The Resurrection of the Dramatic Character

Delgado-García, Cristina. *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity*. **Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2015. 224 pages. e-ISBN 978-3-11-033391-6.**

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For centuries, the character in drama was considered to be the backbone of works for the stage, until the appearance of a wide-scale subversive experimentation with it in postmodern theatre and performance. The writing of *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre* was prompted by the recent publication of books and studies that seriously question the presence and dramaturgical role of character in view of the brand-new developments within the genre. Cristina Delgado-García's point of departure is that the dismissal of dramatic character in this bulk of theoretical literature can be challenged on the grounds that most theorists look at the term "character" in inconsistent ways, their methodology being problematic and their concept of subjectivity too narrow (XI). Surveying the prescriptive considerations about character, Delgado-García posits the hypothesis that by redefining "character" a new, workable approach to investigating certain puzzling character formations in the postmodern British theatre can be achieved (XII). She assumes that "the character cannot be reduced to the impersonating work of the actor" (8) but other aspects of the dramaturgy also contribute to its fictional existence. Contemporary British playwriting, the author continues, exposes "a discontent with ideas of subjectivity formulated around a solid idea" (11). After clarifying its own theoretical positions the study includes the analysis of four British playtexts by major playwrights as well as their performances from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s.Through these analyses, Delgado-García intends to verify "a widening of what character and subjectivity may mean ... [and] begin to undo the hermeneutical stranglehold that liberal-humanism has placed on our examination of theatre's aesthetic and political engagements with human ontology" (22). Indeed, it is a both intriguing and promising introduction to what follows in the book.

The inseparable connection between concepts of subjectivity and character presentation in theatre is no news to those interested in scholarly discussions of work for the stage. Drawing on various theories and debates, Delgado-García summarizes that in our era "the subject is no longer seen as a unified, self-contained, self-mastered and rational individual 'I' defined by the hierarchical dichotomy of mind and body"

(20). In the given discursive context and influenced by the realities grounding such contentions, character portrayal in contemporary theatre tends to reflect the instability of subjectivities which constantly change and show their different, even conflicting sides to the audience who often feel called upon to re-evaluate their impressions of and sympathies with them. Delgado-García's undoubtedly new core idea is that she defines the dramatic character as "*any* figuration of subjectivity in theatre" (emphasis in the original, 14) and describes character "as an 'auto-aesthetic category,' because it is the aesthetic *form* that theatre gives to a particular *form of being* or notion of subjectivity: it is the form through which theatre thinks, produces and encounters subjectivity" (emphasis in the original, 19). For the most part, the theoretical framework of the present study is provided, although without appropriating them exclusively or in all respects, by Judith Butler's, Alain Badiou's and Jacques Rancière's work on subjectivation, regarded as alternatives to the Cartesian liberal-humanist paradigm (14).

A welcome, reader-friendly merit of Delgado-García's book is its clear structure with a succinct conclusion to each of the chapters as well as the testing of her theory on a group of carefully selected plays which persistently challenge both critics and audiences. Arguing with other scholars, the first chapter, "The Life, Death and Second Coming of Character," dissects critical notions announcing the crisis, even death of the dramatic character. Predictably, this part of the book offers a critique of the central assumption of the book *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theatre after Modernism* by Elinor Fuchs, according to which in modern drama character portrayal has undergone a radical transformation and "there are clear signs that autonomous character is in retreat from its Hegelian apogee" (31). Delgado-García thinks that Fuchs's view is "negatively synecdochic: it presents the disappearance of the cogent and autonomous, humanist character as the demise of character in absolute terms." In contrast, Delgado-García's own position is that by

> defining character as a flexible and contingent figuration of ontology, [her] research on *character-less* plays aims to show that it is possible to rethink these non-humanist voices as a proliferation rather than a death: as an excess that contests individuality or independence as a prerequisite for being and that rejects the (normative) limitations proposed by representational structures. (29)

At the same time she claims to side with scholars like William E. Gruber who underscore the performative element in drama enacted through live bodies, which may give a new dimension to the theatrical character since "text and performance, as different modes of production, may converge and diverge in their configuration of character and subjectivity" (32). Justified by her analytical practice displayed in the book, for Delgado-García it seems imperative to examine them together, given the fact that even disembodied speakers of the text usually become embodied in the theatre.

Under the chapter title "Figuring the Subject without Individuality," the nature of *character-less* drama is more fully explained: the term, intentionally italicized by the author, refers to works in which speech is not attributed to individuated characters. Reinforcing her view that an interdisciplinary analysis of character should inevitably

draw on theories of the subject and subjectivation, here a discussion of the relevant ideas of Butler, Badiou and Rancière is sampled largely against Louis Althusser's theory which focuses on interpellation and recognition as forms of objectification preceding subjectivation (52). In contrast, the ideas of Butler, Badiou and Rancière on the process of subjectivation allow for agency, buttressing Delgado-García's central line in this study that "theatre can make a political intervention by stretching our understanding of subjectivity through its experimentation with character" (54). Regarding Butler, the author takes on her dismantling of "the unity and individuality of the subject" and "her commitment to rethinking the subject as relational and intersubjectively constituted" (63). Badiou's and Rancière's thoughts are quoted as going further than Butler, being less interested in the "corporeal and psychic life of the subject" and "direct[ing] their interest towards notions of equality, universality and disruption" (63). For Delgado-García, Badiou's theory of the unforeseeable "Event" is central, since it marks "a fissure in the given ontological order," bringing about a rupture in an individual's world as a prerequisite for subjectivation. The Subject's existence is post-Evental while its nature is collective, Delgado-García interprets Badiou (68).[1]As for Rancière, his "account of subjectivation also offers theatre studies an understanding of subjectivity that transcends ideas of individuality, identity and ideological subjection" and exists "in terms of relations and practices" implying collectivity, Delgado-García says. Furthermore, she continues, by considering "Rancière's definition of the aesthetic aspects of politics and the political force of aesthetics," the shifting of subjects in *character-less* plays can be found acquiring political implications (81).

Applying aspects of post-Althusserian theories of subjectivation, Chapters Three and Four contain the analysis of the selected four plays: Sarah Kane's *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999), Welsh writer Ed Thomas's *Stone City Blue* (2004), and finally Tim Crouch's *ENGLAND* (2007). Both chapters begin with a survey of the critical literature on the dramas, followed by an analysis of the playtexts as well as a comparative discussion of several productions of them in and outside Britain. Delgado-García identifies strategies as used by Kane in *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* to create non-interpellated, non-individuated characters. The plays' speakers are not identified by names: in *Crave* there is "faux dialogue," and in *4.48 Psychosis* "unattributed speech" is used along with an "overt challenge to heteronormative definitions and alignments of body, gender and desire" (93). Jacques Lacan's "extimacy," "a neologism" coined from blending "exteriority and intimacy" to undermine the fixity of the division between exterior and interior realms in understanding the subject (95) is also quoted. Delgado-García opines that in *Crave* "the choral deployment of speech" by four voices without a dialogue serves to present "the subject as opaque, irremediably relational, and composed of an inextricable – and sometimes inexplicable – extimacy" (98). The unattributed monologue, fragmentation and apparent un-narratable nature of the subject in *4.48 Psychosis* present aspects of the general human experience "in a fictive universe" the author claims, suggesting that "subjectivity is always-already contingent – provisional, subject to change" (100,112).

1 The terms Event and Subject are capitalized in Badiou's works.

The main difference between Thomas's *Stone City Blue* and Kane's plays is found in the protagonist, Ray's (split into R1, R2, R3, R4) experiencing and suffering from the lack of intersubjective relations (124-25). Early in the book Delgado-García states that her "project not only endeavours to vindicate the persistence of character in theatre: it also aims to demonstrate that theatre may have the ability to redefine subjectivity and intersubjective relations towards positive social change" (13). Accordingly, her detailed analyses of plays demonstrate that positive change, or at least the realization of barriers to it, is possible. The protagonist of *Stone City Blue*, Ray is "ultimately presented as longing for the restoration of the intersubjective laces that define and ground the subject" (116), which is an evidence for the relational nature of subjectivity. Ray is not able to experience filial love because his father had become estranged from his family in the past and in the fictional present world of the play he is already dead. Delgado-García stresses the irony of Ray's realization that to be and to love is "an opening-up to the other, a mutual exposure and contagion, but this realisation only arrives to him negatively, through the relation of non-relation to others" (129). The theme of the dead father and the living son's (unfulfilled) bond in *Stone City Blue* has an interesting near parallel in the Hungarian Péter Nádas's *Encounter* (*Találkozás*,1979), a play which, according to Enikő Bollobás's discussion, allows the son to recognize his dead father in the intersubjective space created by the latter's one-time lover, whom the son encounters in the present. Reading the drama partly with theorists of intersubjectivity other than Delgado-García, Jessica Benjamin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty among them, Bollobás claims that in *Encounter* "[t]hose who formerly lived in disjunctive worlds that never meet offer mutual recognition to each other" (34), including the son's emotional bonding with his till then condemned father, a secret police officer during the communist era. Bollobás's analysis chimes with Delgado-García's suggestion throughout her book that good theatre is capable of showing that through encounters mutual recognition of the other might occur (or at least become envisioned as a potential) and lead to decisive changes in the characters' affective relations. These kinds of encounters can be seen as similar to the Badiouian Event.

Chapter Four discusses Crouch's *ENGLAND* which, unlike the three plays dealt with in the previous chapter, is treated as an example of dramatizing collective subjectivity. This drama, the author states, displays "a wide breadth of characterisation techniques, ranging from the actors' sharing of roles and the direct address of the audience as a fictional persona, to the non-fictionalising characterisation of spectators as subjects of consumption and consent within a capitalist regime" (147). Of the four works under scrutiny in the book, *ENGLAND* is the most complex one, partly because of the way it foregrounds the dramaturgical function of public spaces as well as the shifting of singular subjectivities in the construction of collective subjectivities. Her analysis of *ENGLAND*, the author claims, takes a new path in that it highlights the implied political concerns of the play operating jointly with its focus on art, enabled by her novel view of figuring subjectivity on stage (153), which relies mostly on Badiou's concept of "the Subject as a collective figure emerging from practices," for instance *through a doing* and not necessarily by impersonation (196). However, this being the most complex contemporary British play of the four, the author's argument tends to overcomplicate the stages of her interpretation, for instance when referring to the

"mis-characterisation" of the spectators (194). Surprisingly, the book has a relatively short "Conclusion" for its weighty interventions into mainstream views on dramatic character. A form of compensation for readers is the "Appendix," which offers food for further scholarly considerations by surveying the unique treatment and figuration of character in many other plays conceived in Britain and Europe (Germany, Spain, France etc.), from the advent of modernism until today.

In sum, informed by relevant theoretical assumptions, Delgado-García's monograph offers a viable methodology for addressing highly experimental contemporary plays. Originally from Barcelona, Delgado-García takes on board the ideas of and argues with a number of theatre scholars chiefly from France and Spain to contest the limiting categories of Anglo-American scholarship on character, which results in a study governed by a critical position open to interdisciplinarity. The book's chief value lies, at least for this reviewer, in achieving a positive outlook on the potential power of even the most opaquely experimental postmodern theatre in contributing to the reinforcement of trust and hope in humanity. The author's contention, that although "theatre may have become post-humanist or post-anthropocentric, it seems necessary to admit that alternative figures of the character and the subject exist" (31), provides new inspiration for researchers of contemporary drama to discover that the genre still continues to teach us about ourselves as both individual and social beings. It is no exaggeration to say that this book is a must for all interested in diverse ways of approaching the drama of our time.

Works Cited

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