studies. Beyond that, Spencer's compendium reflects the crisis of political theater (theory) from diverse perspectives and Brady suggests a productive cross-reading of the use of performance, fiction, and play in the military, in politics and in aesthetic practices. Politically charged passages turn both books into documents to the spirit of their time, and into forms of expressing a

deep sense "of hope on the political left" (Spencer, 13) which has recently been shared by many in art and scholarship alike.