

The Musicality of Postdramatic Theater: Hans-Thies Lehmann's Theory of Independent Auditory Semiotics

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Lehmann's paradigm of postdramatic theater has mainly been criticized on two levels: its flexibility and its alleged "putting to death" of drama. The paper highlights to what extent flexible paradigms like the postdramatic one are necessary to study the numerous performances which are characterized by their in-between-ness between dramatic and postdramatic codes. The study of postdramatic jazz musicality that we observe in *Jaz* by Koffi Kwahulé or in *Isabella's Room* by Jan Lauwers demonstrates the need for such flexibility. Lehmann's notion of independent auditory semiotics is developed in the paper to study the exploitation of text as music (and not only in music): the end of the convergences between arts, the performance as a musical score, voice as sound vs. voice as discourse, disintegration of the dramatic character in favor of the jazz body of the performer.

A ccording to several theater specialists (such as Hebert, Lehmann, Perelli-Contos, etc.), the end of the twentieth century was characterized by the emergence of new theatrical forms whose main feature was the combination of different performing arts, mainly theater and dance. Hans-Thies Lehmann (2002) includes these forms in a paradigm called "postdramatic theatre," in which the text is no longer the central element of the performance, but is situated at the same level as the other signs that compose the theatrical production. A visual and an auditory dramaturgy are developed, which do not obey the drama but follow their own dynamics.

The Postdramatic Paradigm: A Double Misunderstanding

Several researchers and artists (Dort, Ostermeier, Sarrazac, etc.) now claim the come back of the speech, after the reign of the *mise en scène*. Ac-

According to Thomas Ostermeier for instance, the drama is coming back in life because the conflicts in contemporary societies are very strong again, and the theater must be the echo of it (52-53). This context would imply that postdramatic theater is now outmoded. The Canadian dramaturge Carole Fréchette also mentions a certain revival of the text, but highlights to what extent postdramatic theater has modified the dramatic art, as it explores a more balanced relation between the speech and the other scenic elements that compose the performance (qtd. in Hebert 187). Her opinion is particularly relevant in a context where rigid borders between aesthetic categories need to be surpassed: a firm distinction between the dramatic and the postdramatic theater does not fit numerous contemporary performances. This was precisely what Lehmann aimed to surpass with his theory of postdramatic theater, but was misunderstood on two counts.

Lehmann's paradigm led to some confusion. The first polemic concerns the assumed condemnation of drama by the postdramatic theory. Jean-Pierre Sarrazac (2007) understands the postdramatic theory as a "putting to death" of drama. In his reaction to Lehmann's work, Sarrazac strives to highlight that the drama is renewing thanks to the disunion of the drama and the stage: the emancipating of the *mise en scène* from the dramatic form provides a new life to the latter. According to this French researcher and dramaturge, the "drama-in-life" gives way to the "drama-of-life," which renews the contemporary dramatic art (11).¹ As a matter of fact, Sarrazac's distinction between two dramatic forms does not specifically concern current theater and does not really respond to the postdramatic paradigm: his classification echoes Szondi's theory on the classical and the modern drama, which he elaborated in the fifties.

The prefix "post" is confusing because it can be understood in two different manners: either as an approach that does not take the dramatic advances into account and wants to make a fresh start, or as a spectacular form that does not deny the possibilities of dramatic renewals but directs its research towards non-dramatic modes of expression. Whereas the opponents against the postdramatic theory favor the first definition, Lehmann's approach to postdramatic theater corresponds to the second one. Let us re-

1. The "drama-of-life" is opposed to the linearity of the "drama-in-life": it no longer contains a logical organization of the action, structured by a beginning and an end. The dramatic hero takes the form of an ordinary character; the events become insignificant. Contrary to the "drama-in-life," the "drama-of-life" consists of a theater of the intimate, of the introspection.

member that the polemics regarding the prefix “post” do not only concern postdramatic theory: in his denigration of the postmodern paradigm, Heiner Müller asserted that the only postmodernist that he had ever encountered was August Stram, a modernist that worked at the post office.

A second misunderstanding can be observed. Sarrazac seems to approach the postdramatic paradigm with excessive radicalism. Lehmann insists on the open character of his model, which is meant to assemble heterogeneous performances that share the abandon of the dramatic representation as common feature. The eighty-four postdramatic artists cited by Lehmann do not belong to a strict aesthetic category: their work, totally or partially, can be all considered as postdramatic because the dramatic action is abandoned *at various degrees* (Lehmann 105). If his list of postdramatic artists seems provocative, it effectively wants to show the flexibility of the postdramatic paradigm. One could argue that Lehmann’s theory particularly fits the proverb “all covet, all loose.” To be more valued, the postdramatic theory is best restricted. One preliminary task would be to work on *performances* instead of *artists*: as many contemporary creators, the work of the famous Belgian Jan Fabre is so protean that it cannot be integrated to the postdramatic model as a whole.

The postdramatic theory also deals with theatrical forms that are situated at the crossroads of postdramatic characteristics (predominance of the visual, work on the five senses of the spectator, rejection of textual authority over the other signs of the performance, etc.) and a specific dramatic form which we shall call “postdramatic metadrama.” The “re-emergence” of the drama is coupled with postdramatic devices. Alongside performances that do not contain any dramatic dimension, other creations approach the drama in a postdramatic way. Both types can be named postdramatic performances.

In such productions, the text re-emerges but is still deprived of its authority: the other elements of the performance are no longer strictly tied to it. In some performances, this leads to a confrontation between the dramatic and the choreographic spheres, while in many others, we can observe a specific approach to musicality. This second characteristic is the object of the present article.

Independent Auditory Semiotics

Lehmann’s theory of independent auditory semiotics refers to the auditory dimension that is autonomous from the drama. In postdramatic the-

ory, the intrinsic musicality of the text is as important as its dramatic content, and in many cases even more important. Lehmann does not develop his theory of independent auditory semiotics. Rather, it is mentioned in his general postdramatic theory, in which he assumes the emergence of a new scenic language, which is both linguistic and non-linguistic, and in which the sensory stimuli (the sounds) are as important as the meaning of the words.

We wish to propose a first typology of the aesthetic means related to the independent auditory semiotics. This introductory typology will mainly be illustrated with two major performances: *Jaz*, by Koffi Kwahulé, and *Isabella's Room*, written and directed by Jan Lauwers.² The typology we propose is divided in six parts.

The End of the Convergence between Disciplines

For Lehmann, the postdramatic performance no longer consists of a dramatic universe. Each discipline is valued singularly: drama, music, dance and the visual arts do not merge to create a transdisciplinary work of art. This aesthetics resonates with Richard Schechner's research. We can use his two diagrams to develop Lehmann's theory. Schechner distinguishes two dimensions in theater: transmission and manifestation (*Performance. Expérimentation et théorie* 27-72). Drama and script—the two smallest circles—belong to the first category: the drama consists of the specialized written version of the script. Manifestation refers to the larger notions of theater and performance. For Schechner, the term “theater” encloses all the events—mainly dramatic—which take place on the stage. The notion of performance means the ensemble of all the interactions that take place between the people present, from the arrival of the first spectator until the last one leaves the theater.

Richard Schechner proposes a first diagram:

2. Kwahulé is an Ivorian playwright who lives in France. He has written more than twenty plays in French, several of which have been translated into different languages and performed around the world. Jan Lauwers is a multidisciplinary Belgian artist whose theatrical work is characterized by the combination of various disciplines: drama, music, dance and the visual arts. His creations mix several languages. In 1986, he founded the Needcompany with Grace Ellen Barkey, and their work has also been performed in many countries.

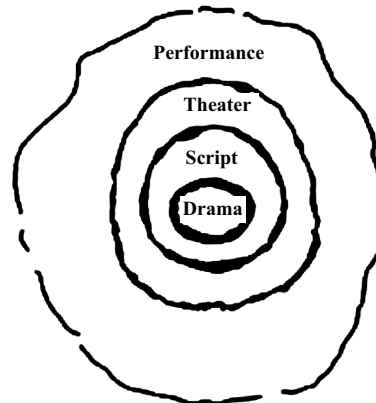


Fig. 1. *Drama, script, theater, performance*
(Schechner 1988: 72, 2008: 31)

This diagram highlights the concentric character of the model: the drama constitutes the heart of the event: the text is the source of all scenic elements. Such a diagram can be applied to the dramatic art. For Schechner avant-garde performances, following the example of oriental traditions, neglect transmission—drama and script—in favor of manifestation (*Performance. Expérimentation et théorie* 30). The postdramatic paradigm fully fits this definition, as it highlights manifestation instead of transmission.

In opposition to the concentric model, the avant-garde diagram highlights the articulation between the four parts:

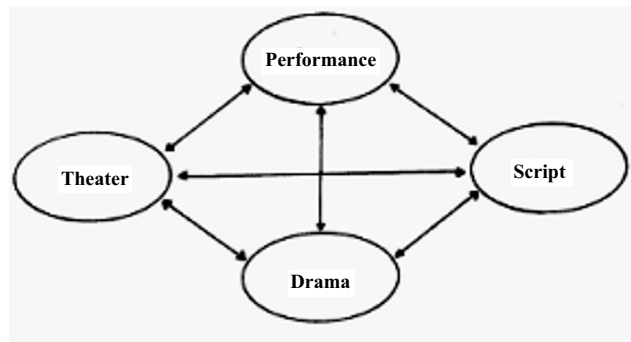


Fig. 2. *Drama, script, theater, performance—second version*
(Schechner 1988: 76, 2008: 38)

In the second diagram, all four parts are equally important. The dissociation between them constitutes a central characteristic of the postdramatic para-

digm. Freed from the authority of the drama, the postdramatic performance rejects the convention of illusion and reinforces the manifestation of a concrete experience, here and now. The use of different disciplines—including music—contributes to the approach of the performance as manifestation. In some performances, the confrontation of disciplines becomes the central stake. The spectator sometimes receives various stimuli—theatrical, filmic, musical, choreographic—at the same time. As sound does not always relate to the image—and vice versa—the spectator must decide which stimuli are favored: the visual, the auditory or a combination of the two. The disruption of the perception habits that we observe is a central feature of the postdramatic paradigm.

I propose a new diagram:

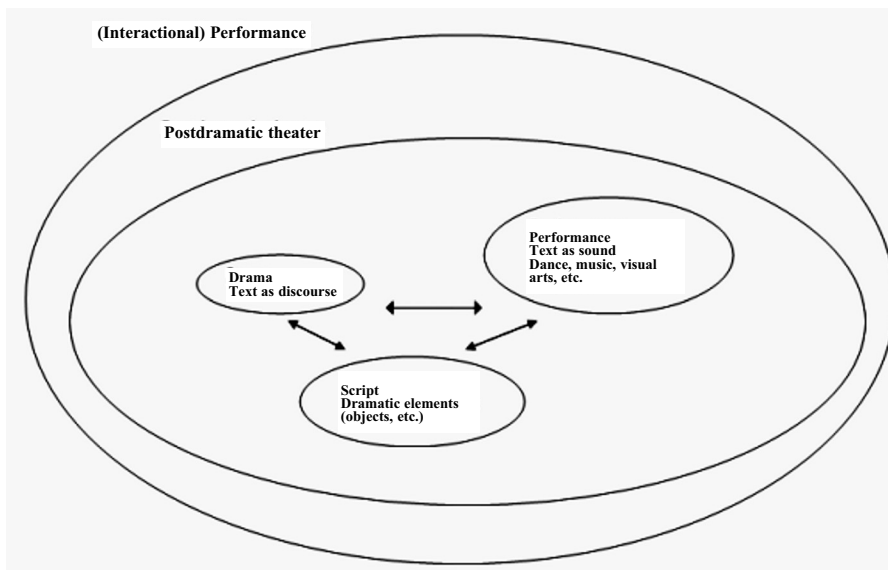


Fig. 3. Drama, script, theater, performance in postdramatic theater

This diagram highlights the end of the concentric approach of theater, without condemning the drama. The notion of performance can be twofold: it is interactional for Schechner but can also refer to dance, music and visual arts, namely those disciplines for which the performance act as such is central. The two dimensions of the enunciation of the text—as drama and as performance as such—are separated. The typology we propose deals with the modalities of this separation.

The Musical Structure: The Performance as a Musical Score

Many postdramatic performances are characterized by their musical construction. The drama is often even coupled with live music on stage. In Jan Lauwers's performances, for instance, the actors alternate between spoken and sung texts, while Koffi Kwahulé's *Jaz* is divided into dramatic and musical sequences, in which a female performer plays the double bass. Beyond the dual presence of drama and live music, the musicality of such performances lies in the construction of the performance. The performance is indeed written as a *score* that focuses on the text as *sound*. According to the French musicologist Gilles Mouëllic, Koffi Kwahulé's writing is a "movement" that is composed of figures that are features of orality: the text is built on changes of speed, rhythmic contradictions, sudden new directions, etc. (7). In *Isabella's Room*, the intrinsic musicality of the text is often strengthened by music and dance that are superimposed on the dramatic text. As in many postdramatic performances, a lack of direction—that contrasts with the dramatic coherence—is increased through the presence of different disciplines.

The actress Viviane De Muynck, for whom Jan Lauwers created *Isabella's Room*, compares the stage performance of the actor to a free-jazz concert: "[...] to her, acting is a constant duel between control and risk, structure and impetuosity. Both the actor and the musician need a basic structure from which they can constantly deviate" (Vanhaesebrouck qtd. in Stalpaert 289-90). This lack of direction is a central characteristic of many postdramatic performances. The jazz arrangement constitutes the matrix of those two performances: an open and fragmented architecture, which is composed of the dramatic content and the vibrating musical rhythm.

Voice as Sound vs. Voice as Discourse

Postdramatic performances offer a basic structure that enables the actors *not* to be fully fictional characters. Their voice is defined as sound as well as being the vector of a dramatic discourse. *Jaz* was written in a musical approach. As many postdramatic artists, Koffi Kwahulé asserts that the meaning of a word is not his priority (qtd. in Mouëllic 24). It will come by itself if the sound is true, if the rhythm is good. When priority is given to musicality instead of semantic content, the text is considered as a material, which is above all constructed following rhythmic constraints. In postdramatic performances, the physicality of the stage enunciation is more important than the communication of a meaning. The linguistic sign is first and

foremost used in its autonomous tone. The voice is used as a sound. Post-dramatic directors often exploit techniques that highlight this physicality: the signifier is underlined through the insistence on the grain of the voice, on the accents of the performers, etc.

In the Needcompany's creations, the performers often utter a text that is not in their mother tongue. Acting becomes a real physical performance. In *Isabella's Room*, the Flemish-speaking actress Viviane De Muynck mainly speaks in English, while only some lines are in French. The international cast of postdramatic performances easily enables the use of accents.

In other postdramatic creations (i.e. act 5 of *King Lear* by Jan Lauwers), the text is sometimes yelled. The energy of the utterance supplants the linguistic meaning, which becomes less intelligible. In such cases, the body tries to produce a discourse that is set apart from the dramatic content. Helga Finter insists on the specific relations between the body and the verbal speech that we encounter in such cases, as the body is at the source of a discourse that is independent of the speech (30).

The voice of the performers becomes a musical instrument in several sequences of *Isabella's Room*. The text is sung; the rhythm of its utterance follows an autonomous musical logic. In such performances, the combination of syntactic and rhythmic devices enables the spectator to hear the presence of music inside the speech. The word, while keeping its meaning, must become something else, close to the musical note.

In *Jaz* as in *Isabella's Room*, *the voice as sound* does not supplant the *voice as discourse* but offers it a new dimension. The speech becomes physical, *carnal* (Mouëllic 50). The power of such performances comes from their coupled enunciation, from the combination of dramatic acting and a work on the affects coming from the jazz vibration. As both musicians and actors, the postdramatic performers create a specific scenic language that differs from that of dramatic characters.

Disintegration of the Dramatic Character

The paradox of the actor, who is defined both as a character and as an individual, is central in postdramatic performances. The dramatic unity of the character makes way for a fragmented body that is constructed at two levels: the drama, and the physical performance as such. The acting in Jan Lauwers's performances is often characterized by what Lehmann names a "detachment": the actors are constantly aware of the theatrical illusion and never seem fully involved in the drama (qtd. in Stalpaert 72). Their scenic

presence damages the illusion. The character they embody is a fragile construction that uncovers their real personality. Rather than characters, such postdramatic acting creates what Audronis Liuga calls “individual types”: the physical and psychological features of the performers are not exploited as dramatic tools (qtd. in Stalpaert 153). Instead of hiding their personality behind a character, the performers highlight universal features that are part of their identity as individuals (i.e. the female eroticism of the forty-year-old Grace Ellen Barkey or of the juvenile Inge Van Bruystegem).

The musical dimension tends to accentuate the scenic *presence* of the actors. When they are singing or when the grain of their voice is highlighted, their authenticity and sincerity increase and counterbalance the fictional role. In such cases, the actor on stage is defined through his/her double identity, which contrasts with the dramatic conventions and deprives the spectator of his/her comfortable conventional marks. What he/she encounters is not a theatrical character but an “individual type” that is constructed on a specific postdramatic hybridity.

The Jazz Body of the Performer

Instead of a dramatic character, the spectator is confronted with the jazz body of the performer. The jazz groove—the swing—resonates in *Jaz* and in *Isabella’s Room* through the performers’ work on breathing and on the tone of voice. Irrespective of the dramatic dimension, the jazz rhythm penetrates the body and is exhibited: the bodily shell becomes the center of gravity from which the swing emanates. The physical energy emerges from the flesh of the actor to reach the spectator’s body head-on.

Energy and dramatic information, process and result merge while at the same time retaining their autonomy. These postdramatic performances move between presence and absence, between autonomous jazz physicality and the dramatic universe. The body creates sense that is independent of the linguistic signified; the rhythmic body becomes “a sense-form” (Meschonnic 217) that leads to the emergence of a postdramatic “suspended meaning” (Lehmann 12). The notion of suspended meaning refers to a metaphorical one, which has no precise signification and which leaves the spectator free in his/her sensory interpretation. The musicality created by the singing body has no meaning itself. Contrary to dramatic conventions, the form constitutes a finality. In Koffi Kwahulé’s terms, the musical utterance of the text leads to a “carnal [...] meaning” (Mouëllic 50). The body vibrates thanks to the jazz impulse and creates its own language, which is deprived of precise signifieds.

Perception

The disruption of perception is central in postdramatic aesthetics. For Antonin Artaud, it is *sensitiveness* that theater can still snatch from speech (qtd. in Papin 673). This means actions that are independent of words and that test the possibilities of reaching the spectator through emotional affects. With their work on rhythm, postdramatic artists like Kwahulé and Lauwers make it possible to create such sensitive actions *inside* the utterance of the text itself.

This in-between-ness between presence and discourse has consequences on the reception. For the French scholar Patrice Pavis, the spectator is first confronted with the materiality—the signifier—of the scenic elements, which he/she then translates into signifieds (19). Some postdramatic performances reinforce this hierarchy when they exploit the presence of the signs without giving them a precise signified. In such cases, we obtain a “suspended meaning”³ and pure perception is favored.

In other performances, such as those by Lauwers and Kwahulé, the dramatic signified of the text is obvious. It is *beyond* the words that the performance becomes a musical one. We are not merely in the presence of a “pre-language,” which refers to a language that is prior to speech and that implies an immediate and non intellectual relation with the spectator. It is through the utterance of the text that the musical language is created. Such performances invite the spectator to a dual reception: a purely auditory perception as well as the dramatic interpretation. The confrontation of emotional and intellectual dimensions of reception is at stake as such in the postdramatic paradigm. The spectator is not only asked to interpret signs but also to let his/her senses govern his/her reception. Schechner relates this approach to perception to the oriental *rasa* aesthetics (*Performance. Expérimentation et théorie* 465-83). In this performing tradition, meaning is not only created in the brain but can also come from the stomach. The latter refers to a more sensual meaning, which is not governed by intellectual questions. The musicality of the text is a tool that reinforces reception as a disruption of the dramatic modes of perception, as the spectator is confronted with the text in intellectual and physical ways.

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3. The notion of suspended meaning can also be related to the theory of the “non-language” formulated by Jacques Fontanille (1995): the meaning is not obtained through the relation between expression and content. Expression is the enunciation act itself and remains in pursuit of content.

Note: The quotes are my own translations from French, except for the quotations from “No Beauty For Me There, On Jan Lauwers’ Theatre Work With Needcompany.”

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