RETHINKING THE PERFORMANCE OF BRECHT: LINES OF FLIGHT, BECOMING AND THE FEMALE SUBJECT

Denise Varney

This essay brings together a number of related but frequently separated discourses around the themes of performance, gender and Epic theatre within the frame of a feminist analysis of theatrical performance. It maps the possibilities of exchange across the borders of specific practices and their discourses in an effort to think about the productive value of border-crossing. I model this crossing-of-borders on a reading of the text and performance of Bertolt Brecht's modernist classic, *The Good Person of Sichuan*, in which the theatrical notion of performance is examined through a feminist application of the Deleuzian concept of becoming.¹ The Deleuzian analysis of Brecht adds a new dimension to performance analysis and helps to revise and historicise Brecht's politics for a contemporary public. This task is an important one for Brecht is worth doing still. He returned to the Australian stage in 1998 and 1999 in two contrasting productions - the true-to-Brecht Melbourne Theatre Company production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, directed by Simon Phillips and the 'renovated' Belvoir St. Theatre (Sydney) production of *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, directed by Michael Kantor – suggesting that a revival of interest in political theatre positions itself through a relation to Brechtian theatre. Finding a productive way forward for Brechtian theatre is crucial to the avoidance of the pitfalls that negate the cultural critique that the plays make possible.

*Der Gute Mensch von Sizuan* (*The Good Person of Szechuan*) was first performed in Zurich in 1943.² For years the play was interpreted as a critique of capitalism and bourgeois Christianity, but it now presents more forcefully as a play about sex and gender. The central character, the simple but good prostitute Shen Te is blessed by earth-visiting gods with enough money to buy a small business and earn an honest living. But her goodness is also her undoing. She gives away her profits to free-load-
ing relatives and an unemployed boyfriend and, in despair, cross-dresses as her fictional businessman-cousin Shui Ta so she can kick the lot out. The double character embodies Brecht’s dialectical thought, but the movement between different subject positions also suggests the more transient subjectivities of contemporary discourse. Gender difference is not a simple case of feminine good and masculine bad so much as both are blurred in performance through the placement of both parts of the double on one (usually female) performer’s body. The Shen Te/Shui Ta figure represents a condition of no fixed identity, leading readily to a notion of the multiple subject.

This new multiple subject, I will argue, offers a performance of gender that raises several questions about the status of the gendered subject as a pre-existing being. The Shen Te/Shui Ta figure is a becoming subject, a dissolution or dispersal of the old gender-fixed character and a representation of the absence of a continuous and consistent identity. The corporeal and aesthetic representation of these concepts is a form of distanciation from the terms through which Brechtian theatre was originally constituted, that is, through fixed social types rooted to a class position. The exposure of the transience of gender relations within and between subjects adds a new and illuminating dimension to the traditional Brechtian focus on the relations of man and capital.

Brecht is usually positioned in the space where performance practice intersects with political intent in a way that focuses attention on what the plays can be made to say. But the question of what Brecht means to say is less resolved than ever. He is well-recognised as the creator of Epic Theatre, an episodic, multi-media theatrical form, incorporating the acting techniques of Verfremdungseffekt and Gestus. (These techniques are constituted by a series of acting and staging techniques, including music, slides, printed text and projections, designed to separate actor from character, narrative from emotion, drama from Aristotelian models of empathy and catharsis and finally Nature from Ideology). Darko Suvin acknowledges Brecht as a radical playwright who broke open the closed dramaturgy of the well-made play to stage a critique of bourgeois theatre. Moreover, Brecht’s theorisation of the epic stage and his debates with Georg Lukács over realism and anti-realism found their way into cultural criticism through the writings of his contemporary and confidante, Walter Benjamin, and later influenced Roland Barthes’ critique of popular culture.

But since the 1970s, both plays and playwright have been embroiled in vigorous and passionate feminist debate about the use of gender stereotyping and the extent to which the many fables criticise or reinforce the politics of sexual difference. Brecht has also fallen from favour in the face of the postmodern preference for non-didactic, non-narrative, technically exhilarating theatres of images and spectacle. Fredric Jameson’s new study, Brecht and Method (1998), attempts to restore Brecht’s standing on the Left, but to do this Jameson turns to contemporary theorists, Derrida and Deleuze, to mediate a modernist Brecht for a postmodern readership. Jameson’s book is itself an instance of the crossing-of-borders between the philosopher/cultural theorist and the performance practitioner/philosopher. Brecht, the didactic and autocratic theatre director appears therefore rather more adaptable than expected and rather than pointing in one direction, he can go off in any number.

The issue at stake in this essay is the practice – that is, the practice of the techniques of Verfremdungseffekt and Gestus and the political purposes they serve. The non-mimetic, anti-realist aspects of these techniques allow for the analysis of discursive and material representations of sex and gender in the theatre. Elin Diamond argues that Brechtian dramatic theory helps feminist theatre do for the relations of gender what
Brecht did for the social relations of capital. Epic theatre creates the conditions of possibility for ‘a female body in representation that resists fetishisation and a viable position for the female spectator’. Through the processes of estrangement and defamiliarisation, the spectator sees the historical, epic elements in the otherwise mimetic arrangement of social relations, including class, as Brecht intended, but also sex, gender and racial relations.

The questions I address are how can the practice be re-politicised for the contemporary cultural condition? How does the practice present itself as an intervention on debates about contemporary culture, which include the voices of a multiplicity of interests? But before proceeding with this enquiry, there is considerable tension within the terms performative, performance and the verb, to perform, with each implicated in different theoretical projects. For the purposes of this essay, the performative in theatre relates to the theatricalisation, or more technically, the semiotisation of bodies and objects in the mise en scène of performance. The performative evokes a semiotic understanding of gestural, spacial, corporeal and vocal acts and their interleaving.

Performance and theory

Rosi Braidotti argues that performance has contributed to the shift in feminist theory away from critiques of representation to the affirmation ‘of denaturalized, deessentialized bodies’, which produce ‘alternative signification’. In the technological interventions on the body and voice in the performances of Laurie Anderson, for example, Braidotti sees possibilities for the reconceptualisation of the feminist subject as an affirmatively post-human, if that means post-the-period of essentialised gender, as a transitional, multiple and nomadic subject. Recognising the continuing importance of the critique of phallocentrism, Braidotti is, however, more concerned with the possibilities of finding ‘the points of exit’ from that mode and ‘access to a nonlogocentric mode of representation of the female feminist subject’. Of particular interest are the connections she forges between a feminism of sexual difference and the difference-affirming non-feminist discourse of Deleuze and Guattari. Braidotti’s alliance with Deleuze is based on the claim that there are grounds for a mutually beneficial relationship between Deleuze and feminism, in that both speak of the need to rethink the subject in a way that escapes the old relations of power and domination. Braidotti asserts that many Deleuzian concepts, such as rhizomatic thinking and becoming are crucial to feminism: ‘What Deleuze aims at is the affirmation of difference in terms of a multiplicity of possible differences: difference as the positivity of differences’. These differences are not only between gendered, classed and racial bodies, but are within the subject. The singular subject of phallocentric thinking is thus split, divided within itself, and continually in a state of movement, or as I will argue in a moment, in a continuous state of becoming.

Braidotti finds strategic value in importing the anti-psychoanalytic and anti-logocentric philosophical project undertaken by Deleuze and Guattari into a feminist project which is concerned with the intellectual deconstruction of the phallocentric order. Like Braidotti, my application of Deleuze and Guattari to feminist analysis is filtered through a feminist perspective. Deleuze and Guattari have described states of flux, fluidity, movement and change through a range of concepts which challenge the dominant paradigms of western thought: the western tree of knowledge with its system of roots, trunks and branches (the arborescent system) is contrasted with the lateral-growing rhizome, plateaux, replicating molecules and becomings.
Becoming

The use of the concept of becoming to invigorate and repoliticise performance, despite Deleuze and Guattari’s own use of theatrical and other examples in their explication of its characteristics, calls for some preliminary comments. Becoming refers to a subject’s temporary taking on of an alternative creative identity that is not necessarily social, institutionalised or governed by laws of the state, biology or psychology. Thus, in practical terms, an author writes a book, but in abstract terms the act of writing transforms both writer and text into a third position, that is in-between. The writer undergoes a becoming writer in the act of writing, neither one nor the other, but a product of the action. In the example given by Deleuze and Guattari of the orchid and the wasp, a line of becoming unites the wasp and the orchid so that the wasp becomes part of the orchid’s reproductive system and the orchid undergoes a deterrioralisation from its own reproduction: ‘it [the orchid] becomes the object of an orgasm in the wasp’ (293). Thus becoming is a rending of the subject from its major identity and from the standards by which the subject measures itself.

Becoming relates to the Deleuzian concept of the subject as a fluid molecular configuration rather than a fixed and stable entity, and was not initially directed at the theatre or a theory of acting. Applied to the actor in the theatre, an actor may be said to enter into a becoming actor when he or she slips out of his or her self into performance. And like the orchid, the actor undergoes a deterrioralisation and becomes the object of performance. This becoming does not produce a product because there is no separation of actor from performance, but rethinking the relation between the actor and character in this way suggests that both categories of subject dissolve in the performance process. The actor/character, the one and the other, dissolves in the becoming actor and becoming character of the actor, which is a layered and contingent field of signification: ‘a becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both’ (293).

But how to put this relation between becoming and performance on stronger ground? Deleuze’s text, as I will show, points the way in so far as it relies on the notion of performance to explain key concepts. For example, he describes how a subject might undergo a particularly performative becoming in the following description of his collaborator Félix Guattari:

He was not a philosopher by training, but he had a philosopher-becoming all the more for this, and many other becomings too. He never stopped. Few people have given me the impression as he did of moving at each moment; not changing, but moving in his entirety with the aid of a gesture he was making, of a word which he was saying, of a vocal sound, like a kaleidoscope [sic] forming a new combination every time. Always the same Félix, yet one whose proper name denoted something which was happening, and not a subject.  

Becomings are therefore corporeal and kinesic and involve visibility, action and sound. They happen through changes in gesture, movement, language, sound and speed. Deleuze’s example also points to the one who notices, constructing himself as spectator of a performance, an enactment of philosopher-becoming. Deleuze writes himself into the scenario prompting the question: are becomings constructed by the one who notices? Under the gaze of critical and intellectual spectatorship, and through kinesic and visceral senses, the observer notices changes in the other. In this sense, Guattari enters into another becoming – a performer-becoming. Becoming is not, therefore, a solitary phenomenon, but a performance conducted amongst other
subjects: writers and readers, collaborators, performers and spectators. In so far as the process of becoming produces visual, aural and kinesic signs, it invokes semiosis even though the signs are molecular, that is, no more perceptible than relations of speed and slowness, of proximity, co-presence and intensity.

Deleuze and Guattari reinforce a relation between becoming and performance through their example of the actor’s creative process in the movie, *Taxi Driver*. Performance materialises becoming on the body of the performer and in the *mise-en-scène*:

The actor Robert de Niro walks ‘like’ a crab in a certain film sequence: but he says, it is not a question of his imitating a crab; it is a question of making something that has to do with the crab enter into composition with the image, with the speed of the image (274).

Robert de Niro walks ‘like’ a crab which is not the same as imitating a crab. He retains a distance from the crab in order to effect a crab-becoming. This way of reading de Niro’s performance is not unlike the distance between the performer and the character in the production of *Verfremdungseffekt*. There is no identification between de Niro and crab, no fusion of performer with the part to be played. But there are also crucial differences. The successful creation of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* relies on the performer’s construction of a persona who takes a properly critical attitude to the character he or she portrays. Becoming, on the other hand, works on the particle or fragment rather than the actor’s whole self. It does not demand the presence of the politicised performer, nor does it demand an integrated, whole or centred subject. Becoming allows for fragmented, split and multiple subjectivities to ‘enter into composition’ with an image and then to disperse and move on. It provides a model of performance that sits well with the movement of the performance across time and space, where there is no such thing as a fixed point.

The application of becoming to performance is not about empathy or identity between performer and character. In this important respect becoming, as I use it here, is not to be confused with a Stanislavskian performance mode, in which the actor becomes the character through a series of identifications and incorporations. Deleuze and Guattari are emphatic that becoming ‘is never imitating’, nor is it a fusion between actor and character.

Becomings are not transformations of the subject into another kind of subject, as in man into woman, or to continue the analogy with performance, the performer into the character, but the dispersal of the subject into segments, fragments or molecules, and their progress across thresholds and borders. Where the whole self cannot go, the fragment can pass. Becomings are not visible to the naked eye which looks for borders, boundaries and totalities, particularly those of the centred subject, or in theatre, the unified dramatic character. This explains why in *The Good Person of Sichuan*, the gods do not recognise Shen Te underneath her disguise. Brecht’s bourgeois Gods look after borders and boundaries and categories of good and evil and are not positioned to see the productive value of slippage. If becomings are molecular, if we speak of molecules crossing thresholds and borders, then the progression occurs while everything appears to remain the same. ‘There is a reality of becoming-animal, even though one does not in reality become animal’ (273).

In the case of Guattari, it is the act of writing of *A Thousand Plateaus* which provides the context within which Deleuze’s reading of Guattari’s philosopher-becoming takes place. Character-becoming may be understood as something more than and
different from simply playing the part. It is playing the part in a context, a situation of utterance which provides the codes through which meaning is ascribed to image. A performer can put on a costume and say lines, but character-becoming works against the imitation of a dramatic signified as if the whole character can be taken on ready-made by the whole actor, in an equation of one on one. As performance occurs in time and space and each moment is different, the movement of performance involves, perhaps demands, new becomings and new spatial arrangements. The lingering of the previous moment in the next one means that images move in a state of flux. ‘Always the same’ performer, but one whose function or role is to create new moments, new situations, new positions and new subjectivities for the character.

The concept of becoming, of the line of flight and deterriorisation are all to do with the way in which the subject departs from the norm and as such they appear as metaphors for new modes of thinking. The line of flight can be an act of treason against ‘the world of dominant significations, and to the established order’. Becoming are lines of flight ‘through doors and across thresholds’ (272).

**Shen Te/Shui Ta becoming**

The double character Shen Te/Shui Ta, already a multiple, is a useful site to begin the analysis. In so far as becoming relates to a subversion of identity and an opening up of the subject to the multiple, the fluid and the adaptable, reading the performance of *The Good Person of Sichuan* through the notions of the performative and becoming produce alternative visions of its female subject, Shen Te, as she seeks to escape from her social position. That Shen Te is unhappy with her final situation does not detract from the radical potential of her subversive moves. Rather, her relative failure to find the affirmative moment in nomadism takes us back to Brecht’s point – Shen Te represents a wrong state of mind in a wrong world. Her return to the polarities of Shen Te/Shui Ta as an either-or option returns her to the phallogocentric organisation of the social sphere into binary divisions.

In a musical interlude, ‘The Song of the Defencelessness of the Gods and the Good’, Shen Te appears carrying a man’s coat, shoes and mask. As she sings about the hopelessness of the poor and the viciousness of the gutters in which they learn the lessons of life, Shen Te begins to dress as her fictional male cousin Shui Ta explaining there is no other way for her to survive but to exploit and profit. The sentiment in the song is presented ironically as the misguided logic of the pre-revolutionary subject. But stepping aside from that reading, and the official narrative, it is possible to see that the space in-between Shen Te and Shui Ta can be reconfigured as a sequence of becomings. As with de Niro’s ‘crab-walk’, Shen Te undergoes a Shui Ta-becoming without imitating a whole man. She tries out a number of walks before arriving at a Shui Ta-walk. This is not the same as imitating a (molar) man, but a dispersal or breaking down of Shen Te’s woman-walk so that an aspect of her walk can be connected to an aspect of an imaginary man’s-walk. The body in this configuration is fragmented into segments. It is a walk rather than a body. Despite de Niro’s association with the Stanislavskian-derived Lee Strasberg Method School of acting, becoming is not a fusion of actor and character. As Fredric Jameson says of Deleuzian thought, ‘in a sense everything theorized in *Mille plateaux* is a phenomenon of exteriority, since the language of interiority, subjectivity, identity, warm night in which “all cows are gray,” is itself one of the polemical targets of Deleuzian thinking’. Becoming is effected externally, not internally. The walk functions metonymically and is therefore fundamentally an estrangement device –
the walk stands for the man – while the female performer remains always the same performer, distanced from the walk and the character. She does not become the character or something else. There is only a partial embodiment of masculinity.

The notion of becoming as a partial embodiment of another character is useful both as an application of Brechtian performance theory, which rejects identification between performer and character, and for the performer herself who stands to be released from the (impossible) task of playing the male part as a whole. Playing the male might call on a limitless series of incorporations: a voice, a walk and costume, and also masculine desire, a male gaze and a phallocentric point of view. Indeed, cross-gender performance is a specialist field occupied by the parodic playfulness of drag performers and is most commonly performed as a male parody of stereotypical femininity. Brecht never intended that the actor play the male as a seamless illusion. The Gestus of the female playing the male needed to be visible to make the social critique visible. Shen Te’s becoming-Shui Ta describes the process of creating man with seams.¹⁴ This occurs as the Shui Ta character is created in segments in-between the removing of women’s shoes and female mask and the putting-on of masculine shoes and coat, face-mask and microphone. Shen Te, like de Niro, walks like Shui Ta without trying to imitate Shui Ta. The objects assist the actor in the enactment of the part while the part itself is a sequence of acts, deeds and performative gestures.

Becoming is therefore a potentially useful concept in Brechtian performance because it is not about the imitation of a thing, but the showing of a fragment or trace of the thing that appears as a rate of speed, an intensity, a texture or a movement. In the case of Shui Ta, this translates into an increased heaviness of the footstep, a slowing down of the walk or a lengthening of the stride. It is about a trace, a suggestion, a move or a glimpse. Instead of taking on the identity, psychology or social status of some imagined, fictionalised male, the process is fragmented. The psychological or internalised approach to performance, wherein the performer’s unproblematised self fuses with another’s, has no place in this scheme. Nor does the body function as an external sign of an internally given.

A more extended application of becoming to performance is offered as a reading of the famous scene in which the fable reaches a point of no-return for Shen Te. In this scene, which involves Shen Te and another failed business woman, Mrs Shin, it is revealed that Shen Te has lost her Tobacco shop, a gift from the Gods, that her lover Yang Sun has disappeared with her money, that she is about to find herself on the streets again and she is pregnant. Each revelation adds a new perspective for the character which is manifested as a change in attitude.

The scene calls on the actor playing Shen Te to undergo a number of becomings. She begins with a reluctant becoming – the sorry state of homelessness, which can be understood as the negative side of nomad-becoming. The actor’s task is to represent the situation of loss – of business, home and love, which is in effect a deterritorialisation, a loss of identity. She enters the performance space carrying awkward bundles and props representative of the effects of the loss of her home base. Her gaze is cast downwards to the floor of the performance space and does not take in the surrounding mise en scène. As she enters the space with her eyes cast down and holding her bundles, she maintains a close vision of the space.

When Deleuze and Guattari write of space, they distinguish between smooth and striated space. Smooth space is without thresholds, boundaries or fixed points of reference. It is potentially a creative and nomadic space. Striated space is mapped, crossed by lines and fixed points, grids and points of surveillance and reference.
When Shen Te enters with cast-down eyes, she appears directionless. As Deleuze and Guattari write: ‘The first aspect of the haptic, smooth space of close vision is that its orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in continuous variation; it operates step by step’ (493).

Shen Te’s close vision creates a smooth, nomadic space, but it is not creative. It is filled with events and intensities of emotion rather than with objects and points, but this is not a welcome release from routine. Shen Te represents the wrong-thinking subject, created by Brecht to demonstrate the limited choices available to her. As her vista narrows and closes around her, she loses touch with the way in which space is conventionally mapped. Through Shen Te’s close-range vision, the space loses its points of reference. She becomes dizzy in a desert in which she is the nomad, moving on a trajectory rather than towards a pre-determined point. The actor conveys the appearance of dizziness and aimlessness, even though her movements are choreographed for the space and her actual movements are predetermined.

The performance space becomes an open ‘smooth’ space for Shen Te to, in the loss of the business, she has undergone a deterriorisation. She is at this stage defined as a speed of movement, an intensity in the space. She is drawn towards Mrs Shin, whose presence in the space becomes a point to which Shen Te can direct herself. The smooth space confronts the striated space. Shin sweeps the space as if her broom ‘striates’ it, marking out territory around the fixed point of her home. Having herself undergone the loss of business and dwelling, she sees Shen Te coming with her bundles. They meet at a point where their histories come into contact with each other: two nomads, one on a trajectory, the other sweeping the yard. The sweeping is an attempt to ward off nomad-becoming. Using these spatial categories, we can see how the interior of Mrs Shin’s home is a retreat from the formlessness of smooth space. The sweeping attempts to integrate the space around it with the interior. The home, the interior space, is striated space, organised by densities, properties and material objects.

Shin and Shen Te go through Shen Te’s belongings as they engage in dialogue in the process of which points are marked out in Shen Te’s world. She has lost her shop, what will she do, she should not have refused the barber’s offer of marriage, she is ruined. Shen Te’s nomad-becoming is, however, short-lived. Mrs Shin pins her dizziness down to pregnancy rather than a loss of co-ordinates. She is not disoriented, she is pregnant. She is now dizzy with a new becoming. The pregnancy is both a physical condition and a delirious escape from what is, to Shen Te, the unhappy situation of the nomad: the unhappiness of nomad-becoming is replaced by mother-becoming. Shen Te responds with characteristic style: she takes another line of flight. This line of flight sees her in a joyous state where the deserts will be conquered by her son, an aviator-hero. But becoming aware that a starving child looks for food in Shin’s rubbish bin, she reluctantly returns to the Shui Ta position, this time to save her child from poverty. The scene ends with Shen Te’s world having become a thoroughly striated space, a gutter marked by poverty, viciousness, deceit, greed and cruelty. The social has encroached on the vision of ‘uncharted regions and inaccessible mountain chains’ and once again she is forced to take a line of escape from the impossible situation.15

Shen Te’s Shui Ta becoming is in the main performative, a demonstration of the fabricated identity, constructed from actions and deeds. But Shui Ta reminds us identity retains a non-performative materiality or corporeality which is indexed by the pregnant body of Shen Te. Terry Threadgold’s reservation about the limitation
of the performative as a theory of identity, ‘actual performance and rehearsal in the theatre would belie any simple theory of the transformation of the body of the actor into another differently lived or crafted body’, claiming there are social sites which act on the body, would seem to apply to the example of Shen Te.  

This analysis of the scene suggests that a productive symbiosis of the Brechtian and the Deleuzian is possible. Deleuze’s somewhat romanticised notion of smooth space and the affirmative position of the nomad is given a reality-check through Brecht’s more social construction of the choices available to the subject. Where nomad-becoming is an abstract concept, referring more to a state of mind than an actual condition, Brecht provides the concrete dramatic situation where the concept can be more fully examined. The case of Shen Te in the Good Person of Sichuan sounds a note of caution to the overly romanticised condition of the nomad; nomad-becoming is not always sought after by social subjects. The analysis suggests points of convergence and fruitful debate between radical contemporary and historical thinkers, so that it is not a case of replacing the one with the other.

Points of convergence may also appear in the performance techniques deployed by the actor. The scene demands of the actor a complex confrontation and mixture of becomings and lines of flight. The way in which the actor uses and sees the performance space is the key to these actions. She can create nomad-becoming through close vision. Her cast-down gaze blocks out the total mise en scène and she makes a desert of the space. Holding onto her bundle, her relation to the space becomes tactile rather than territorial. She no longer owns territory, her contact with the world is established through the body and mobile objects. Onto this condition is placed mother-becoming, and the actor must prepare herself for the ensuing line of flight.

This is again created through a relationship with the space. Her gaze moves outward. She takes in the whole picture – a global dimension that takes her from the mise en scène in which she is a figure, across the spectator’s space and out of the theatre, before coming back to the gutter in which she locates herself. The Deleuzian theory of space applied here bears a striking resemblance to Brecht’s Theaterarbeit: ‘Irrespective whether the actor on stage is to get outside or stay inside himself he must know how to take it easy. First he must conquer the setting: that is to say, acquaint himself with it like a blind man acquainting himself with his surroundings’.  

The blind see space through tactile and other senses. To use the Deleuzian description, ‘it is a haptic rather than optical perception’. Smooth space is occupied by ‘intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities, as in the desert, steppe, or ice’ (479). In order to allow the actor to develop the part, rather than begin from a predetermined position, the actor must first perceive the space as a space that is open, that has not already been marked out by lines of dialogue, by points of reference, by entrances and exits, by predetermined paths and walkways and by a telos, the politics of the social revolution. The actor on entering the smooth space is therefore faced with a number of choices. In which direction will she go? What path will she make through the space? Alternatively, the already striated space of traditional theatre will have her following stage-directions, speaking lines, feeling or feigning emotions or attitudes as required, making entrances and exits, and moving from point to point, rather than making transitions between them. Again, in an instance where Brecht offers advice to the actor, which would seem to undercut his own prescriptive theory, there is a striking resemblance to Deleuze. Brecht advises the actor to make the part her own, whether she achieves that through internal or external means; the actor:
must divide up his part and modulate it, thoroughly savouring it, until it suits him. He must “arrange” his movements, whatever they are meant to express, in such a way that he gets fun out of their sweep and rhythm. All these are tasks for the senses, and his training is of a physical kind.18

This description of the actor’s process invites the actor to undertake a character becoming. The actor who creates a smooth space out of the performance space is best able to move in such a way as ‘to get fun’ out of her ‘rhythm’. This method stands in contrast to the cliché that Brechtian acting technique is solely externally constructed on the surface of the body.

At the same time, we see in the analysis of this scene how the text itself is open to a deterritorialisation from its official status as a social fable or parable, to one that focuses on the female subject’s attempts to find viable subjectivities for her various situations. It can be prised open and unhinged from its Marxist emphasis on social relations, to incorporate a radically different and potentially subversive examination of the contemporary female subject. In the same way, the text can be removed from its historical base in patriarchal culture. Motherhood is not the essential female condition of joy or sexual exploitation or the combination of the two, but a becoming which entails all the subversive and creative potential of the line of flight. Motherhood for Shen Te is framed by capitalism but it also exceeds the frame. She has been badly treated by Yang Sun, and she will be left to bring up the child alone, but the child also gives her power. Where in Kafka’s Metamorphosis, Deleuze and Guattari read Gregor’s animal-becoming as a line of escape from the father in whom state oppression is condensed, Shen Te’s mother-becoming is also an escape.19 She will escape the uncertainty of the nomadic life and the viciousness of the gutter, but she will also participate in a kind of becoming in which she finds movements, intensities and flows. Just as Kafka’s animals, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are not archetypes, mother-becoming need not evoke the mythological or archetypal mother: ‘Kafka’s animals never refer to a mythology or to archetypes but correspond solely to new levels, zones of liberated intensities where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them.20

The reading of the Shen Te/Shui Ta characterisation through the concept of becoming helps to theorise its treatment of the problem of the feminine as a social site in a way that was never intended by Brecht. Although Brecht would not have imagined his plays being used for feminist purposes, the changing nature of his practice and theory, the fact they were always under revision, opens the way to a possible exploitation and evolution in many directions.

The concept of becoming leads to an understanding of Shen Te’s action as a shedding of her identity. As a secondary social subject under patriarchy, she masquerades as a man, and thus rends (slips out of) her major identity as woman/prostitute/shopkeeper. Her rending of herself from her major identity is a deterritorialisation of herself, including her status as a subordinate subject. This action frees her from the standards by which her old identity is judged. Thus she can now exploit others, make a profit, and be tough because she is a man. Shen Te’s Shui Ta-becoming is, however, a reversal of the order of becomings as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari. Becomings usually involve a deterritorialisation from an imposed identity to a freer or more fluid, less colonised, if abject, as with Gregor’s dung-beetle, identity. It is a radical departure from the norm, rather than an intensification of it. The Shui Ta- becoming appears, on this view, a perverse solution to an unhappy situation. Perverse because it is an intensification and reinforcement of the normality of the power vested in the
male subject-position. The extent of Brecht’s social critique becomes clear on this reading when, in performance, the powerful male subject-position is estranged on the foreign, female body. The play questions how readily subordinate social subjects take on the mantle of their oppressor, and how successful they are when they do so, at least in the short term. The historical context of Brecht’s critique—the rise of Nazism in the Weimar Republic—haunts a contemporary reading. The play’s ironic proposition is that ‘freedom’ from oppression is through fascist-becoming. Shen Te rends herself from her major identity, not to a better, more enlightened state, but into a more codified and pragmatic one.

Shen Te’s line of flight from woman to fascist reveals a bleak but pragmatic side to Brecht’s political thought. Shui Ta-becoming is a practical strategy for Shen Te and her child’s survival. Shen Te is poor and uneducated, but at what decision does the politicised subject arrive? The gap between Brecht’s dramatic theory which presents an optimistic future, and the complexity of the vision presented in The Good Person of Sichuan becomes apparent. This occurs as the more recent theorisations of contemporary culture by Deleuze and Guattari allow for a reading of Brecht that maps the pragmatism of his political analysis. If the notion of becoming is understood, as intended, as a subversive act involving the shedding of State-imposed identities, then it assists in the repoliticisation of Brecht in so far as the performance of the Brechtian female character becomes a failed subversive and parodic act. Reading The Good Person of Sichuan through the concept of becoming produces a new reading of Brecht that sees in the bleakness of the options available to Shen Te, evidence of Brecht as a pragmatist rather than an idealist. The end of the play is unremittingly negative, because in Shen Te’s plea that she needs Shui Ta is the admission that one can only survive in the world as it is by fascist-becoming. This is the conventional interpretation.

Alternatively, the performance can be read as the staging of a number of attempts on the part of the oppressed and troubled female character Shen Te to undertake a number of becomings. The becomings point to the dissolution of the stable and representative subject and her dispersal into multiple subjectivities. The fact that her choices are directed at becoming (what to her is) normal rather than radical, highlights the mistakes that are made along the way, as befits the parable form. It is, however, possible to read in the figure of Shen Te a femininity that is moving between identities, most notably from Shen Te to Shui Ta, but also among a range of other subjectivities—among maternal, proprietorial, angel-of-the-slums, criminal and other positionalities. This brings us back to Butler’s performative feminine. Shen Te bears similarities to the figure described by Judith Butler in a phrase that has striking resemblance to the terms through which this essay is constructed. Referring to the constitution of the term woman, Butler writes: ‘woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.’

Butler’s language evokes the rhizome, which is always in the middle, without beginning or end, and becoming to speak of the subject in motion, who is never fixed and whose construction is never complete. I have argued that performance, with its capacity to intervene in the space of culture and to produce signification, contributes its own discursive practices to the ongoing investigation of the processes of woman-becoming. That Shen Te chooses to undergo a Shui Ta-becoming, points to the wrongness of her strategy and explains why, at the end of the play, she has reached a dead end. Becoming man, as Deleuze emphatically points out, is not possible.
The analysis demonstrates that notions such as becoming do not always point to the right choices, to the affirmative strategy or to the successful outcome. Becomings can be counterproductive if the social situation is rigged against the subject. Brecht’s notion of the subject as social retains, in this sense, a political relevance. His construction of Shui Ta as a negative solution to Shen Te’s problems acquires a heightened sense of the wrong path taken when it is performed in the space of feminist theatre. The critique of the phallogocentric subject has intensified under feminist and poststructuralist discourses so that the original critique of the capitalist male is sharpened through being connected to the arborescent system. Set against Butler’s affirmative notion of becoming woman, Shui Ta-becoming appears an astonishingly retrogressive step for a woman to take. This reading is only partially produced by a Brechtian mode of analysis; its full impact is produced through more contemporary discourses such as those of Deleuze and Guattari, whose writing speaks more for our times than Brecht’s.

The most compelling and challenging aspect of contemporary performance is its engagement with the theorisation of the feminine subject as a subject in transit. This subject, a version of the nomadic subject, can be found in old texts made new in feminist performance. This new female configuration does not appear on its own, as some visible embodiment of a new empirical subject, but is discursively constructed in the intersecting spaces between performance and discourse. This subject dissolves as readily as it is formed and requires constant reconstruction.

Performance Cited


*The Good Person Of Sichuan*, 1993, The Open Stage, University of Melbourne, dir. by Denise Varney.


Notes

1. Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Sichuan*, trans. by Michael Hofmann (London: Methuen, 1989). This is the first English translation of the abridged version of the original full-length play written by Brecht and his collaborators Ruth Berlau and Margarete Steffin in 1938–42. Brecht adapted the play for the American stage during his exile in Santa Monica, California during the second world war. The so-called Santa Monica version was first performed in English at the National Theatre, London, in 1989 under the direction of Deborah Warner. According to cast, crew and critics it was a most un-Brechtian production that raised more questions about the performance of Brecht today than it answered.


11. Deleuze and Parnet, p. 41.

12. My comments refer to my own production of the play at the Open Stage Theatre, University of Melbourne in 1993, in which I directed students in a university performance of the play.


14. It is important to state here that Deleuze and Guattari are emphatic that there can be no man-becoming. This is because becoming is presented as a subversive act which challenges dominant identities. In the case of Shen Te becoming man, therefore, the becoming is related to her movement away from one dramatic character to another. Shen Te remains visible as Shui Ta and as such retains her minority status.


*Denise Varney lectures in Theatre Studies in the School of Creative Arts, VCA, University of Melbourne. She has written and published on feminist performance, Brechtian theatre, the video documentation of live performance, and performance as research.*
Author/s: VARNEY, DENISE

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