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No Boundaries Here: Brecht, Lauwers, and European Theatre after Postmodernism

In this article John Freeman focuses on theatre after postmodernism as exemplified by the Belgium-based Needcompany. If, as is suggested here, we are all more than a little 'postmoderned out' through an over-dependence on individualism, the shadow cast by postmodernism remains large in the contemporary Western world, and its impact is still clearly felt. As the postmodern came to offer a safety net through which bad practice could not easily fall, the modernist theatre it followed offered its own elusive ideal. In arguing this, Freeman forges links between Brecht's knowing embrace of amateurism and the *faux* uncertainty of much contemporary work, where Brecht the arch-dramatist becomes the archetype of the postdramatic, as twenty-first century theatre moves in the shadow of the past. John Freeman has written extensively on contemporary performance, creative learning, and arts policy. He is currently Associate Professor at Curtin University, Western Australia, where he leads the Humanities Honours programme.

Key terms: Postdramatic theatre, amateurism, modernism, montage, spectators, *Isabella's Room*, *Marketplace 76*.

WHILE THE FOCUS of this paper is on contemporary theatre after postmodernism, explored, as the paper develops, through the work of Jan Lauwers and the Belgium-based Needcompany, we well know, and have done for a great many years, that postmodernism, particularly as it is applied in performance, has no watertight definition; just as we know that the term has lost something of its critical allure. We are all, it seems, more than a little 'postmoderned out'.

Perhaps this is the result of an excess of liberality, in as much at least as the theories of postmodernism depend upon individual perception: one critic's postmodernism is another's neo avant-gardism, is another's *faux*-experimental rehash, is another's post-dramatic performance, and so on. In light of this, an article (yet another article) on post-modern performance might seem to have both missed the zeitgeist and also its own author's point. Nevertheless, postmodernism's very resistance to definition still speaks to the contemporary Western world to the extent that it is difficult to write about innovative practice without reference to it: as

a field of practice that is at once formless and formulaic, postmodernism casts a heavy shadow and, no matter how much we may sometimes wish it so, the word has not lost its currency merely because we are no longer in thrall to its potential.

If postmodern performance is difficult to pin down, to the extent that it either elicits groans from those longing still for the certainty of seemingly fixed historical perspectives or else it functions as a safety net through which bad practice has not easily been able to fall, this is because the modernist theatre that it has appeared to succeed has always been an elusive ideal.

The terms 'modern' and 'modernist' have no fully agreed upon meaning in theatre; rather, they have their own histories of disagreement, with modern theatre having no untroubled correspondence to either an art movement or distinct genre. If modern theatre can be broadly characterized by a narrative plot unfolding in a logical and clearly sequenced manner, as with plays by Harold Pinter, Bertolt Brecht, and Anton Chekhov, where conflict and the unfolding

The Deer House

Needcompany, directed by Jan Lauwers,
Octavian Goga Theatre, Sibiu, Romania, 27 May 2012

Scribbling unseen words on a theatre programme. No reflection, just response. Watching hands on a piano keyboard. Seeing cast members wander in and wander out. Lauwers in-role as in-audience director signals tech problems. Start again. Start over. Start twice. Benoit Gob speaking in his mother tongue as two perfect bodies shudder their buttocks: half-playing, half-doing, half-preparing, half-competing; talking to and for each other rather than for us. Grace Ellen Barkley's rolled-towel penis mock-buggers one woman as another speaks. Our paid-for gaze pulled all over the stage. Viviane de Muynk sits centre stage like the queen of all performance: 'With these facts we can create thousands of stories.'

Like watching a football team at play, we follow the ball or focus on the player we choose. This is the choice here and this is the House of Choice: the Choice House. Moments of feigned reality that fool few of us, and fooling us is not Lauwers's intent. Moments of tenderness, moments of stillness, moments of love: theatre at the top of its game. Deft. Too deft at times to read. Seduced by random actions, we are brought short by an identifiably crisp directorial flourish.

Things degenerate into ramshackle beauty: a sweet kiss, a stolen caress, a soft song, an orgy of dance, a sex sculpture symphony. A stage filled with dancers refusing to dance. Argument offered up as art. Beautiful bodies everywhere the eye falls. If *Isabella's Room* was narrative reclaimed this is postmodernism declaimed. Theatre as theatre-dressing-room. Two spectators stride out. Another sneaks out. The same freedom of choice as Lauwers's players and the people who stay.

The set shifts to the Deer House and as the space opens up the work narrows down to its narrative drive. White bones of death. No crowd-pleaser yet, yet the crowd is crazily pleased, the hand at the helm sure enough to persuade the doubters.

Christmas Eve. Real names and made up worlds. A young woman's impeccable body lays dead-not-dead among the stage-made deer. Theatre as beautiful as any painting. Art disguised as activity. Dance pretending to be do-nothing moves. Theatre masquerading as mess. Showing us the magic and then tucking the rabbit back into the hat. 'How dismal these people must be who need stories.' The dead here will not stay silent. The dead do not stay dead and yet the living still grieve: the tears are real and the blood is false. 'Okay', says Benoit Gob, 'now we're getting somewhere.' 'Why,' Barkley sings, 'Why are there no boundaries here?'

drama develop in linear progression from exposition to denouement, then Shakespeare is a modern dramatist and so is Oscar Wilde. Not much fixity there.

In fact, our perspective on what makes a play modern is increasingly determined by its abundance of non-postmodern aspects, so that the *post* has come to define the *ante*. Postmodern performance began as a reaction against modernist theatre, with productions that sought to foreground the fallibility of definite truth, inviting spectators instead to reach their own individual understanding. My attempts at in-the-moment and unedited readings of two postmodern/postdramatic performances by Needcompany duly frame this article, as above and on page 231. These readings do not quite constitute first impressions, as I was already familiar with the

company's work, but they were written in the darkness of the auditoria during the performances and they are reproduced here unchanged. If postmodern performance is often about the raising of questions rather than the supplying of answers, modernism has come to read as that which stands for logic and which speaks with a unified voice to a unified audience. All of which is handy, but not quite true.

What (and When) is Modernism?

Things are further complicated by distinctions between modernity and modernism and by debate over the point at which modernity began. The French Revolution marks the start for some, whilst others cite the Renaissance.¹ Modernism is easier to pin

to the wide-scale and far-reaching changes to Western societies in the late nineteenth century through to the middle of the twentieth, linked to the development of industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities. But this would imply that the great period of modernism brackets modernist work. Again, this would be a useful determinant, if only it were true. Modernism refers to a period of cultural, artistic, and sociological history, and as with postmodernism it is an inevitably generalized term.

If modernism refers mainly to a shift in thinking and a development of different ideas about reality, this is seen clearly in the work of Carl Jung, who developed a theory of archetypes suggesting that regardless of cultural, geographic, economic, and racial barriers all people share a common memory; ideas that seem somewhat antiquated in the light of current philosophical and scientific approaches. Hard times indeed for those Jungians who still believe in the Universal Self, and yet Jung's thoughts are alive and well in most revivals of Chekhov, Ibsen, *et al.*, and so those universal truths that have disappeared elsewhere have managed to hold sway on the stage.

Where modern theatre loves the ordered world of mimesis, modernist theatre tends to be resistant to the lure of turn of the twentieth-century realism; like postmodernism, modernist theatre spoke and still speaks to the work of practitioners with neither faith nor particular trust in traditional forms of art; like postmodernism, a key tenet of modernist theatre has always been its innate self-consciousness, often leading to experiments with form and with practice that draw attention to the processes and materials used. If modernist (rather than *modern*) theatre has become synonymous with the avant-garde and the experimental, with theatre pursuing radical aesthetic, political, and social agendas, then postmodernism reads often as apolitical and empty, folding form back on form in order to disguise a lack of any content that matters.

We know that in the mid-twentieth century performers started pushing hard against the perceived boundaries of contemporary

practice. From Yves Klein through Vito Acconci and on to Marina Abramovic, Kira O'Reilly, Ron Athey, and Franko B, solo artists made work that provided its own counterpoint to the Living Theatre, Grotowski's Theatre of the 13 Rows, and Judson Dance collectives, dissolving recent history's distinctions between sculpture, and music, dance and theatre, the improvisatory and the prepared, space and place, and performance act and event.

When Tehching Hsieh suggests that an audience's presence is not vital, that as long as audiences know the concept behind a particular work and that the real action did indeed take place, they can use their experiences and imagination to feel these artworks, to the extent that being present physically may not indeed be helpful,² he speaks to a performative authenticity so *real* that it needs no act of witness; so much so that the archive becomes both substance and its shadow, the record of an event and the event in itself. And, historically at least, Hsieh has a point: the seminal moments of so many mid- to late twentieth-century performances were largely unseen in any audience sense of the word: Acconci's underground onanism in *Seedbed*, Burden's bullet in the arm, Abramovic and Ulay's Wall of China walk, Linda Montano's performatized grieving, Hsieh's own durational work – the list of work with archive importance and no immediate audience-impact is significant.

The Shift to the Postmodern

Often experimenting with the participatory involvement of audiences, work of this kind was characterized by the idea that art mattered as much as the artist's body; that art could change societies, and that performance could not be isolated from the world it was part of. If the student uprising of 1968 came at the end of the modernist heyday, it was in its own way also a lending of emphasis to this punctuation, and the streets of Paris were perhaps in hindsight the site at which modernism fought its last glorious battle. To say that rebellion is innately participatory is to say no more than

we already know and yet the shift away from passive, contemplative observation has been so central to postmodern performance that it is hard not to see theatre that sought action over applause as forming a strong line between Brecht's thinking watcher and Hsieh's invitation for us to think about watching; and Brecht's ghost haunts contemporary performance no less than it will hover over this essay.

Philip Auslander might see this as the turn from that which he describes, after Schechner's 1968 essay, as 'the politics of ecstasy', in the emancipatory political theatre of the mid-twentieth century to a more postmodern 'ecstasy of communication', a self-critiquing concentration on the contemporary flow of information and imagery.³ The Auslander/Schechner influence notwithstanding, theories of postmodern theatre (an admittedly over-abundant list) have their differences of *foci* and intent; yet most propose that the modernist idea/ideal that Aristotle's universal truths can be achieved through artistic representation is flawed in as much as theatrical performance stands more proudly as a genuine event in which the spectator plays an active part; which is to say that notions of passive audience reception are sacrificed to the shifting notion that spectators are individuals who write their own meanings into and on to performance in the act of watching.

Roland Barthes's texts on readerly and writerly work speak to this directly.⁴ Postmodern theatre posits many possible truths, as many truths as there are spectators, and mono-interpretation gives way to the idiosyncrasies of subjective response to the extent that spectators are always also in on the act. Postmodernism focuses on a de-centred humanity, where those ideas of disorder and fragmentation which were previously seen as negative are now seen as acceptable representations of reality. Modernism saw the fragmented view of human life as something bad, while postmodernism celebrates this fractured view of the world and in so doing accepts chaos as something that encourages us (and in our case that 'us' is *spectators*) to play with meaning.

Readerly and Writerly Work

Apropos of all this, and without trying to reinvent the wheel, it is worth offering here a staple distinction between readerly and writerly work. Classical (for which we often read *traditional*) Western theatre thrives on texts that encourage us to remain relatively passive, to induce pleasure through devouring well-crafted stories where the emotions we are supposed to feel and the subtextual secrets we are supposed to unearth have been designed by the all-knowing author; where the work of integrating the different theatrical elements has already been done for us by the director, and where we can sit in relative comfort, enjoying that which has been *already made*.

Postmodern theatre refers generally to texts in which we are encouraged to take a creative role, participating in the work's meaning as we watch. Texts are not complete by the time we meet them and meanings are not placed by the author/director for us to find; we are encouraged to notice, to pay attention in a different kind of way and to find connections that are our own. In this way watching/reading/spectating becomes for Barthes not so much a parasitical act as a type of creative work in itself.⁵

Postmodern theatre sought to dilute if not quite destroy the authority of the playwright as part-hidden authority figure and to disrupt those theatrical conventions that modernist work had left unchanged, opposing conventional notions of what might constitute the *acceptably aesthetic* through its deconstruction of original meaning, unsettling expectation, and proposing new angles of interpretation. But what happens when our expectations have been so strenuously and perhaps so *effectively* unsettled that we no longer possess a clear site to be shifted from?

That which once frustrated and held spectators – the tension between our expectations of looking for and finding the familiar and postmodern theatre's invitation for us to complete unfinished wholes – lost its bite after decades of fragmentation, which, like Brecht's old distancing devices, no longer

possess the power of surprise. Where our spectatorial consciousness was once collective and then individualized, we have now been trained to deconstruct and decentre onstage information to the extent that such work often confirms rather than upsets our theatregoing conventions. Just as much of what passes for contemporary performance pours old wine from new bottles, so when postmodernism offers nothing much by way of narrated stories, psychologically driven characters, and no chronological unfolding of plot, we come to accept this as a theatrical norm; and when antagonism becomes as tame as a house cat it also loses its bite.

Following Barthes, Elinor Fuchs heralded the acceptance of postmodern performance in her *The Death of Character*, where she argued that in postmodern theatre notions of character and representation were being collapsed, resulting in a form that was ultimately only ever really about itself.⁶ As much as anything, it has been this sense of self-reflexivity that has come to define postmodern performance; a commitment to auto-presentation as much as any formal disregard for the character-driven conventions of the modernist stage.

It is axiomatic to say that the flipside of theatrical experimentation is that it operates within a negative and easily dismissed relation to both mainstream practice and general society – not a particularly strong platform from which to launch a sense of artistic reform. To define itself against a culture of modernist, modern, and classical practice, postmodernism had to recognize its potential audiences as default audiences for the very same work it sought to subvert. Postmodernism could never excise those spectators fully out of existence, and yet its anti-traditional conventions needed to be formed in an absolutely inverse relation to the expectations of traditional stagecraft.

The great challenge for postmodern theatre then was always to bring audiences around to work that denied precisely that which spectators want, and even perhaps that which they *need*. Within this context, postmodernism served as an opposition culture, as art that negated art and as theatre

that steadfastly refused the theatre staples of narrative, character and the Aristotelian unities of time and place.

Kenneth Gergen has it that within postmodernism we 'exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction'.⁷ And he's right; not that postmodern performance would necessarily make things appear so. While much of the postmodern theatre-by-numbers that has surrounded us in recent years has the easy expertise of deconstruction, which functions as a critical scene behind which the absence of characterization hopes to be read as knowingly cool rather than performatively reductive, the act of reconstruction has often got lost in the pomo mix.

From Postmodern to Postdramatic

Not quite so with Jan Lauwers and the choreographic theatre of Needcompany. True to Gergen's concept of postmodernism, Lauwers's performers rarely have any consistently held, fictional identities: they are performers presenting ideas within a field of fluid, merging, and at times conflicting discourse, and yet onstage identities are not abstracted out of existence: they are genuinely reconstructed for us in the theatre moment. Arnd Wesemann has described the Brussels-based Needcompany as a troupe that utilizes film, theatre, dance, and poetry, while not measuring itself against any of these forms, and his is a description that holds true.⁸

From a dramaturgical perspective, in order to present this altered sense of onstage reality Lauwers had to take apart some of theatre's key conventions. Essentially Needcompany had to engage with and become fundamentally *postdramatic*. It was only through this shifting point that Needcompany's trademark relationships between text and performance, being and doing, receiving and constructing could come to be.

Lauwers's background is in conceptual art, where lightness and emotion were tacitly forbidden and where Joseph Beuys was something of a mentor; so it is fair to assume that the road from confrontational solo art to

often celebratory communal performance was not smooth. Yet it was Beuys's own practice that pointed the way, in as much as when the great man of angst began to cry to order in his work he segued from the concrete qualities of performance into the rehearsed illusion of theatre.

For Lauwers this was a major step, and it was one that was often taken most adroitly by those with no formal theatre training. For performance makers trained or even *studied* in theatre (and this includes the study of theatre at university), rules that have first been learned have shown themselves hellishly hard to unlearn, and postmodern theatre has suffered from an overload of theory at the expense of art. When it comes to theatre, too much theory is often a dangerous thing, and too many of us (and I count myself here among the guilty) have spent time recycling Baudrillard in our theatre programmes that might have been more effectively spent on the rehearsal floor dealing with pace and flow, energy and intention, and the craft of performance rather than the craftiness of critical chicanery.

Terms lose their value and currency very quickly, and many terms given currency in universities have no real urgency in art. This is the case, I would argue, with postmodernism, which has become ubiquitous to the point of being almost entirely meaningless; and yet the idea of the 'postdramatic' lives on, partly because, unlike the postmodern, its usage is limited primarily to theatre. Postdramatic theatre takes those elements of plot, narrative, character, and developmental action that have been traditionally privileged by theatre and decentres them, or more accurately provides a series of centres for the work. Lauwers, like John Cage before him, sees five onstage centres as optimum.⁹ Where conventional theatre works value wholeness and a sense of stylistic consistency, the business of decentring is to upset all notions of 'the play's the thing'.

Pieter T'Jonck's review of *Marketplace 76* could be a description of almost any Needcompany production: the 'performers do not tell this story in a single straight line. They occasionally forget the part they are playing

to comment on their character. The group regularly burst into song and dance.¹⁰ Andreas Willink writes in a similar vein that 'it is precisely the unordered, transient, and confused elements that lead to a humane reconciliation played out with emotion'.¹¹

Decentring in *Isabella's Room*

We see this clearly too in Needcompany's seminal work, *Isabella's Room*. As with *Marketplace 76*, the production begins with Lauwers as an onstage director-performer in the tradition of Kantor. In *The Dead Class* Kantor's onstage director presided over a class filled with supposedly dead characters who encounter mannequins representing their younger selves;¹² in *Isabella's Room* Lauwers introduces and observes a stage filled with the dead, the drowned, and the crazy, surrounded by objects representing Isabella's desire to see Africa and Lauwers's own desire to fashion the loss of his father into art. As a director, Kantor was a hugely significant part of the neo-avant-garde of mid- to late twentieth-century European performance and, as with Lauwers, he came to theatre from a background as a visual artist, as a painter who needed the company of players.

Lauwers delivers a conversational introduction to the work as members of the cast amble into view. We know from this preamble that the performance we are watching will amount to some kind of contemporary, personal ritual, rooted in the last hundred years. We know too that the work will somehow tell the story of Lauwers's late father. We know that truth matters here, and if we are distanced at the start from any semblance of fourth-wall realism we are engaged with a reality that owes nothing to the backstories of learned characters.

We get the feeling too that shades of Wilson, LeCompte, Fabre, Bausch, and Brecht will be as much a part of the next two hours as the ethnographical and archaeological objects that decorate the stage. We can see from the start that *Isabella's Room* will thrive on character, plot, and storytelling, yet a great number of recognizably postmodern features

are here too, and they are about to be deployed to mesmeric effect, developing notions of pastiche, pluralism, and spontaneity through merging sharp structural experimentation with the too-cool-for-school taboo of musical theatre. When Brecht told us that 'the Theatre can stage anything [because] it theatres it all' he might have been dreaming a dream of *Needcompany*.¹³

Time passes and we leave the theatre knowing we have witnessed an emphatically moral tale of Isabella Morandi – moral because love given freely knows no guilt and a life lived with an open heart knows no shame. Somewhere in the two hours' traffic of the stage we learn that the past is carried with us and the best we can do is learn the story that it tells, because it is our histories that will whisper our futures. Whether this is a lesson learned or remembered makes little difference.

The result is work that drags postmodernism out of cynicism and contemporary performance out of its non-narrative grave. We buy the stories Lauwers tells because they are stories we need to hear, see, and share. This is theatre without a moment's negativity and it shows that the baby of story has not quite yet been thrown out with the bathwater of modernism. As we see Julien Faure dance his thrilling emergence as the real fulcrum of *Isabella's Room*, the whirling incarnation of Lauwers's father no less, the cast reprise their 'Song for Budhanton', with its lyrics of life going on and a musical loop that draws Barthes's spectators into that which feels (and whisper it soft) like an audience.

Presenting and Being Present

If theatre is in a perpetual crisis, this is the crisis of representation rather than any gap between text-based, character-driven narrative theatre and the more abstract principles of dance. For Hans-Thies Lehmann, the father of postdramatic theatre, this is *das TheatReale*, work where performers do not seek to embody fictional others so much as at once to *present* the work and be *present* before spectators.¹⁴ For Lauwers, and he is not so much alone in this regard as he is an

exemplar, this concern with physical presence does not negate the inclusion of both textual and representational elements; if Lauwers's performers do not represent fully sustained characters at the centre of the plot they still create a montage of movement and voice that evokes a coherent emotional sensibility, and this in its turn leads to an extremely twenty-first-century appreciation of narrative.

Whereas that which we might by now refer to as classic postmodernism has as its default depiction performers moving within a landscape of words, performing actions that are not carried out in any pursuit of narrative progression, Lauwers's performers are characters at least in an in-and-out sense and this leads to an entirely satisfying spectatorship, as borne out by *Needcompany*'s global success.¹⁵

As Lourdes Orozco and Peter M. Boenisch describe it, a number of pioneering artists emerged suddenly from the Flanders performance scene in the 1980s, blurring aesthetics and inventing unknown modes of presentation, which 'firmly established the Dutch speaking part of Belgium on the map of experimental performance practice'.¹⁶ The list of these artists reads like a who's who of contemporary European and international performance: Wim Vandekeybus, Jan Fabre, Michael Laub, Luk Perceval, Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Lauwers: a phenomenal group from such a tight geographical spot.

A Visual Artist in Love with Words

The reasons for this Flemish wave are both complex and simple: strong government subsidy, numerous small Belgian theatres, a savvy and critical home audience base, multilingual performers, the relative ease of European travel, and the significance and daring of Amsterdam's Micky Theatre.¹⁷ Developing from this Flanders experimental theatre scene and having morphed into the deserving darlings of the international theatre festival scene, *Needcompany* deploy sequences of montage, the absence of a sustainable plot, and the breaking down of barriers between spectator and performer through a non-

linguistic medium of dance aligned to a finely tuned theatre intelligence.

However abstract the work appears, it never fails to lead us somewhere: not so much the death then of the author as much as the birth of a new and newly covert directorial authority. Where postmodern directors regularly break with the privileging of text over performance, Lauwers is a visual artist in love with words and the narrative text is never decentred to the point of disappearance. If postmodern theatre revels in its own artificiality, then Lauwers shows us what might lie beyond the now: something between the illusion of character and the auto-performance indulgence of self. Something that matters and something that cares.

We know well that a conventional theatre can pull these strings, for we know that sentiment is a short cut to emotion and sentimentality is what happens when we seek familiar responses to familiar stimuli. But Lauwers's work does none of this. His performers turn what might in other directorial hands be sentimentality into optimism, and they do so without missing a beat. There is a spirit of selective eclecticism at work in Needcompany's *oeuvre* that renders the real and the fictional equal – but equally what? Equally valuable? Equally ephemeral?

Postmodernism without Irony

Lauwers wonders how, when we watch death in Africa on television and then one minute later an advert for a holiday in Africa, we do not kill ourselves.¹⁸ He responds to his own question by musing that we are used to switching between sensibilities as swiftly as we can switch channels on television. And maybe this is where equality lies – not in inherent value, but through the sensibilities we bring to experience. And in inviting us to switch between sensibilities, particularly in *Marketplace 76*, the work becomes a holiday from hopelessness. *Marketplace 76* tells the story of villagers startled by an explosion in which twenty-four people lose their lives, including seven children. The tragedy of the

dead children weighs heavily on the surviving villagers and grief dominates their lives. If Lauwers's villagers can live through all that, then surely we can live through all of this? Robin Detje believes that

Invariably, postdramatic theatre can be spotted squatting on stage behind a mess of MacBooks and tangled cables. In this world, the artist is the epitome of the tragic, hyper-networked but lonely monad, flung into a world of technology. And on his hard drive, there is the musty smell of a thousand seminars.¹⁹

Detje has some important things to say, but his broad-brush dismissal of the postdramatic covers more than is good for his argument, or good for us. Notwithstanding the papers written about Needcompany, there is nothing musty or academic about the work. Similarly, when Detje writes that postdramatic theatre, with its 'emotional anaemia and its absence of euphoria, is precisely the theatre we deserve. This kind of theatre is highly modern and irrefutably smart – but it no longer gets to us',²⁰ he fails to see that, at every Needcompany presentation I have seen, the work absolutely got to its audience, resulting in standing ovations that had nothing to do with theoretical perspectives.

Like Detje, Birgit Schuhbeck sees a world wearied by the experience of postmodern apathetic theatre.²¹ In a similar vein, Ihab Hassan has recently called for an 'aesthetic of trust', where the relation between subject and object can be redefined in terms of 'profound trust';²² and trust is what Needcompany provides. Lauwers's characters overcome the seemingly inescapable trap of postmodern ennui, developing a performative self-confidence that is at once as reasonable as it is preposterous. Needcompany's style works for performers and spectators, allowing temporary, intimate relations that convey a great deal of beauty. This is postmodernism without irony, and because irony is to postmodernism as verisimilitude is to realism, it is hard to see that as a viable state. Either the term or the work has to give.

If Baudrillard's simulacrum has resulted in the real being indistinguishable from the

copy, realism becomes no more than a double photocopy, fair game for screen performance where both camera and screen stand knowingly between the viewer and the viewed, but outmoded and irrelevant on the stage. That last sentence begins with an 'if', and what one person sees as irrelevant is another's significance; nevertheless, Markus Wessendorf speaks for many when, at the same time as applauding the 'extreme naturalism' of much postdramatic work, he is compelled towards looking at 'actors who no longer seem to participate in the make-believe world of the play, but also don't seem to be fully their private selves'.²³

The performance work of Needcompany employs, I would suggest, both a modern and postmodern aesthetic. In this rare theatre space characters possess a fragility that bleeds between action and artifice in a way that keeps irony at bay. Without the detachment of irony Lauwers creates a space where love, beauty, and trust can exist without falling back into modern theatre's picture-frame and make-believe world. Lauwers deconstructs semiotic analysis not by reducing onstage signs to gestures without *gestus* but by pointing exactly to what actions present and by exposing precisely what each moment signifies. That which seems at first glance anti-descriptive is its opposite, just as that which reads like performative happenstance is choreographed to the tightest degree.

Moments of Truth, Lies, and Trust

What is apparent in Lauwers's work is the organization of written text in ways that generate their own theatricality, so that his theatre pieces always present challenges. Instead of over-control, his works seem to showcase disunity and an assemblage of visual and emotional textures. In this we can identify those deconstructive devices formed by Derrida and which are used by many postmodern practitioners. What distinguishes Lauwers's work is its focus on beauty, providing a lyrical aesthetic that is often blunted by postmodernism's resistance to emotional sway. Lauwers's performances

exhibit short theatrical scenes interrupted by outbursts of dance, which are knowingly fragmented, challenging the traditions of theatre where flow and cohesion were once perceived as essential at the same time as they flaunt the excesses of romanticism. Where Needcompany explore and expose human relationships their work does not use movement for movement's sake: rather, and in a very traditional sense, movement is used to express and narrate emotion.

Truth in art is like truth in love: we know it when it is seen and felt but it is not subject to taxonomic categorization. And, like the loves we have known that did not necessarily last but which were nevertheless true, we cannot measure honesty in performance by the autobiographer's promise, the playwright's search for universality, or the critic's purple prose. The current obsession with auto-ethnography has added its own layer of self-orientation, turning theatres into confession booths; yet it is usually through the lies we tell that we reveal most closely who we are.

Lauwers gives us moments of truth and lies alongside trust and love in his work, and these are possessed at the same time of sincerity and play. And let us not forget that Lauwers trusts and loves his performers as well as his audience. Over the years Needcompany has put increasing emphasis on its core ensemble of performers, and the close group Lauwers has collected is part of the long-term vision Needcompany has in view. Lauwers has gone on record repeatedly with his belief that he could not write roles for performers he did not love, and his relationship with Grace Ellen Barkey is at the heart of Needcompany.²⁴

While the approach to love and work offered by Lauwers and Barkey has echoes of Julian Beck and Judith Malina's ensemble practice with the Living Theatre, Needcompany's performing subjects are clearly not the 'old modern' ones, and Lauwers's characters offer few if any moments of transcendental justification. His characters' identities, dual selfhoods, and knowing subjectivities ensure they are always on the edge of being dismantled and deconstructed; but while

this audience awareness is palpably felt, characters nevertheless appear in moments of belief. Lauwers's fictional characters tell us what matters, at the same time as we know what matters here to Lauwers is to keep us watching, listening, and thinking.

'An Extension of the Brechtian Project'

Caroline Wake sees postmodern theatre as a 'place of infinite possibility wrought with infinite peril', arguing that 'Most of the people who are engaged in it do so clumsily.'²⁵ No surprise really. Since the turn of the twenty-first century we have seen traces at least of a move from the postmodern media madness of cyberspace and spectacle towards a resurgent faith in the craft of creative amateurs and the intimacy of community – a drift away from the stubbed-out cigarette end of postmodernism's empty promise. If we are witnessing a sensibility shift that resists the postmodern at the same time as it retains some of its traits, then we are, perhaps, also seeing something of a return to the promise of Brecht: a promise that looms larger over Western theatre than any other. Karen Jurs-Munby's feeling that 'the exposure of textuality on stage is simply an extension of the Brechtian project of making the apparatus visible' is consistent with much we have seen since Müller's *Hamlet-machine* and Wilson's *Deafman Glance*.²⁶

Unlike Brecht the modernist, the post-dramatic Lauwers is not significantly concerned with banging a political drum, going so far as to say that 'Trying to change the world is an arrogant act',²⁷ and explaining that his work is political only in as much as it shows his love for the human race.²⁸ But like Brecht, Lauwers reacts against the contemporary Western theatre, presenting an artistic field of theatre where precisely choreographed gestures, movements, shapes, textures of sound, and lighting fuse to create a heightened experience, producing the interplay of visual, verbal, and auditory elements we have come to expect from postmodern performance and which constructively problematize the relation of image to action and to language.

Even after one has become somewhat jaded by deconstruction, this still serves to emancipate *this* spectator (for who in an essay on postmodernism dare speak for an entire audience?) from both the specific textual interpretation enforced by Western theatre directors and the seeming anti-theatricality of that cod postmodernism which has for the last thirty years come to dominate the European stage.

In achieving this, Lauwers employs a number of strategies which, including essentially non-linguistic montage, displace any univocal signification, thereby releasing a so far limitless play of language. If connecting this to Brecht appears too much of a leap, we can shorten the gap by suggesting that Needcompany's theatre works as a type of collage, as a series of montages that are far removed from being theatre in pursuit of an integrated whole. Lauwers relies on disconnecting text from image and music, thus creating a similar effect to Brechtian defamiliarization and disruption of traditional narrative.

Brecht called for a performance style far removed from realism in that it did not ask for emotional honesty so much as intellectual prowess; its admission of characters' unreality seeks to create a different depiction of onstage life. This goes some considerable way to explaining why amateur actors were so praised by Brecht, because they were already to a large extent alienated from realistic acting technique in the first place. Brecht's fascination with amateur actors is articulated in *Two Essays on Unprofessional Acting* and *Notes on the Folk Play*,²⁹ which discuss various non-bourgeois theatrical traditions and their attendant economies and aesthetics, from which Brecht's appeal for simple truth emerges. The simplest truth, of course, being that the actors are acting and that spectators are watching them at play.

If we pursue also the Brechtian idea or *ideal* that a performer's acceptance and admission of artifice can allow spectators to be self-aware of their presence within the theatre, we can see the postdramatic as not quite as new as the term might suggest, and Needcompany's work not massively distant

in aesthetic ideology from the Berliner Ensemble of Brecht's post-exile years.

Brecht's amateur actors further embedded his concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the alienation or distancing effect that allows spectators to deconstruct social processes as they watch. Brecht deployed amateur actors in his work in pursuit of this desired estrangement, directing them to perform both physical and speech acts and, knowing/hoping that since they were not steeped in realism an alienating effect would be created between spectators' expectations and experience. Those who were expecting a particular experience of theatre received an awkward disconnect of gesture separated from meaning. In the creation of space between gesture and gist spectators were (Brecht believed) made aware of the space between the actors and the acting, the dramatic text and the production, and the onstage action and in-society behaviour.

This Brechtian quality of actorly naivety has been exposed as something of a contradiction in terms by Theodor Adorno, who suggests that even Brecht's most successful work was 'infected by the deceptions of his commitment':

Brecht affected the diction of the oppressed. But the doctrine he advocated needs the language of the intellectual. The homeliness and simplicity of his tone is thus a fiction. It betrays itself both by signs of exaggeration and by stylized regression to archaic or provincial forms of expression. . . . It is usurpation and almost a contempt for victims to speak like this as if the author were one of them.³⁰

To return to that essay's opening paragraphs, Brecht was a modernist, producing art which aimed for a popular audience. He was also a Marxist who was sceptical of knowledge and a theatrical innovator, of sorts at least, who valued and deployed popular art,³¹ a didactic man of the theatre who remained an entertainer; and a champion of the ensemble who wrote star parts for his wife; a man who believed in both pleasure and entertainment, saying:

From the first it has been the theatre's business to entertain people. . . . It is this business which always gives it its particular dignity; it needs no other passport than fun, but this it has got to have.³²

And he was a man who wrote scathingly of spectators who enjoyed pleasures he felt undeserving: 'I aim at an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their heart warmed.'³³ All of which created a practitioner every bit as complex and wily as any dramatic character Brecht wrote into his plays.

Innovations Defeated by Time

Traditional postmodern performance – and it is established enough now to be termed 'traditional' – fought its way through stylistic plurality but could never win the theatre war so long as stylistic dissent was regarded as sufficient in itself: a case of too much emptiness ever to fill the theatre space. Where the old avant-garde looked to change the world by changing consciousness through art – epitomized in Brecht's accusation that Stanislavsky's work was geared towards the creation of amusement and frivolity rather than serious social deliberation³⁴ – postmodernism rarely looked beyond its own mirror image, an image that reversed everything and changed nothing much at all.

Nothing dates like the nearly new. Caught up remorselessly in the newness of its own moment, contemporary performance seeks to impose new norms, but as soon as these norms are accepted their adversarial potency begins to wane. The experimental is innately combative, not specifically towards artistic convention, but towards the mainstream ways in which art is produced and received; because it sees itself in some opposition to the past, postmodern performance always presupposed itself to be ahead of the game and ahead of the field. The idea of innovation is based on the assumption that the rest of the theatre world will at some point wake up and catch up with where new work stands today – by which time, presumably, the postmodern would have moved forward into new forms and new positions.

All innovations are defeated by time: perhaps time has been most cruel to postmodernism because its time coincides with the time of mass and immediate communication,

where the new grows quickly old and before our very eyes. When video that would take forty-eight years to watch is uploaded onto YouTube every day, the shelf life of work is at once extended and denied. There is simply too much that is brand new for us to focus enough time on the nearly new.

The more closely we have come to understanding postmodern performance the more we have essayed it into a set of conventions that all too quickly have become all too conventional. When postmodernism-by-

numbers became as easy to make as bad Brecht by mock-ensembles locked into textbook copy, the death knell began to sound. The best of ideas, badly presented, dies a long time; and the death of postmodernism has been hastened by an abundance of bad art made by good thinkers and by theatre that only really makes sense on the critical theorist's page.

There are no boundaries in theatre. Brecht knew that in his time as Jan Lauwers knows it now.

Marketplace 76

Needcompany, directed by Jan Lauwers,
Ruhtriennale Brussels, 25 October 2012

Villagers startled by an explosion. Twenty-four people lose their lives, seventeen adults and seven children. The tragedy of the dead children. Experience weighing heavily on the surviving villagers. Too much grief dominates their lives. Is melancholia the highest calling of art?

One day a boat falls from the sky. Lauwers's text tells us so: 'A lifeboat fallen from the sky.' Seventy-six notches made in the doorframe with a kitchen knife. All the same length; all the same spaces between. The neat and the precise. Cold shivers and waiting. Characters laughed at and listened to. Seventy-six notches, neat and precise. Precision into chaos, order to disorder, dialogue to dance. An epic kaleidoscope, a four-season report on humble heroes.

Mourning, sorrow, incest and paedophilia, suicide and survival. Entanglement of love and of loss and distrust, epic pronouncements and alienation effects, street cleaners and fountain drownings, guilty lives and culpable wives, manifestos and allegories, days of judgement. No matter: 'It's only theatre.' No matter, it's only theatre. It's only theatre.

Buddhist orange, like Isabella's Budhanton out of Guantanamo Bay, in and out of character interruptions, irritations and innovations, inexhaustible ideas, explosions and wheelchairs. Perversions and horrific deeds. Polyphony gone wild where a village party amounts to confusion as aesthetic form. The living and the dead are all the same here because the dead do not let go of the town: not the child who jumped out of a window, nor the woman who threw herself off a railway bridge. Erotic liberation, crime and punishment, gull droppings, inflatable fish, lighting-rig gallows, toy dogs and a child fathered by an entire collective.

Party of Pain, Party of Hope. Children's Theatre for Adults. A Sergeant Pepper Lauwers as sardonic MC: is this an invitation to take a holiday from morality? Or are we so immersed in moral matters that we need a little space? This is morality without moral judgement. A heady mix of love and hope and badness and pain, leaving us free to write our own wrongs. 'You will have to help us a bit.' We all will have to help others out a bit.

Notes and References

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3. Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 37.

4. Roland Barthes, *S/Z: an Essay* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), p. 5.

5. *Ibid.*

6. See Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996).

7. Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 71.

8. Christine Stalpaert, Frederik Le Roy, and Sigrid Bousset, *No Beauty For Me There Where Human Life Is Rare* (Amsterdam: Theatre and Film Books, 2007), p. 261.

9. Erika Rundle, 'Images of Freedom', *Theater*, XXXIII, No. 1 (2003), p. 59–71, here p. 64. Despite the early pre-translated impact of Lehmann's 1999 book, 'post-dramatic' is not a new term – Richard Schechner used the phrase in the 1970s to discuss happenings – and nor, as we know from Cage and Kaprow, is the idea of performance work with multiple *foci* a postmodern conceit.
10. Pieter T'Jonck, 'Marketplace 76: the Melodrama of Jan Lauwers', *De Morgen*, Brussels, 12 October 2012 <www.needcompany.org/EN/review/1103>.
11. Andrea Willink, 'Deliverance in the Village of Pain', *Nachtkritik*, 8 September 2012. <www.nachtkritik.de>.
12. See Noel Witts, *Tadeusz Kantor* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010).
13. Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 280.
14. See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).
15. Needcompany's success includes the following awards and prizes: Mobil Pegasus Preis; Internationales Sommertheater Festival Hamburg, for the best international production, *Ça Va*, 1989; Thersitesprijs, Flemish theatre critics prize, 1998; New York Obie Award for the play *Morning Song*, 1999; Kinematrix Prize for Digital Format, Venice International Film Festival, 2002, for *Goldfish Game*; Grand Jury Honor for Best Ensemble Cast, Slamdance Film Festival, *Goldfish Game*, 2004; Le Masque, prize awarded by the Académie Québécoise du Théâtre in Montréal, Canada, for the best foreign production, *La Chambre d'Isabella*, 2005; prize awarded by the Syndicat Professionnel de la Critique de Théâtre, de Musique et de Danse in France, for the best foreign production, *La Chambre d'Isabella*, 2005; Culture Prize awarded by the Flemish Community, 2006, theatre literature category, for *Isabella's Room* and *Ulrike* scripts; Grand Prix Golden Laurel Wreath Award for Best Performance, MESS Festival, Sarajevo, for *Isabella's Room*, 2009; Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic Austria, 2012.
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17. Christel Stalpaert, 'Something is Rotten on the Stage of Flanders: Postdramatic Shakespeare in Contemporary Flemish Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, XX, No. 4 (2010), p. 437–48.
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24. <www.needcompany.org/EN/about>.
25. See Wake, 2012.
26. Karen Jurs-Munby, 'Text Exposed: Displayed Texts as Players Onstage in Contemporary Theatre', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, XXX, No. 1 (2010), p. 102.
27. Rundle, 2003, p. 61.
28. Ibid., p. 62.
29. Bertolt Brecht, ed. John Willet, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).
30. Theodor Adorno, *Commitment, Aesthetics, and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1987), p. 187.
31. See Shomit Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Grotowski, and Brook*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1992).
32. Brecht, 1994, p. 180.
33. Ibid., p. 14.
34. Ibid., p. 72.