

“Pure Joke”

The Comedy of Theater since Brecht

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From Friedrich Nietzsche to Walter Benjamin, from Hans-Thies Lehmann to Christoph Menke, scholars have discussed whether or not modern societies still enable tragic experience and whether or not we live in a post-tragic society. Far less effort has been spent on the question of how modernity relates to the tradition and theory of comedy. There are many reasons for this imbalance. One is the fact that tragedy always seemed to be the more dignified genre for literary critique and philosophical reflection compared to its sometimes obscure and often obscene counterpart. Another reason is the questionable privilege accorded to comedy by Hegel that it amounts to the very end of art itself.

However, the study of comedy seems promising to enlarge the sense of contemporary cultural self-understanding and its theatrical infrastructure. Since the theater reforms at the beginning of the 20th century, the development of modern and postmodern theater owes a great deal to the tradition of comedy. To name just a few examples: Brecht argued that epic theater should always be staged as comedy; Pirandello chose comedies and humor to reflect on modern drama; Dürrenmatt stated that comedy alone would be suitable for societies after World War II; Beckett's tragicomedies are at least as much comedy as they are tragedy; Heiner Müller characterized all of his plays as 'relatively comic', and elements of comedy are, of course, ubiquitous in the plays of Thomas Bernhard, Botho Strauß, Tom Stoppard, Yasmina Reza and many others. Even in postdramatic works by authors such as René Pollesch and Elfriede Jelinek, the most characteristic theatrical devices of crucial importance can be traced back to the tradition of comedy.

This raises the question of why it is that these devices, largely neglected by theoretical reflection, have at the same time become so influential in the theater of the past century. Why does modern theater so often tend to disrupt the dramatic plot, to break the fourth wall,

demand improvisation, address the audience directly, or insert a layer of metatheatrical self-reflection? And how have these devices become vital not just for the aesthetic form of contemporary theater, but also for the standing of theater in modern and postmodern societies?

The workshop seeks to explore the assumption that the rise of performativity and theatricality we have witnessed in the past century was enabled by a comic dispositif: It was comedy that opened a way out of the illusionistic dramatical forms of the 18th and 19th centuries and has opened up a different self-understanding of modern culture. The workshop will discuss the structure of this dispositif and examine the function of comic devices for the theater since Brecht. It will reflect on theoretical and philosophical concepts of comedy, on their impact on our contemporary self-understanding, and on its current theatrical manifestations. It will investigate which comic traditions – from Old Greek Comedy to *commedia dell'arte* and Romantic comedy – have affected modern plays as well as our concepts of theatricality and performativity. And it will trace how these questions do not only concern specific forms of theater in recent history, but more importantly tell us about the aesthetical, philosophical, and political implications of theater and theatrical situations for the society we live in.