

Dayton Henderson

Loren Kruger: Post-Imperial Brecht. Politics and Performance, East and South

2006

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2006.4.1062>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Henderson, Dayton: Loren Kruger: Post-Imperial Brecht. Politics and Performance, East and South. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 23 (2006), Nr. 4, S. 440–441. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2006.4.1062>.

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Szenische Medien

Loren Kruger: Post-Imperial Brecht. Politics and Performance, East and South

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, 399 S., ISBN 0-521-81708-0, \$ 95.00 / € 91,50

Brecht's position within the German canon is today seemingly assured. Many of his works, such as *Baal*, *Mutter Courage*, or *Die Drei-Groschen-Oper*, are taught, read, and produced with a mixed air of reverence and intimate acquaintance that lends all ostensible masterpieces a certain phenomenological timelessness. Simultaneously, Brecht's conceptualization of *Episches Drama* and *Verfremdung* are, in certain circles, understood to represent the greatest theoretical shift for the social function of German theatre since Lessing wrote the articles comprising the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* in 1767. Few have enjoyed such high esteem as Brecht.

However, this canonical assuredness was not always self-evident. His prodigious output has at times been labeled profligate, with Adorno famously castigating him for his simplistic methodology. Much contentiousness surrounding Brecht historically stemmed from his conflicted Marxist pedigree. During his lifetime, there was a mixture of vilification and adulation that came from both East and West. Brecht's decision to spend his exile in the West and his life-long devotion to various forms of Weimar modernist aesthetic, instead of Soviet-sympathetic socialist realism, rendered him problematic for the Left, particularly within the post-war GDR. His tenure in the West, meanwhile, is often summed up in his appearance before the House of Un-American Activities Committee and a less than successful stint in Hollywood. Positioning Brecht between East and West was thereby an uncertain task in a time that demanded that everything could be distilled into a concrete position on a left/right axis.

Loren Kruger exploits Brecht's destabilizing position within the essentialized binaries of political logic that dominated most of the 20th century in order to examine the reciprocity of political and cultural exchanges occurring both within and around the theatre of two nations: The German Democratic Republic and South Africa. Kruger adroitly shifts away from a conventional post-colonial reading by refuting a simple trajectory that runs from Europe in the North, to Africa in the South. Instead, she grafts this onto an always-shifting line running between Washington, in the West, and Moscow, in the East. Kruger therefore layers her discourse of Brecht within a greater context that refracts the legacy of German imperialist expansion through the lens of American/USSR attempts for economic

and cultural hegemony. This globalized freedom of movement allows Kruger to trace a new, non-longitudinal connection between seemingly disparate poles: the East and the South. Specifically, she frames the anti-apartheid movement of South Africa within the context of tangible East German anti-imperialist/anti-colonialist sympathy movements, and vice-versa. For Kruger, the validity of this axis is predicated on Brecht's reception within South Africa, as well as South African drama's reception within the GDR.

The book is divided into seven chapters, with an introduction and a concluding *Coda*. The first four chapters loosely follow Brecht, and the Brechtian tradition (usually personified in Heiner Müller) from late 1920s Weimar to the centenary of his birth, with a large portion focusing on GDR performances during the 1950s and late 1980s. Chapters five and six read the South African anti-apartheid movement, its protest theatre, and the works of Athol Fugard and Fugard's reception in the GDR, against the theoretical foundation that the first four chapters establish. The seventh chapter examines the performances of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to examine the Brechtian nature of a non-theatrical, but very public, trial in a post-traumatic world.

Kruger excellently explicates the plays she uses as textual representations for these culturally discursive movements. Each chapter is unpacked through the close analysis of multiple dramatic pieces or theoretical publications, and the even balance between the text and its contexts is maintained throughout. This is especially true of her exquisite analysis of Brecht's *Katzengraben* (1953), and *Die Massnahme* (1930), Heiner Müller's *Der Lohndrucker* (1956), and *Radio-Fatzer* (1988), as well as the productions of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) and *The Coat* (1966).

Kruger goes to great lengths to establish a new complexity of understanding around Brecht and his reception. Indeed, at one point she underscores his dynamism by referring to him in the plural ("*Post-Imperial Brechts*"). Her work succeeds through her impeccable research and her impressive ability to weave Brecht into a broad system of intersecting histories. Kruger's approach is obviously indebted to Stephen Greenblatt's seminal work, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford 1988). With her analysis of Brecht's legacy, she forces a concordant re-examination of how his texts function within this post-imperial society. She creates a symbiosis in which societies do indeed shape the work of Brecht and those who follow him, but they are societies which Brecht himself has shaped. She even appears to appropriate Greenblatt's representational mode of "purchasing" when discussing Brecht as commodity within the "*glocal*" market. This is not a detriment to the book. Kruger excellently balances a very complicated cultural network and exhibits an amazing ability to keep her grip on this multifaceted character.

Dayton Henderson (Berkeley)