

ELSI SAKELLARIDOU

Contemporary Women's Theatre: From Post-Brechtian to Post-feminist Representation. Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 2006. pp. 415.

This informative book surveys women's theatre in the U.S.A. and the EU (England, France, Germany, Greece, and Italy) from roughly 1955 to 2005. Intended for Greek readers, it is divided into three parts: historical and theoretical itineraries (3 chapters), women's theatre on page and on stage (3 chapters); and fertile bipolarities between theory and practice (2 chapters). It assesses feminist theories and gay/lesbian viewpoints advanced by 20 American¹ and 11 British² women academics. Sakellaridou, who teaches English at the University of Thessaloniki, applies the hegemonic Anglo-American feminist model as the standard that both frames her understanding and measures the achievements of women's theatre in four countries of continental Europe.

She begins with a 19-page unnecessary preamble about the scanty presence of women as playwrights and performers from the days when Sappho sang her poems on the island of Lesbos around 593 B.C. to the days when Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robin coauthored the play, *Alan's Wife*, in England in A.D. 1893. Sakellaridou then delivers a relevant 18-page sketch of how women theorists, playwrights, and performers in the U.K. and the U.S.A. in the 20th century began to fashion a feminist poetics and gender politics that has become manifest in the diverse work of feminist and gay/lesbian theatre groups³ since 1969. However, the growing divergence and difference in beliefs and missions among feminist theatre groups and individual feminist theorists is seen as "degeneration" (sic) of the women's movement. The diminishing prospects for a unified feminist theory or practice in the near future compel her to look into the near past in search of a common root that has nourished the various branches of contemporary feminist theatrical theory and practice. Brechtian theatre, firmly planted in Marxist soil, is identified as the ancestral root of post-World-War-II feminist theatre, but also as the root of the problem. In 17 pages she traces the debt of Anglo-American theatre feminists to Bertolt Brecht as he transitioned from "epic" to "dialectical" theatre, and as they moved away from his gender politics.

The first part of the book describes, among other things, how feminist theory and practice developed its plots, themes, and characters first by selecting its protagonists from a proletariat of women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians, and, then, by seeking alternative narrative and performance styles beyond realism in order to expose oppressive social and economic practices. These unfair practices were perpetrated and perpetuated by antagonists who, generally speaking, were "bourgeois," "capitalist," "imperialist," "white," "chauvinist," "heterosexual" males – dead or alive, real or fictive. Their "reality," "morality," and "identity" are

¹ Alicia Arizon, Gayle Austin, Janet Brown, Charlotte Canning, Sue-Ellen Case, Elin Diamond, Jill Dolan, Jeanie Forte, Patti Gillespie, Lynda Hart, Helene Keyssar, Sara Lennox, Bonnie Marranca, Deborah McDowell, Brenda Murphy, Elizabeth Ramirez, Janelle Reinelt, Barbara Smith, Valerie Smith, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano.

² Elaine Aston, Susan Bassnett, Susan Bennett, Rose Collis, Jill Davis, American-born Lizbeth Goodman,

Gabriele Griffin, Margaret Llewellyn-Jones, Lib Taylor, Catherine Itzin, and Michelene Wandor.

³ The New Feminist Theatre (1969), The Westbeth Playwright's Feminist Collective (1970), The Women's Street Theatre Group (1970), The Gay Sweatshop (1975), The Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company (1975), The Spiderwoman Theatre Workshop (1975), The Siren Theatre Company (1979), and The Split Britches Theatre Company (1981).

presented as cultural constructions that serve to legitimize repressive social hierarchies by predominantly keeping both the privileged white men and their unprivileged subordinates in their place. Feminist theorists, playwrights, and performers – sometimes resorting to interpretive privilege – have shown and criticized the contradictions between intent and action, or between meaning and expression that were carried out wittingly or unwittingly by the agents of repressive ideologies. In doing so, the feminists often incurred the disagreement and displeasure of the people whose behavior and values they questioned. Sakelariou aptly focuses on two literary/performance devices – “gestus” and “gaze” – describing in length, in this and other parts of the book, how the feminists borrowed, adapted, and used both devices for their own purposes with great success.⁴

The strongest and most cogent writing in the book occurs in the second part where Sakelariou surveys plays authored by women playwrights in six countries. The U.S.A. is given 57 pages of attention. The ideas of American women academic theorists are nicely interwoven with the practice of 22 American women playwrights⁵ and five feminist and gay/lesbian theatre groups.⁶ Sakelariou primarily reports established critical opinion about these playwrights, but she occasionally takes brief detours to correct critical bias as, for example, in the case of Estela Portillo Trambley’s play:

Known feminist critic Sue-Ellen Case’s severe accusations (which are noted by Ramirez) that Trambley’s early play, *The Day of the Swallows* (1971), is homophobic, reflects the lesbian obsessions that literally flood Case’s own critical work (during the decade of the 1990s) rather than Trambley’s heterosexual priorities. (2006:117)

Sakelariou also takes shortcuts to identify trends within the women’s movement that, in her considered opinion, appear to be vying for power and control.

The intense desire for hegemonic positions in key-places that shape both the ideology and the aesthetics of contemporary American theatre is very clearly apparent in the strong position that lesbian theory and criticism (which accompany lesbian theatre practice) have taken in American universities and the better-known American publishing houses mainly since the mid-1990s. A handy list of female academics who identify themselves as lesbians and occupy key-positions in university departments of theatre and theoretical studies – in conjunction with a productivity barrage of texts related to lesbian and queer theory and transgender disguise and representation – gives the impression of a real takeover and a bent for the monopoly of academic thought and performance the-

⁴ “Gestus,” was developed by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin to show how ideology crystallizes and manifests itself in the verbal and body language of its carriers; and “gaze,” which was developed by Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and Michelle Foucault, to show how ideology, through the inspecting, intimidating “eye” of its overseeing agents (who have already interiorized “it” over and against themselves) keeps the oppressed in line and under surveillance without resorting to physical violence.

⁵ Rachel Crothers, Eve Ensler, Maria Irene Fornes, Susan Glaspell, Lorraine Hansberry, Lillian Hellman, Beth Henley, Tina Howe, Adrienne Kennedy, Josefina Lopez, Carson McCullers, Cherrie Moraga, Marsha Norman, Dael Orlandersmith, Susan-Lori Parks, Estela Portillo Trambley, Milcha Sanchez-Scott, Ntozake Shange, Anna Deavere Smith, Megan Terry, Sophie Tredwell, and Wendy Wasserstein.

⁶ Spiderwoman, Split Britches, Teatro Raices, Valentina Productions, and Las Cucarachas.

ory by a methodical, dynamic gender minority. Although the corresponding dominance of lesbian performance practice would have been much more difficult in the circuits of show business, the dominant position of lesbian theorists in the area of performance theory and aesthetics openly shows not only the desire, but also its fulfillment through a reversal of power and authority. It reveals how a hegemonic role is exercised in a scandalous fashion by individuals and groups that, up until recently, ceaselessly protested against the oppression and marginalization of the weaker groups by the established system, and they fought for a new politics that would endorse racial and gender diversity in the context of equality in social cohabitation. The case of the lesbian academics, mostly white, vying for a forceful domination is not an isolated phenomenon. It is the most visible pressure exercised by the margin that lays claim to the center, while it remains an unclear issue whether they are motivated by ideology or self-interest, or, as usual, by a medley of both. (2006:136)

Shortcuts like the one cited above about the self-privileging maneuvers of the gay/lesbian branch of feminist theorists to seize control of academic discourse, especially in theatre and related disciplines in the U.S.A., lead to quick conclusions without the benefit of supporting evidence (statistical data or testimony) gathered and analyzed by Sakellaridou or others.

Nonetheless, in all other respects her account remains a lucid and well-documented overview of women's theatre theory and practice primarily in the U.S.A. and the U.K. during the last half of the 20th century. She devotes the lion's share (101 pages) of her book to the U.K. The ideas of British and American academic historians and theorists are masterfully interwoven with the art of 42 British women playwrights⁷ and 14 feminist and gay/lesbian theatre groups.⁸ The 42 playwrights represent various racial and geographical segments of the U.K. Sakellaridou correctly identifies Marxism in the work of many English theatre theorists and playwrights as the parent ideology onto which French post-structuralism and American post-feminism were grafted. I might add, however, that the Anglo-Americans have more or less shifted the representation of the class struggle from economics to culture, while, at the same time, focused their attention on only segments of the proletariat – such as women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians. The social existence of men in many plays of recent years – like the social existence of the bourgeois in most plays with a Marxist bent – is seen as reactionary, superficial, or short-sighted. These men, regardless of color, are presented as victims and carriers of a “false consciousness” that keeps them blind to the truth because it makes them see “socially” constructed relationships as “natural”. The underlining assumption is that socio-economic transformations – such as gender inequality and racial inequality – can be achieved through the adoption of feminist perspectives and values that deconstruct dominant male

⁷ April de Angelis, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Daniels, Shelagh Delaney, Anne Devlin, Maureen Duffy, Marcella Evaristi, Marie Jones, Tash Fairbanks, Pam Gems, Sue Glover, Maro Green, Caroline Griffin, Ann Jellicoe, Sarah Kane, Jackie Kay, Charlotte Keatley, Bryony Lavery, Doris Lessing, Deborah Levy, Liz Lochhead, Claire Luckham, Alison Lyssa, Sarah Kane, Anne Marie Di Mambro, Sharman MacDonald, Clare McIntyre, Rona Munro, Louise Page, Winsome

Pinnock, Rebecca Prichard, Christine Reid, Shelagh Stephenson, Michelene Wandor, and Timberlake Wertenbaker.

⁸ The Women's Street Theatre Group, the Women's Company, Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, Gay Sweatshop, Siren, Spare Tyre, Clean Break, Joint Stock, Monstrous Regiment, Mrs. Worthington's Daughters, Charabanc, Brith Gof, Sistren, Theatre of Black Women, and Black Mime Theatre Women's

patterns of thought and social practice, while, at the same time, restore awareness and empathy about the rights of gender minorities that have been hidden, ignored, or victimized.

France is given less attention with only 29 pages. The ideas of 4 French women feminist theorists⁹ are discussed in the context of the work of six French women playwrights,¹⁰ and one theatre group.¹¹ Germany is shortchanged with only 16 pages. Sakellaridou comments on the work of 11 German women playwrights,¹² one Austrian playwright (Elfriede Jelinek), and two theatre groups.¹³ Italy is given a token mention in just 8 pages. She considers the work of 5 Italian women playwrights¹⁴ and one theatre group (La Maddalena). She devotes 30 pages to Greece, but mentions only one female academic (Maria Anastasopoulou), 4 theatre groups,¹⁵ and discusses an assortment of plays by 12 Greek women playwrights.¹⁶ Women theorists, playwrights, and performers in the other countries of continental Europe are not taken into account. It is for this reason that I think that the book would have accomplished its goals more decisively if its focus had stayed on American and British women's theatre theory and practice.

The third part of the book deals with non-text-based feminist performance, performance art, and body art. Judith Butler has shown the conventionality of feminist goals for the representation of gender differences. So, Sakellaridou focuses on the efforts of Roberta Sklar to create a feminist acting method, and then reexamines two British groups (Monstrous Regiment and Talawa), and two American groups (Split Britches and Spiderwoman) in their efforts to liberate performance from the male gaze. As in the first two parts of her book, Sakellaridou uses a nexus of theoretical feminist insights yielded by both academics and artists. In this part, she paraphrases or quotes the views of 21 more women academics who work in the U.S.A. and the U.K.¹⁷ The performance art and/or body art of Orlan, Margaret Cho, Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Rachel Rosenthal, Annie Sprinkle, and Sande Zeig are also examined. The concluding chapter of the book comes full circle back to Bertolt Brecht and his fertile influence on feminist theatre artists and academics that either adopted his insights or opposed them.

In conclusion, Sakellaridou surveys theoretical assertions and theatrical practices in an informed and informative way. Her goal is neither to revise established feminist theories nor to advance new ones by reexamining feminist performance practices in the U.S.A. and the

Troop.

⁹ Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Sarraute Valerie Minogue.

¹⁰ Simone Benmussa, Hélène Cixous, Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and Marguerite Yourcenar.

¹¹ Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil.

¹² Jenny Erpenbeck, Marieluise Fleisser, Ilse Langner, Berta Lask, Dea Loher, Gerlind Reinshagen, Friederike Roth, Else Lasker-Schüler, Kerstin Specht, Ginka Steinwachs, and Christa Wolf.

¹³ Anna Konda and Frauen im Theater.

¹⁴ Natalia Ginzburg, Dacia Maraini, Franca Rame, Cecilia Stazzone, and Annie Vivanti.

¹⁵ Nemesis, Persona, DameBlanche, and Christiana Lambrinidou's workshop.

¹⁶ Elli Alexiou, Loula Anagnostaki, Lili Iakovidou, Karina Ioannidou, Anna Kockinou, Margarita Limberaki, Costoula Mitropoulou, Elena Penga, Avra Sidiropoulou, Kalliroi Siganou-Parren, Chrysa Spilioti, and Constantina Vergou.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, Susan Clement, Kate Davy, Mary Ann Doane, Ellen Donkin, Josette Féral, Elinor Fuchs, Geraldine Harris, Loren Kruger, Karen Laughlin, Teresa de Lauretis, Laura Mulvey, Meg Mumford, Alison Oddey, Vivian Patraha, Peggy Phelan, Mary Russo, Rebecca Schneider, Iris Smith, Gayatri Spivak, and Elizabeth Wright.

five countries of the EU that she selected. Her brief disclaimer about the applicability of the Anglo-American feminist model to Greek theatre practice comes too late in her book (p. 322), and, therefore, it has no effect on the direction and outcome of her narrative. Likewise, her three cursory references to Aristotle and his theory of mimesis (especially on p. 365) do not introduce any new arguments or evidence about the Brechtian or anti-Aristotelian debate beyond those already rehashed by Elin Diamond and others. Still, Sakellaridou's book is useful because it surveys important developments in women's theatre after Brecht in the U.S.A. and five countries of the EU in a realistic, articulate, and reasonable manner.

STRATOS E. CONSTANTINIDIS