

Review – Welttheater: übersetzen, adaptieren, inszenieren [World Theatre: translation, adaptation, production.] by Boyd, Stephen and Manfred Schewe (eds)

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“All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players”

Who does not know these famous lines from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*? With these few words the melancholic Jacques expresses an image of life that had a striking impact on art and culture, especially during the European Baroque era: the *theatrum mundi*. It is the idea that human life is but a short, temporary play and everyone has an appointed role to play. This concept addresses fundamental questions of human existence by subordinating life to a numinous plan. Today, however, in our so-called post-modern times, which are widely considered ‘secularised’ and primarily ‘rational’, the tradition of the *theatrum mundi* seems to be inappropriate to stage (wo)man’s present-day concerns. Yet, is the desire for a transcendental explanation of existence simply a longing for the past? Or rather, is the West’s self-perception of living through a time of religious scepticism merely a cliché? Indeed, the endurance of religious tradition and the transformation of its rituals and sacral aesthetics have gained increasing importance within contemporary scholarly discourse, particularly in the Humanities and Cultural Studies. With their bilingual survey *Welttheater: übersetzen, adaptieren, inszenieren – World Theatre: translation, adaptation, production*, Stephen Boyd and Manfred Schewe contribute to these discussions by focussing on today’s drama and theatre practice. The authors investigate to what extent the ‘world theatre’ tradition still provides a useful dramatic form

that not only raises the essential and timeless questions of human life but also deals with the specific challenges of the present.

The book is divided into two parts. The first starts with a theoretical definition of the term 'world theatre' (chapter 1), followed by a brief overview of the genre's development throughout literary history, focusing especially on Spanish Baroque playwright Calderón de la Barca's *El gran teatro del mundo* (1636), and the wide reception of this *auto sacramental* in Germany during the Romantic period and the early 20th century (chapter 2). The core of the book emerges in the next two chapters with an analysis of Thomas Hürlimann's *Einsiedler Welttheater* (2007), a contemporary Swiss adaptation of Calderón's *El gran teatro del mundo* (chapter 3), and a description of the production of Hürlimann's play at the University of Cork in 2010, which was translated by Boyd and Schewe themselves as *Cork's World Theatre*. These two modern *theatrum mundi* interpretations have both been adapted to "other site-specific and country-specific circumstances" (p. 99). The authors intend to encourage other theatre makers to follow their example, as they see their own work in the field of theatre performance, teaching and research, as fostering cultural exchange and understanding. To illustrate what this means in practice, the second part of the survey provides a side-by-side reprint of these two modern pieces of 'world theatre', which offers the reader a close comparison of both versions.

Building on Goethe's dynamic and intertextual concept of 'world literature', Boyd and Schewe understand 'world theatre' as a theatrical form creating a "mutual influence" and "dynamic interaction" between dramatic texts as well as between "different culturally-specific theatre forms along with their respective performance traditions" (p. 25). Hence, 'world theatre' is marked as an intercultural phenomenon which "offers its audience an intense experience of the interplay of the local and the universal" (p. 97). By expanding the idea of *theatrum mundi* through the inclusion of aspects of cultural transfer and cultural dynamics, the authors loosen the tight bond between this dramatic

tradition and a religious context. Yet world theatre even today has not become fully secularised, as Hürlimann's *Einsiedler Welttheater* demonstrates. His play is a tense combination of both the traditions of religious drama and modern theatre. Although Hürlimann's interpretation keeps formal elements of the *theatrum mundi*, such as an allegorical aesthetic, his play is simultaneously a satire on the current commercialisation and politicisation of religion. Boyd and Schewe's modern pattern of 'world theatre' enfolds a complex network and multidimensional space of cultural interaction which not only takes place synchronically between two different cultures or languages, but also diachronically by referring to the dynamics of this dramatic pattern throughout literary history.

This book expounds a broad view of the concept of *theatrum mundi*, its contemporary theatrical adaptation, tradition and theory. However, condensing this into no more than one hundred ninety bilingual pages is quite a burden and leads inevitably to many issues not receiving the space and attention they deserve. Nevertheless, the book offers various suggestions for further research, as well as theatre practice and teaching. For example, Christoph Schlingensiefel's opera *Mea culpa* (2009), which referred to the theatre's religious roots, and his commitment to an 'opera-village' in Burkina Faso/Africa, seem to correspond to Boyd and Schewe's idea of 'world theatre'. This comparison highlights the peculiar relevance of their survey. By concentrating on a modern sacral aesthetic, this book locates a vital trend in modern drama and theatre. It should be read by anyone looking for a concise introduction into a modern understanding of 'world theatre' as not only analysed in terms of its religious legacy but also from an intercultural and interdisciplinary perspective.