

Review Article

Theatre and Philosophy

Tom Stern

The Art of Theater, by James R. Hamilton. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, xv + 226 pp.
ISBN 978-1-4051-1353-3 hb £21.99

The Necessity of Theater, by Paul Woodruff. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, xiii + 257 pp.
ISBN 978-0-19-533200-1 hb £17.99;
ISBN 978-0-19-539480-1 pb £10.99

The Drama of Ideas, by Martin Puchner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, xii + 254 pp.
ISBN 978-0-19-973032-2 hb £19.99

Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance, by Freddie Rokem. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010, xi + 227 pp.
ISBN 978-0-8047-6349-3 hb \$60.00;
ISBN 978-0-8047-6350-9 pb \$21.95

Is there anything philosophical to say about theatre? Even within the philosophy of art, there is little material that is devoted to theatre, compared to music, films and novels. One can always take problems in the philosophy of art and apply them to theatre; but that hardly constitutes an independent area of study. And the one or two philosophical problems which have theatrical labels are frequently, and not unjustifiably, taken to be wider problems in the philosophy of art. The problem of tragic pleasure, for example, has been applied to novels, sculptures, documentary films and rollercoaster rides. Catharsis—if there is a meaningful philosophical conception, independent of the curious but basically unsolvable exegetical riddle—is taken by most writers, probably including Aristotle, to be a feature of more than just theatre.

Still, the absence of material is puzzling. Theatre in various forms continues to be popular, inventive, moving, controversial, financially viable and a number of other things which at least some people want from art. What's more, many philosophers have written directly about theatre (Plato, Aristotle, Hume and Nietzsche are some of them) and several were also notable playwrights (Seneca, Machiavelli, Lessing, Rousseau, Schiller and Sartre, for example, of whom at least three belong to the first group too). Finally, many of the traditional concerns of philosophy—truth, reality and representation, action and its consequences, living the right kind of life—are explored in a variety of theatrical

contexts. Still, the idea that there could be an interesting or independent area of study devoted to the relationship between philosophy and theatre has seemed very remote.

Four books published in the last few years take the opposite view. Each author takes himself to be saying something about philosophy and theatre as a whole, not just about, say, Shakespeare, Sophocles or Seneca. Does this mean that a literature on philosophy and theatre has finally emerged? In one important sense, the answer is 'no'. That is, if a 'literature' on a particular subject suggests a group of writers, devoted to the same topics, questions or problems, who read and comment on each other's work and develop their work accordingly. Apart from in one or two very cursory ways, these authors do not interact with each other (in these pages). Freddie Rokem and Martin Puchner exchange compliments on their respective book covers and acknowledgement lists; Puchner tells us in a footnote that he is looking forward to Rokem's book. But that is as close as they get to explicit, meaningful communication in these two books. Partly, of course, this may be explained by the close publication dates; but both have written on theatre before, and neither book features any substantial discussion of work by the other. Hamilton's book contains a couple of brief discursive footnotes about Woodruff (basically expressing agreement) and borrows some terminology from a paper of his (pp. 87–9). Woodruff, characteristically, mentions none of the others. Of course, one cannot expect authors to reference books published a couple of years in the future; but the reader of these books will not discover a coherent set of problems, let alone any method for solving them.

There is, of course, an advantage to this. Each author has been able to approach his subject free from the fear of being swamped by an overwhelmingly vast puddle of other people's thoughts. Each book is carefully and in some cases painstakingly researched, and each has a great deal to recommend it, independently of the others. In any case, despite the lack of interaction and the varied methods, certain themes do emerge, in relation to which comparison is instructive.

The question of the definition of theatre features as a central one in Woodruff's and Hamilton's investigations. Woodruff describes his book as a 'kind of poetics of my own'. This tells us something about the project. First, it is highly ambitious: Woodruff begins with a new definition of theatre and, like Aristotle, proceeds by spelling out its various elements. In many ways he delivers on this ambition: Woodruff's thoughts are carefully worked out, intricate and insightful. Reading them, one gets that rarest of things: a new, interesting way of seeing the world. Second, though, the 'new poetics' project indicates some of the conflict in that very idea: you cannot really make a new *Poetics*, because if it is like the poetics, it is not new. Woodruff writes: 'Although I am acquainted with established theories of theatre, I make little use of them in writing this book. I have chosen, instead, to do original work' (p. ix). This is not a dichotomy everyone would recognise. Woodruff is evidently a highly original thinker: his ideas would stand up to and perhaps benefit from closer engagement with the work of others. Indeed, some of the most effective sections are those which do so (the discussions of Plato and Brecht, or the excellent chapter on *Mimesis*). Woodruff's writing style is unusual—equal parts chatty and didactic: as if, *finally*, grandpa has lifted you onto his knee, to tell you about theatre, caring and laughter.

The central thesis is the definition of theatre: 'the art by which human beings make or find human action worth watching, in a measured time and place' (p. 18). The absence of text, playwright, actors, stage and theatre (the place) in this definition is deliberate. A performance of Hamlet is theatre; but so, for Woodruff, is a wedding, a football match, a person having a heart attack in the front row of a performance of *Hamlet*, who unintentionally draws the attention of the audience. A desired consequence of this is a

distinction between 'theatre' and what Woodruff calls 'art theatre' (which, to you and me, just means 'theatre'). The latter is, in general, just a particular instance of the former. I say 'in general' because certain kinds of art theatre do not have an audience, so presumably they would not count as 'theatre' at all, for Woodruff—a claim he might be happy to accept (p. 122).

The idea that everyday life is full of performance is nothing new; indeed, it has an entire academic discipline devoted to it: performance studies. But performance studies does not pay much attention to (art) theatre. It is one kind of performance, to be sure; but it is a highly idiosyncratic one, belonging to a particular European tradition, which (in its most artistically respected form) draws in primarily highly educated, middle-aged, Western, wealthy white people. The World Cup Final, or the president's inaugural speech, or the Catholic mass may, quite reasonably, be more worthy of study than an avant-garde production of *The Winter's Tale*. What those interested in (art) theatre are left with (prior to Woodruff) is a choice: if you want to study something broad, culturally significant, perhaps universal, then ditch the Sophocles and look at performances of all different kinds, probably the more important ones; if you want to spend your time studying the difference between the Hamlet quartos or the disappearance of the thrust stage, then by all means do so, but don't pretend you are doing something much beyond specialising in a very particular, highly context-dependent and (now) extremely bourgeois parochial cultural practice, which cannot and should not bother the rest of us. Many theatre aficionados, it seems to me, would be perfectly happy to accept the latter choice, albeit with some minor stylistic modifications. Not Woodruff. For him, you can have your cake and eat it too. Theatre is as widespread as language, and as distinctively human (p. 11). But *art* theatre is particularly good at doing certain things which, once understood, can be used to better inform our understanding of non-art theatre (and, of course, non-art theatre can inform art theatre as well (p. 17)). In other words, art theatre helps us in certain unique and important ways with theatre (in Woodruff's general sense); and theatre (in general) is essential to being human.

One thing art theatre is particularly good at, Woodruff tells us, is plot: matching up the set time to the action, it 'sustains our interest from beginning to end' (p. 64, also p. 26). Other kinds of theatre—the football match and the sex show—fail at this. At the football match: once it's clear who has won, people begin to leave; at the sex show: spectators stop watching the show and get interested in each other (I would have got the point without the sentence which describes Woodruff starting 'to lose myself in my partner' (p.63)). Sticking to sports, the message could go one of two ways, both problematic. Either football matches could learn from art theatre to make the action fit the measured time; or football matches are worse theatre, because the action doesn't fit the measured time. The former claim is hard to reconcile with live, competitive sport, which requires the possibility that one competitor will immediately dominate the other. Doctoring major sporting events so it is always tense until the end would render everything but the end not worth watching. The latter claim—that football matches are worse theatre—suggests an ungrounded preference for art theatre. Fans may not want to see a tense finale: they may want to see their team ruining the other team. Either such preferences make football defective in relation to art theatre (but why?) or art theatre cannot teach us about other kinds of theatre, which produce different but equally valid expectations.

More important for Woodruff is the connection between theatre and morality. The best theatre combines actions which are worth watching with people watching those actions in the right way. The latter requires 'caring', which has a strong ethical dimension. The emotion theatre causes in its audiences is central to Woodruff's moral defence, which

stands in a long line of treating theatre as a 'school of morals'. It also bridges the gap between art theatre and other theatre: art theatre teaches us to watch and care; watching and caring, part of theatre in general, are cornerstones of morality; hence art theatre helps us to be moral (pp. 20, 182–3).

Some philosophers (notably Walton) would claim that what theatre produces is not an emotion at all—otherwise, we would be pitying people we know not to exist. But obviously this won't do for Woodruff, since it would deny his first premise. He suggests, instead, that there is no problem with caring about what we make-believe to be real. This, as it stands, is a bit weak: it is clear from the literature that lots of philosophers think there is a problem. The engagement with Walton is so cursory that it is hard to tell, but it appears that Woodruff mistakenly takes Walton to claim that what you feel (i.e., subjectively experience) for fictional characters is weaker than what you feel for real people. Hence Woodruff concludes (as if against Walton) that in-theatre emotions 'are as intense as anything you might feel outside the theatre' (p. 164). But Walton doesn't deny this: what you feel for the character and what you feel for the real person may be indistinguishable in terms of intensity or generally in terms of subjective experience—it is just that the former isn't an emotion.

We might wonder, moreover, whether caring in the (art) theatre context is a useful training. After all, responding emotionally to what is placed in front of you isn't very difficult. What is difficult is acting on it which, of course, is exactly what spectators cannot do. Woodruff's answer is that theatre makes you want to do something, which is all that matters (pp. 162–4). But I am not sure it is: don't we need help understanding what kinds of 'doing' there are? How can we think critically about what we might do in relation to what we see going on around us? Theatre doesn't obviously have answers; not even Brecht's theatre.

Woodruff's second claim is that emotions are closely linked to morality. Here, as often, one senses the invisible hand of Aristotle guiding the discussion: 'Putting emotion in harmony is the main work of a human life. Putting emotion in harmony is also the business of theatre' (p. 146). Those who are not convinced by the idea that emotional harmony is a significant human goal will find little here to convince them otherwise. An impartial observer, looking at the group of philosophers who endorse this view, would probably conclude that spending lots of time with Aristotle helps. In the introduction, Woodruff contrasts two responses to seeing a pedestrian run over by a car: in the first, the spectator gets on with lunch; in the second, he calls the emergency services:

[In the latter case] I am engaged, and I am framing what I see now as a scene, and I am calling on my imagination to give it context. I am the first to call 911. . . . I hurt for him, and . . . I call the city about installing a light or painting a crosswalk. (p. 21)

The connection between 'framing the scene', the emotional reaction and the responses—calling the ambulance and the authorities—is never really made clear, here or elsewhere. Rousseau thought that needing to use emotions to figure out the right thing to do was a kind of failure: it should be obvious what morality requires. Normally, one would be inclined to disagree with this, because it sounds lunatic; but, if the spectator needs to think of the traffic accident as a 'scene' in order to call an ambulance, maybe something has gone wrong. Local councils routinely put traffic lights and crossings on the sights of traffic accidents: they are not renowned for being overly caring—it is just obviously a good idea and there are institutions in place to do it. One might even imagine a debilitating kind of care—an emotional response which makes someone useless at acting.

More importantly, the theatre model restricts us to being moral in relation to what we see in front of us, characteristically to people suffering before our eyes (Woodruff uses the good Samaritan as another sample case, or witnessing an old man attacked by muggers). A moral worldview based on caring about the people who are suffering in front of our eyes is potentially an extremely impoverished one, encouraging the small-scale acts of petty kindness which might get one lauded by the village newspaper under the headline 'Heart of Gold', but which shouldn't necessarily form the core of the good life. Conversely, some of Woodruff's examples of moral behaviour look moral enough, but don't convince us that they depend on watching. Henry, who watches Alice at her wedding, will turn out (we are told) to be a good friend to her (p. 182): but it looks like he would be a good friend anyway, independently of watching her wedding.

In comparison to Woodruff, Hamilton offers a restricted account of what theatre is. Hamilton is not (here) interested in morality, although he does find a role for emotional response. The main point is, as he states it, that 'theatrical performance is an independent form of art' and that this claim 'has always been true; but for a long time we did not see it' (p. 16). Hamilton's opening chapter, a tour of different theatre theories and practices, immediately takes us worlds away from the Woodruff *ex nihilo*. What is more, what for Woodruff is a 'technical dodge' which hinders good watching—thinking, as you watch, about how the performance is technically constructed—looks a bit like what Hamilton takes to be a necessary condition for 'full appreciation' of a theatrical artwork (Woodruff, p. 150; Hamilton, p. 167).

Of course, being an 'independent form of art' might itself be a rather contemporary notion. Would Greek tragedy count? The Greeks probably didn't have anything like the notion of an independent form of art: statues belonged in temples, tragedies at religious festivals, victory odes at Panhellenic athletics competitions. We might now treat *Antigone* as an independent artwork, but that doesn't mean it always was one and that Sophocles and his fellows Greeks just didn't realise it. Hamilton isn't interested in the Greeks. The foundational years for him are the 1850s to 1950s; the decisive years are 1961–1985; the decisive theatre practitioners are the avant-garde. The target is the thought that theatrical performances are performances of something else (principally of play texts) and that the artistry of theatre requires some connection between text and performance. Woodruff aims to tell us about how art theatre (like Sophocles and Shakespeare) is central to human experience; Hamilton has a narrower, corrective message: theatre is too much dominated by reverence for Sophocles and Shakespeare—in particular, by reverence for their written words.

Hamilton has two basic resources for supporting his claim: avant-garde theatre and ordinary audience practice. Developments in avant-garde theatre practice demonstrate that text-reverence is misplaced. Whereas other theories of the text-performance relationship render the performance a 'performance of', Hamilton offers an 'ingredients model': a text is an optional ingredient in the overall artwork. A chef has some potential ingredients on the table; she chooses which she will use (and which not) and *how* to use them; the dish she makes is her creation. The analogy is clear: the theatre company makes an artwork from various ingredients, including the text of *Hedda Gabler*; the company chooses which ingredients to use *and how to use them*; the performance it creates is its work of art. Thus: using a play text to inform a performance is an artistic choice; and, if you decide to use a text, how you use it is also an artistic choice. Oddly, of course, one choice not available to the company (for Hamilton) is to perform the play text; whatever they do, the performance won't be a performance of a text, or of anything else for that matter. For those not familiar with various non-standard, twentieth-century approaches to play

texts, Hamilton gives extremely helpful, ideal-type summaries, using the example of *Hedda Gabler* (pp. 41–50)—summaries which, as well as fleshing out his case, would make an excellent teaching tool.

A first thought would be that the avant-garde isn't necessarily a good guide to the rest. Suppose we used to think of performances as performance of texts; we developed our theatrical institutions, critical practices and expectations accordingly. But now certain theatrical practitioners are challenging that notion by producing plays which either don't make use of play texts or, if they do, use them in non-standard ways. Does the artistic achievement of the latter tell us what was going on in the former? Of course, once new practices become established, carrying on with the old practices may become a decision rather than a matter of course (by analogy: once there is atonal music, writing a tonal piece becomes a choice); but the new practices don't therefore tell us what the old practices were all along (tonal music was, after all, *tonal*). The avant-garde doesn't necessarily tell us what performances have always been: perhaps they used to be performance of texts, but now they sometimes are and sometimes aren't. Hamilton suggests, by way of an argument against this thought, that sticking to his view (i.e., that no theatrical performances are performances of something else) is more parsimonious than dividing them into those that are and those that aren't. Parsimony is appealing in physics, where it is seen as a good thing to use as few theoretical posits as possible to explain the same physical universe; but there isn't an obvious analogy in something as historically complex as art.

Elsewhere, Hamilton suggests that 'we' (the general, theatre-going public) have always behaved in such a way that recognises the truth of his claims—even those accustomed to watching much more traditional, text-based theatre. The project is therefore one of liberation. Examples of this implicit attitude are given throughout the book, some more convincing than others. We are told, for example, that 'we recount and discuss plots of plays we have seen but never read'; that 'when we discuss characters in plays we are usually thinking of them as we saw them in this or that performance' (p. xi); that if I have seen one performance of *Hedda Gabler* then 'that is what *Hedda Gabler* is for me' (p. 31). The first of these claims is uncontroversial, though, when we do so, we may for all that be thinking about or somehow invoking the text; we may wonder whether the performance we saw was accurate or faithful in relation to the text (claims which, of course, Hamilton disputes). The second is debatable: it looks ambiguous between what I visualise when you say 'Hedda' and what, at some deeper level, I think Hedda amounts to. The third, as it stands, is false: after a recent performance of *A Doll's House*, a fellow spectator asked me when it was written. Suppose she hadn't read it or seen it before: it is still perfectly clear that the performance we just saw does not exhaust what *A Doll's House* is for her. She might have been wrong. But what we need is some criterion for judging between good practices (for Hamilton) and bad practices. If what distinguishes the good practices from the bad practices is that the former agree with Hamilton's views and the latter don't, then the appeal to 'our' implicit theatre practices looks spurious.

Looking at the examples of bad practice (Beckett among them (p. 11)), what really bugs Hamilton is the criticism of performances—standard or experimental—on the grounds that they are inadequate performances of the text (see, e.g., the *New York Times* review, p. 205). The critic who complains that the performance doesn't 'give us what Ibsen wanted' and doesn't 'let the text speak [sensibly] for itself even for a minute' has, for Hamilton, failed to appreciate that the performance (like all theatrical performances) is an independent work of art. The performance has drawn on many elements of the text,

ignored others, taken certain creative decisions and so on; but that is what any performance must do, so the critic can make no complaint here.

Of course, one doesn't need Hamilton's theory to argue with the critic. First, because often there isn't one text: varied translations, editions, partially extant fragments are features of many of our most revered works of dramatic literature. Second, the appeal to the *intentions* of the playwright is controversial, even within the traditional model. Third, play-texts themselves require artistry of various kinds if they are to be performed. The text isn't a set of necessary and sufficient conditions which can be plugged into a machine, resulting in a perfect, text-determined performance. All of these familiar points may speak against the critic on his terms.

Presumably critics are permitted to be critical about some elements of a performance. Hamilton's discussion of the critic draws out a worry that is perhaps more general. Clearly, Hamilton takes himself to offer performers theoretical apparatus to defend themselves from false constraints and spurious criticisms—a laudable aim. But if a company chooses to employ the text as an ingredient, and chooses to employ it in a traditional manner, then can the text constrain their performance? If 'yes', then it is open to critics to claim that the company hasn't done justice to the constraints which, in taking on the yoke of the text, they chose to respect. If no, then what does it mean to make the decision to use the text in such a way? Hamilton answers no, but claims that, in this tradition, what constrains is not the text, but 'chains of performance histories back to the initial *performances* of each text-based scenario' (p. 207). Scant discussion of this claim is provided, but if performance history explains *all* critical practice and artistic justification, then presumably the critic could simply rephrase his concerns in those terms, and Hamilton's theory would give no ammunition to the performers. Conversely, if the performance-chain model renders the critic impotent, then we might be getting rid of critical apparatus which, all things considered, we'd quite like to keep. I might want to be able to say the *kinds* of thing the critic says about relationship between the performance of *Hedda Gabler* and the work of dramatic literature which goes by that name and which the performers have chosen to use as an ingredient, whether basing my criticisms on knowledge of the text or performance history or both. I say this is a general concern, because, on the one hand, Hamilton suggests a revolutionary status for his claims, but, on the other hand, he tries to reassure us that we can keep everything we want from what we currently do. The challenge is to see how these two thoughts fit together.

It is probably no accident that the two books which are written from outside philosophy departments are the books which aim to say something about how philosophy works—namely, that at least some philosophy is somehow dramatic or theatrical, or that ignoring theatre hinders our understanding of the practice of philosophy. Rokem and Puchner both explore the notion that philosophy has something dramatic about it; Rokem begins, like Puchner, by asking for a reconsideration of Plato's attitudes to theatre. He proceeds by analysing isolated instances of interactions between philosophers and thespians and subjecting these interactions to a kind of sustained, literary analysis from which little more than certain themes or literary motifs emerge—circles (pp. 133–7), for example, or sanity (various, explicitly at p. 104). Examples of interactions include: the *Symposium*, in which Socrates argues with the playwrights; the Nietzsche–Strindberg correspondence, in which Nietzsche, on the brink of insanity, exchanges letters with one of the few significant thinkers to read Nietzsche and communicate with him while he was still sane; and a meeting between Brecht and Benjamin. Rokem tells us at the outset that he could have set out issues, arguments and theories, but that he prefers to focus on the encounters in question. The result is an array of high-level literary insights into various specific events, with little

theoretical or conceptual discussion of how they fit together. As such, adequate summary is (here) impossible, and readers will have to consult Rokem's book for the specifics of the encounters. His discussion of the *Symposium* highlights a number of puzzling features which will have escaped the attention of a less meticulous reader. His chapter on Nietzsche and Strindberg seems to take, as its point of departure, that their correspondence in some way led to Nietzsche's insanity (described as a kind of catharsis) (p. 91)—a claim which is tempting for dramatic purposes, but which is probably false.

Puchner's work asks us to reconsider the connection between Plato, theatre and philosophy. This challenges a number of commonly held views: (i) Plato was 'anti-theatrical', (ii) modern philosophers in the European tradition (roughly from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre) were anti-Plato (or Plato-neutral) and (iii) likewise for modern playwrights of the same period (including Strindberg, Shaw, Brecht). Puchner disputes all three: Plato is not best considered anti-theatrical; he was a radical reformer of the theatre of his day—hence the dialogues. Modern philosophers were influenced by Plato but, to varying degrees, were influenced by the correct view of Plato (the not-anti-theatrical Plato). Modern dramatists were also influenced by the not-anti-theatrical Plato; and, in recognising this, we see that modern drama is, in a sense, Platonic drama. Puchner ends by suggesting that 'new Platonist' philosophers like Nussbaum and Murdoch have something to learn from all of the above.

Each target claim could be set out in more detail. Take Plato's 'anti-theatricality', for example. Students are often taught the *Republic* as Plato's attack on tragedy, or theatre, or art. But, first of all, this is consistent with Plato being a reformer (one also speaks of Artaud's 'attack on the theatre'). Second, students are also taught, or at least they ought to be, about the literary and historical elements of the text—for example, that two of the interlocutors are Plato's brothers. Third, students will probably be told that it is hard to reconcile Socrates' claim that there are two kinds of stories (true ones and false ones) with the kind of dialogues that Plato writes, with their myths, speculatively reported conversations, and settings in which Plato did not observe them. (Rokem's discussion of the *Symposium* brings out some of these elements very clearly.) Even if the considered view of the scholar is that this apparent conflict can be resolved somehow, its presence is hardly a secret. Puchner may, of course, be referring to Barish's classic, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*, which places Plato at the start of a long line of theatre-bashers. But Barish acknowledges the 'strain of playfulness' in Plato, which 'may seem to warn us against taking his theses too solemnly'; and he adds that 'the Platonic dialogues, in general, . . . would have trouble with the proposed Platonic censor' (Barish 1981: 11). What is more, it is not as if Plato scholars are completely insensitive to dramatic elements: it is not astonishing, for example, to find a critic making an appreciation of the 'dramatic intention' of a dialogue the '*sine qua non* of any adequate interpretation' (in this case of the *Euthyphro*) (McPherran 2005: 7).

This picture is common to both sides (and, incidentally, to Rokem): Plato is an extraordinarily gifted writer, who drew on certain elements of tragicomic (and comedic) writing, as well as on other cultural influences, and who produced arguments against the bewitching power of theatre and art, while being happy to exploit them to a certain degree, leaving us unsure how to give a full or satisfying account of the matter. As is this: Plato seeks to undo false prejudices while trying to avoid leaving a vacuum in their place. In espousing a 'Dramatic Platonism', which reminds us of the 'tangible, the personal and the concrete' in Plato (p. 173), is Puchner offering a radical revision or a merely slight change of emphasis? Often, just when we think we'll get more robust account of 'Dramatic Platonism', Puchner retreats either to metaphor (a 'lens', a 'tool' (p. 193), an

'entanglement of philosophy and literature' (p. 182)) or to a mesmerizingly general account of an interplay between idealism and materialism, put to service against relativism (see pp. 193–8) or of a 'connection between matter and form' (p. 33).

A chapter is devoted to 'the Socrates play': the dialogues used either directly as play texts, or adapted as such. Performances are much more widespread than one might think, and Puchner's description of their history is an impressive and illuminating piece of research, which adds another dimension to Plato's incomparable influence. It is also gratifying—at least for this reader, who has asked students to act out parts of various Platonic dialogues in class, to bring out some of the dramatic as well as philosophical content (with mixed results, it must be said). In places, though, Puchner claims that the existence of an extensive catalogue of Socrates plays suggests something 'dramatic' in Plato, which philosophers have missed (p. 10). What Socrates plays have in common is the conviction that 'the most adequate way to present Socrates is in the form of drama' (p. 40). But writing a play based on a story or text doesn't necessarily indicate that the author of the text was a tragedian or dramatist—or, if it does, then the bar for being a 'dramatist' is pretty low. Moreover, if, as a trained composer, I write a sonata about a dead loved one, I am not necessarily stating that writing a sonata is the best way to present her (as opposed to writing a novel or painting a portrait): I am writing music because I am a composer, not a painter. The existence of Socrates plays aren't, taken together, a great piece of testimony that the *most adequate* way to present Socrates is as a play. The producers of a 1960s television drama (p. 44) based on the *Symposium*, one may suppose, did not weigh up the possibility of painting a fresco of Socrates and Alcibiades, before finally, after much consideration, plumping for a TV series. The point is: they were TV people looking for something to make a show about—why not Socrates?

Puchner's very brief treatments both of playwrights in the third chapter and philosophers in the fourth indicates a clear decision to opt for breadth over depth, along with its usual advantages (a sense of perspective, the possibility of arguing for an overall pattern) and disadvantages (the nagging feeling that in each case there is a great deal more to be said, not all of it conducive to Puchner's claims). What emerges from his brief but intricate readings is the influence of Plato—and not merely the austere Plato of the theory of forms—on a wide variety of thinkers and writers, with apparently very different approaches to their work. It is not a huge surprise that nineteenth-century intellectuals were exposed to a great deal of Plato; but nonetheless, the extent to which dramatists in particular think and write about him offers a fresh and unexpected perspective, which Puchner sets out with considerable skill.

Even accepting (and respecting) the desire to keep each section brief, in order to say something more general, there are times when the discussions are disappointing. The (representative) seven pages devoted to Brecht open by explaining that Plato's influence is to be found among Brecht's 'most cherished beliefs', in that 'he designed plays that were addressed to reason rather than the emotions; he wanted audiences to analyse rather than enjoy' (p. 106). In fact, Brecht thought neither of these things; in his writings he repeatedly and explicitly denied them (presumably because this was a common misunderstanding of his views, even in his own day). What he says is that plays must appeal both to reason and the emotions, and that they must promote both enjoyment and analysis on the part of their audiences. The choice between either learning something or enjoying yourself—the idea that it was strictly one or the other—was, he thought, a product of a capitalist attitude to education. According to this attitude, one learns enough to compete on the market; but, once on the market, learning has a negative association, because needing to learn is equivalent to not being a competitive product. Compare the

company which boasts that its forthcoming product will have new and exciting safety features with the company which recalls its current product for safety updates. Puchner downplays (though he does not ignore) Brecht's Marxism, in order to emphasise the connections with Plato; but one wonders whether this does Brecht justice. (Woodruff, who also compares Plato and Brecht, is much sharper on this (see Chapter 9).)

Similar criticisms may, on occasion, be levelled at Puchner's readings of philosophers of the period, which seek to show that modern philosophy is in some sense dramatic. The ten pages on Nietzsche, which take us through the various things that Nietzsche wrote about Socrates, Plato and tragedy, conjure up a philosopher who is interested in experimenting with philosophical form, who saw in Plato and Socrates a great deal more than dry, formal argument, and who frequently thinks in dramatic oppositions (e.g., between Apollo and Dionysus). All of this is true but, combined with a rather speculative reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (as a 'displaced drama of speech') and of other Nietzschean thoughts like the will to power, truth and the eternal recurrence, it offers little more than a slightly giddy tour of some bits of Nietzsche's thought. Nietzsche scholars will take issue with specific claims—for example, I wouldn't want to affirm that 'ethics', for Nietzsche, is a matter of 'gaining dominance in a kind of evolutionary process' (p. 146)—but a general comment would be that, despite Puchner's skill, breadth and obvious competence, the discussion of Nietzsche is typical in that it is too broad and too speculative to convince us that seeing Nietzsche as a 'dramatic' philosopher will significantly improve our understanding of him or of the history of philosophy.

One can seek out common interests in the pages of these books: Brecht features in all of them, Plato in most. The definition of theatre—central to Woodruff and Hamilton—is relevant to Puchner inasmuch as he begins by asking us to reconsider Plato's dialogues (read aloud to small groups of students) as radical theatrical performances. But to look at these books solely in terms of their definitions would be to miss what is aimed at in each case: a new anthropology with theatre at its heart; a defence of avant-garde theatre using the unlikely tool of analytic philosophy; a revision of the history of modern European drama and philosophy. Faced with aims so diverse and wide-ranging, a broad conclusion might be misplaced. If the optimist hopes that this cluster of books is the start of a new wave of sustained academic attention, the pessimist notes that, taken together, they are many individual ripples, far apart from each other and perhaps moving further apart still. To open each is to enter an isolated world, with its own terrain, its own rules, its own temptations and distractions. From each world, the others look like distant stars, whose light is barely perceptible, let alone illuminating. Fortunately, a library is a wonderful spaceship.¹

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NOTE

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