FOCUS ON THE BODY: TOWARDS A FEMINIST READING OF BRECHT IN PERFORMANCE

Denise Vaney

In 1993, I directed Brecht's *The Good Person of Sichuan* at the Open Stage Theatre at the University of Melbourne. Like most directors, I found the text's tightly-woven and theoretically inscribed composition resistant to meddling. Brecht's dramaturgy, structured on a Marxist-derived aesthetic and embodied in the techniques of Verfremdung and Gestus, weighs heavily on the creative development of the play in performance. I am in full sympathy with Leander Haussmann's claim that Brecht's plays are constructed linguistically and dramaturgically like a house of cards and therefore can only be reproduced by slaves to the text. Not wanting to be a slave but also, unlike Haussman, unwilling not to do Brecht, I prowled around for gaps into which our production could insert a differently-motivated, feminist mise-en-scène.

Notwithstanding the house-of-cards-like constraints, my production was interested in how far we could stray from the original text, to reposition the play within a feminist postmodern context. This involved historicizing Brecht, turning his own techniques of estrangement and distanciation against the assumptions that underpinned the theory and practice. To this end, we claimed *The Good Person* as a feminist subject, reworking the Verfremdungseffekt in the interests of estranging gender and sexual difference. The gods and Wang the Water seller became female characters in a move that feminized the text, appropriating masculine dialogue for the feminine subject. Our fictional Sichuan was a postmodern space severed from its orientalist past and released from the onus of representing Brecht's critique of monopoly capitalism and Christianity. The ideological unity of Brecht's fable was ruptured by a visual text composed of objects from different historical periods, modes of production, and social control. The production attempted, therefore, to re-inscribe the text with the techniques of contemporary political theatre. Theoretically, I wanted to approach the

Disguising herself as Shui Tan when her very survival was at stake seemed right in character.

Other actors that stood out in this production were Michael Hume playing Wang, the humble yet slightly crooked waterseller; Michael Ellich as opportunistic lover and would-be pilot, Yang Sun; Mark Murphey as Shu Fu, the fatuous barber; Robynn Rodriguez as the money-grabbing landlady Mrs. Mi Tzu; and J.P. Phillips as Lin To, the swindled carpenter. The energy and liveliness of the cast successfully transformed the old Chinese tale told by German playwright Bertolt Brecht into fast-moving, American-style entertainment. Although the play lasted for more than three hours, it earned standing ovations at the end of each show.

Reviews in local and regional newspapers were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. The *San Francisco Chronicle* found this production of *Good Person* to be the "the most provocative play of the season." For the *Eugene Register-Guard* it was "the hit" of the 1999 festival. The *San Francisco Examiner* called it "the season's most rewarding non-Shakespearean offering," and the *San Jose Mercury News* raved: "What a treat! Last year when everyone short of the Teletubbies celebrated the 100th anniversary of Brecht's birthday, something was almost forgotten: The man was a great playwright."

What a tribute to Brecht, who has been found difficult and hard to relate to for American audiences, to Penny Metropolous, Douglas Longworthy, and the skillful actors!

*Santa Clara University*
question of Brecht and feminist theory from the point of view of the productive value of applying non-theatrical theories of the body to Brechtian theatre practice and criticism. I moved the frame of Brechtian performance criticism beyond the frame of his own theoretical writing to see how the performance, and therefore a Brechtian play, might address more contemporary concerns. I found that feminist poststructuralist and postmodernist readings of the body released the performance from the closure of a narrowly conceived analytical frame.

The following analysis of The Good Person of Sichuan traces theories of the body in the cultural sphere onto the body in performance. It focuses on the regulatory norms and imperatives that mark even the female body as they are translated/ transferred onto the body of the actor in performance. These marks are particularly visible on the bodies of the three female gods and the female Wang. The text is surprisingly open to this substitution. The dialogue, action, and fable continue unchanged, but the feminization of the parts offers a new means of deconstructing the gender polarities of the text. It is not a matter of females playing male parts for the purposes of estrangement as in the Shen Te/Shui Ta opposition. Changing the gender of the characters thinks through alternative representations of gender. The playing of the male parts as female parts within the text-as-written demonstrates that, even within the tightly woven Brechtian text, there is scope to insert an alternative discourse about gender ambiguity and fluidity. One of the effects of the feminization of the play in performance is that the framing scenes — the Prologue and the final scene as well as the interludes — become female rather than male spaces. I will therefore focus on these scenes in the analysis which follows, but before doing so, I will trace some recent developments in the theorization of the body that informed the development of the mise-en-scene.

The Body in Performance: Feminist interest in and theorization of the body have particular application to performance. Theatre is well-placed for such thinking to be enacted — it is the place where reality has always been performative rather than stable, and it is a place for experimentation and play. Where the body is variously theorized as a site for the interplay of the corporeal with the social, the cultural, and the psychological, in performance the body is also a living, breathing materiality that occupies time and space. While theoretical interest in the body has grown, so has the centrality of the body in performance simultaneously as a signifier and a signified. This view of the centrality of the theatricalized body is usefully represented by phenomenologist Starston Garner, Jr.: “Bodied spatiality is at the heart of dramatic presentation, for it is through the actor’s corporeal presence under the spectator’s gaze that the dramatic text actualizes itself in the performance.”

Garner uses notions of ‘embodied subjectivity,’ also disseminated through feminist poststructuralist theory, to oppose the theatrical body to the essential, fixed, and timeless body of humanist discourse in ways that suggest the shared discourse through which the body is articulated across disciplines. In this case it is phenomenology, theatre, and feminism. Theories of the body offer analytical tools which undercut traditional text-based and semiotic modes of performance analysis and produce alternative readings of performance. Focus on the body displaces the logoscentrism of textual analysis for both performer and spectator and provides opportunities for performing against the text. The performer can work from body-image and movement, from notions of rhythm and flow, energy and stillness, and the spectator can discern points of difference and even discordance between body and text.

The relation between the body and subjectivity, foreshadowed above, adds further substance to the analysis of the body in performance. The connection between the body in performance and the social or lived body of the performer suggests that something of the latter may be illuminated through the performance. The relation between the body and subjectivity, a crucial concern for feminism since Cixous and Irigaray, points to the constitution of identity through the corporeal. The notion of morphology connects the anatomical body to the lived, encultured experience of that body, to the extent that the meanings attached to the male and female anatomy in culture are embodied as subjectivity. As Elizabeth Grosz explains: “No matter how much the individual may wish or will it, male and fe-
male genitals have a particular social meaning in Western patriarchal cultures that the individual alone — or even in groups — is unable to transform insofar as these meanings have been so deeply etched into and lived as part of the body image."

Theorists like Grosz seek to use the body to deconstruct the binary opposition of mind and body that has historically worked against the feminine. The feminine is traditionally aligned with the body and assigned an inferior and unreliable position in relation to the masculine, which is aligned with the superior term, the mind. Grosz invites a reconfiguration of the body as a text on which subjectivity, history, and even psychology might be read. Rather than the binary opposite of the mind, Grosz asserts that the body produces cognitive meaning: "bodies have all the explanatory powers of minds."

Debates about the body as a medium of culture, or as a construction or even a location constitute a new turn in feminist theory in the 1990s. Grosz has circulated the notion of the body as an inscriptive surface on which "cultural and personal values, norms, and commitments" are written. Thus voluntary practices such as diet, exercise regimes, and clothing, and coercive forms of correction and training such as shock therapy, straitjackets, and medication, mark the body, making it readable as a representation of the subject's social, cultural, historical, and psychological make-up. In a similar way, Susan Bordo, after Foucault, proposes that the body is "a medium of culture" — a symbolic form or a text — that is readable as a measure of the extent to which the subject has incorporated the rules of cultural life. Bordo uses the notion of the docile body to describe the body that is "practiced at and habituated to the rules of cultural life."

Bordo's contribution to the theorization of the body is her interest in the willful and highly visible disordered of the female body through conditions such as hysteria, anorexia nervosa, and agoraphobia. She reads the disordered and abnormal body as a form of feminine resistance. These conditions function as an exaggeration of the terms through which repressive and coercive regimes describe the feminine in a move that is not unlike Irigaray's notion of playing the feminine to "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation." Even though I would not want to endorse as practice such ultimately disabling modes of resistance, Bordo's analysis produces an unintentionally theatricalized version of the disordered body that lends itself to theatrical performance. The image of the disordered body as a parodic caricature of gender norms, "exaggerated, extremely literal, at times virtually caricatured presentation of the ruling feminine mystique," suggests that the body is willfully and artfully, that is theatricalized, made into a heightened representation of the feminine. Bordo's hysteric, for example, can be played as a negative scenario in much the same way as Brecht intended with his characterizations of wrong states of affairs.

Bordo's theatricalized disorders found their way into the performance, as will be seen in the analysis which follows, in the representation of one of the gods as hysteric.

Reading the body as a text is appealing to performance analysis, and constructing the body as a text assists performance-making. The body in performance might be said to produce a corporeal or material text that runs parallel to or against the dramatic text. If the social or everyday body produces a meaning that refers to the culture in which it lives, then the performing body similarly engages in the production of a readable performance of culture.

Against the notion of the body as a text and as a medium of culture is a more deconstructive theory of the body as a discursive and corporeal practice. Judith Butler rejects the notion of the body as a text, claiming instead that the body is a construction. The notion of the body as text implies that it precedes the marks of culture. But there is no body, she argues, prior to inscription: "bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender."

For Butler, the body is inextricably tied to culture through gender and cannot be understood as a separate text. The body comes "into being in and through the mark(s) of gender," and those marks carry cultural meanings. The body may be understood as a discursive construction: it becomes visible (readable, apprehensible) within the signifying system that gives all objects, even seemingly natural bodies, meaning. In place of the body as a medium is the body as a discursive space.
"a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained." The body is not acted on by culture or inscribed, but enacts the attributes, gestures, and styles that produce its abiding gendered self.12

The notion of the body as a discursive space accords with Rosi Braidotti’s formulations of the body as a "site." For Braidotti, the body is a spatial frame in which subjectivity, in all its multiplicity, complexity, and variability, is rooted. For Braidotti, the body is neither biological nor sociological, but the site for the interplay of a number of discursive formations. The body is "a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the material social conditions" that position the subject in culture.13 Pragmatically for what Braidotti refers to as a — politics of location — the body is sexually differentiated, and also differentiated through class, race, age, and other social divisions. For Braidotti too, the body is connected to the rhizomatic network of interconnections in which subjectivity is multiple.

These varying and conflicting notions of the body set the scene for an invigorated reading of the body in performance. Whilst I favor the more active theorizations of the body as a construction and as a location, the notion of the body as text takes on a particular meaning in the analysis of performance. In so far as the body, in the mise-en-scene of performance, incorporates multiple layers of construction, including the textual, the notion of the body as a text does not suggest that the body of the performer is only a medium for the performance. The body in performance wears costume, moves in space and time, sweats and tires, performs actions and speaks — it activates signification at the level of visible corporeality and palpable energy. It is apparent that the female actor is not a passive medium, but one who brings her will and artistry to the self-inscription of her body. This self-inscription is undertaken for display purposes and to make social and political points. The body in performance is a complex network of signification that has the potential to operate at each of the levels outlined above.

The body in theatrical performance can be enlarged through the application of these non-Brechtian and non-performance-based discourses. While Brecht saw the body as gestic and accorded the actions of the body an important status in the dramatic work, it was always driven by a proper consciousness. The Brechtian political mind is prior to and determines the attitude and manner of the body. What happens when the body is also shaped by discourses outside the text?

The conventional interpretation of the gods in The Good Person of Sichuan is that they are pathetic representations of Christianity. They are traditionally dressed in long white robes and beards, like Biblical prophets and elderly patriarchs. They were a critique of the enduring power of the Christian Churches in the Weimar Republic, which, despite its social democratic origins, was still dominated by the conservative values and vested interests of the military-industrial alliances of which the church was its increasingly (in)human face. Volker Klotz saw them as a personification of bourgeois conscience. The bourgeois conscience, he explained, appeases itself with small gifts of charity while it accommodates itself to the status quo for fear that any change might lead to revolution.14 In this reading the gods' gift to Shen Te is a paltry offering which appeases their conscience and turns the prostitute into the good person they seek in order to prove to themselves that it is possible to do good in the world they have created. The gods are comic figures whose ineptitude with earthly matters comments on the inappropriateness of Christianity in the modern age. Rather than sup-
Brecht’s gods are a very good example of the difference history can make. The robed and long-bearded figures now appear as two-dimensional clichés rather than parody. With the decline of Christianity as a state power since the time of the play’s writing, the original critique has lost much of its sting, and its staging becomes problematic. The gods have lost the historical context through which they were estranged; numerous films including Wim Wender’s Wings of Desire (Berlin 1988) have played with the fantasy of the meeting of the divine and the everyday. The spectator is not so easily surprised by unworldly beings who observe the world of people.

However, emphasis on the gods as corporeal rather than abstract or symbolic figurations is not entirely at odds with the Brechtian text in which there are several references to the gods’ physicality. In the Prologue, Wang hopes to recognize the gods through their physical appearance. He imagines that their shoulders will not be bowed from carrying heavy loads, nor will their fingers be inky from working the presses. He picks three figures from the crowd who are well-nourished, bear no trace of any occupation, and have dust on their shoes and decides that these are the corporeal signs of godliness. The gods’ physicality is gestic, linked to and indicative of their social position. Their progress through the dramatic fable is marked on their bodies—one has a black eye, another an injured foot, and signs of increasing exhaustion indicate the hopelessness of their earthly mission. For Brecht, the body is primarily an indexic sign of social status. A focus on the body is not necessarily at odds with the Brechtian text, rather it is the focus on the gods’ gendered corporeality that is different.

Brecht’s Wang is also a socially constructed dramatic figure. He represents the body of the marginal social type who ekes out a living on the edges of society. It is only towards the end of the play that he ventures into the space occupied by the people of Sichuan. Prior to that, the text stipulates that his space is at the edge of the city, along river-banks and in sewer pipes, and he inhabits dream landscapes. He expects to suffer from the blows, both literal and symbolic, that life dishes out. As a marginal figure, Wang eludes the strict binaries of sexual difference and represents a sexually indeterminate body. He has no sexual, emotional, or familial relations with any of the characters in the dramatic text. He is not an obviously male fabrication like Shui Ta, nor is he read as a sexualized male body by Shen Te. He does not play the male with other male characters such as Yang Sun, Shu Fu, the Carpenter, or the male members of the Family of Eight.

From the position of marginality, Wang serves a number of fictional and dramaturgical functions through which he/she derives power as a character. He is sufficiently detached or estranged from the dramatic world to take on narrative functions. He embodies a degree of objectivity about the social world. Hovering along the rails and borders of the city, he meets the gods, and the first speech is an exposition setting up the dramatic world of Sichuan and the situation, the arrival of the gods. He then acts as mediator, messenger, and servant to the gods. Later on, when Shui Ta appears to have taken over the Tobacco Shop and Shen Te has seemingly disappeared, Wang acts as the catalyst forcing the dramatic events to their (unresolved) ending.

In our performance, the female Wang emphasizes the gender indeterminacy of the original and acquires an additional level of gender ambiguity as an effect of the spectator’s expectation of a male body for the character. The unexpected appearance of an ambiguously gendered Wang, in addition to the equally unexpected female gods, draws attention to theatrical bodies in the space. Focus on the bodies undermines the conventional representation of the characters and sets in motion an alternative-bodied text, which tells a story about gender. In the text Wang appears at the beginning of the play and introduces himself to the audience.
He/she is given a choreographed entrance so that the spectator has time to read the character through the body before the introduction of the verbal text. The wordless sequence begins with Wang running up the stairs from the below-stage dressing rooms, through the space and across to the downstage right tap. The entrance establishes her bodily image and presence: the body is slightly built, she takes small steps, she is barefooted and moves quickly but with her back bent underneath the various water containers — buckets, watering cans, plastic bottles — hanging from the body. She is breathless from her run and stands a moment to catch her breath. She slowly and shyly lifts her gaze from the ground to the spectator. As she catches her breath by the tap, the spectator sees a young woman dressed in bright green trousers and a multi-colored striped, short-sleeved shirt. Traces of the male character linger in Wang’s language and attitude to the actor’s female form, but this is also partly due to the actor who performs the part. She has a strong, black, slightly wavy hair. When she speaks, she has a soft, nervous voice. She looks sideways as she speaks, in the manner of a person who is always on the lookout for adversity. Her demeanor is that of someone who is always running from or towards superior beings. She is a bit simple, supplicating and eager to impress.

Elizabeth Grosz has said that body-image is an important component of subjectivity and is in a continuous process of production and transformation. For the actor who understands the body as a site for the complex interplay of actor and dramatic character, the creation of an alternative body image for the character assists in marking the points of difference (and similarity) between the two. The actor playing Wang creates a body-image for the character so that the spectator reads the character’s body on her body. The body-image is invested with the character’s attributes through the material objects chosen for the character and worn or carried on and by the body. In the space of performance, body-image and with it, subjectivity, both the character’s and the actor’s, become fluid, changeable, and capable of transformation. The fluidity of the body-image occurs as it comes into contact with external objects. Grosz comments that anything that comes into contact with the surface of the body and remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body-image — clothing, jewelry, other bodies, objects. They mark the body, its gait, posture, position, etc. (temporarily or more or less permanently), by marking the body-image: subjects do not walk the same way or have the same posture when they are naked as when they wear clothing.

The actor has built her character from old clothing and objects found around her own home, including her father’s garage. Placed in contact with her body, her body is re-marked according to the additional signification, but also changed as it incorporates the objects, which alter the gait etc. Each object has a history which she embodies as a theatrical example of the way in which “every body is marked by the history and specificity of its existence.” For example, the worn laborer’s pouch had been her father’s and carries traces of the migrant story — the actor’s father migrated from southern Italy in the 1950s and worked as a laborer. The actor draws on the family narrative of migration, available to her through objects such as the pouch to create a Wang whose marginalization in Sichuan, she imagines, is similar to the migrant’s experience in a new country. The actor’s own position as law student at a prestigious university gives her a distance from the situation of the character and the family history, and so the character embodies both the similarities and differences. Her distance from the character is marked by the realization that she will have to cut her manicured fingernails to fit the body-image of the fictional Wang. Her familiarity allows her to embody the attitude of marginality in the hesitant way she occupies the space.

The actor’s performance in the Prologue is built around her constantly moving body. Throughout the performance, she appears and disappears in short interludes, crossing the space as a body intent on being invisible. A history of violence, beatings, correction, and training is inscribed on Wang’s body and is particularly evident in the interactions with the gods. The performer bows, supplicates, and tries to placate the gods, creating a comic image of the “docile
body,” the “regulated body practiced at and habituated to the rules of cultural life.”

The gods on the other hand, represent three differently marked bodies. The conventional reading of the gods as a critique of Christianity is enlivened by the application of a more recent discourse concerning the symbolism of gods. Deleuze’s notion of gods as having fixed attributes and codes and as marking boundaries offers another possibility within the context of The Good Person of Sichuan: gods have fixed attributes, properties and functions, territories and codes they have to do with rails, boundaries, and surveys.

Recalling that the gods appear in the Prologue and the final scene, they mark the beginning and end of the play. They also appear in a number of interludes, in the spaces between the episodes which constitute the play’s fable. They are positioned both inside the fable and outside it. They mark the boundaries of the fable by ranging around its borders, surveying its territories, and discoursing with other marginal social types, such as Wang and Shen Te the Prostitute. They provide the fable with its starting-point, its interludes, and its completion. The fable is enclosed within its borders. That the gods become increasingly disheveled as they make crossings over the border from the realm beyond into the territory of the everyday world, signals that their fixed attributes make them ill-suited to the fluid and changeable state of the world. The fixity of the gods’ attributes and properties as metaphysical, literary, and cultural signifiers makes them resistant to the flow of the performance.

If the gods are understood as boundary markers, then as female, there is a change in their signification. As female boundary markers, they offer a gendered reading of the fixing of codes, attributes, properties, and functions. The relation between the gods as agents of control and regulation, and the feminine as the product of culturally regulated codes, styles, and practices is brought into relief in the space of the performance.

The first god plays on the elevated status of the divine in the earthly world, but is engaged nevertheless in a struggle with corporeality and its maintenance. The body of the performer becomes a focus for and an enactment of the body as a site for the interplay of competing and contradictory discourses. Draped in a diaphanous white cheesecloth gown which is topped by an enormous headress and carrying her own make-up bag, she is a parody of the great goddess. The headress is adorned with signs of the pagan goddess — crystals, beads, and stylized deer antlers from which hangs more diaphanous cloth. It also evokes the cultural and religious use of the veil for female religious subjects. The deer antlers mimic primitive objects of worship, mythical notions of the horned god, and peasant women carrying twigs in baskets on their heads. She is transhistorical and transcultural, occupying multiple temporalities and referring to a range of composed images. The traces of the veil recall a history of covering the female head, claiming the body for religious, moral, and social institutions. The headress also signifies primitivism and domesticity, the goddess and the essentialized peasant woman; it is comic, parodic, and grotesque. The headress is also heavy, and the performer is acutely and uncomfortably aware of the weight on her head during the scenes in which she wears it. This adds to the performance a parodic representation of the performer’s body as living and palpable, suffering, violated, and in extremity.

Images of female divinity, beauty, and domesticity and the discourses which support them gradually lose their grip on the body. The headress is removed with great relief in the Prologue. In subsequent appearances the body has become increasingly encultured to the new earthly situation. The god tries a cotton dress and running shoes and begins to shape the body for modern life. She begins to exercise and jog. She becomes the bush body in akubra and hat and finally leaves the space barefooted. The god learns that femininity is a matter of body-image and, as the custodian of fixed attributes, she is keen to adopt the appropriate body. The god enacts observed styles and gestures in order to make herself incarnate. The effort to compose and maintain the body points to the fabrication that demands ceaseless repetition. Beyond the boundaries of corporeality, there is no subject, and the god struggles to maintain visibility in order to inhabit the earthly world.

The second god is the most judgmental, morally high-minded, and uncompromising of the three. She is represented according to Susan Bordo’s notion of the body as a medium of culture,
"a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced."20 Her long, black Victorian dress connotes a period of sexual repression masquerading as middle-class morality. The imposition of this code on the body is emphasized by the corset the actor wears and later reveals. The performer's long hair is braided and wound around her head. For her first entrance, she has wound a length of calico cloth around the body, restricting leg, hip, and torso movement. The second god represents the incorporation, at the level of the body and at the level of subjectivity, of the regulatory codes of a morally repressive regime.

The cloth restricts the second god's mobility. She moves with great difficulty, and the spectator sees a body that struggles against that which is inscribed on its surface and affects her movement, her attitude to the space and her difference from the other gods. Her other adornment is a key on a large metal keyring attached to her dress. She presents an image of a woman bound, of a body tied-up, contained, locked-up, and restrained. The key suggests that she has voluntarily submitted to the regime. The cloth wound tightly around the black Victorian dress encloses a body that must be restrained from its own biology: its excesses, its disposition towards hysteria, its inclination towards insanity, its capacity for moral weakness and, more dangerously, its suppressed anger. Sally Shuttleworth's study of representations of menstruation in the mid-Victorian era shows the strong connection made between women's reproductive biology and mental health. One example from a report by Dr. J. G. Millingen, a resident at the Middlesex Lunatic Asylum at Hanwell, England, entitled The Passions; or Mind and Matter (1848), states: "If the corporeal agency is thus powerful in man, its tyrannic influence will more frequently cause the misery of the gentler sex. Woman, with her exalted spiritualism, is more forcibly under the control of matter; her sensations are more vivid and acute, her sympathies more irresistible. She is less under the influence of the brain than the uterine system, the plexi of abdominal nerves, and irritation of the spinal cord; in her, a hysteric predisposition is incessantly predominating from the dawn of puberty."21

Shuttleworth reads medical discourse on the body in terms of the twin notions of woman as angel and demon. As a figure of restraint she has civilizing power, but as a victim of the body's excess she represents radical instability. The calico cloth is an exaggeration and caricature of the restraint both desired by and imposed on the female body that matches in hyperbole the language of the attitude it reflects. The second god embodies the duality of the feminine with its fixed and unfixed attributes.

Susan Bordo's reading of the hysteric as an exaggeration of another related Victorian attitude toward woman is also relevant to the performance. Bordo reads "the dissociations of hysteria, the drifting and fogging of perception, the nervous tremors and faints, the anaesthesias, and the extreme mutability of symptomatology" as a subversive embodiment of the feminine mystique of the ethereal lady.22 The second god developed a "You want restraint? I'll give you restraint!", the price of which filled her character with bitterness, irritability, and impatience. Her restraint is shown to be a response to corporeal inscription. The cloth is both stylus and text, the means and expression of her anger. Deleuze speaks of delirium — which is not all that different from hysteria — as going off the rails. It is related to the line of flight, creative leap that transgresses established codes and conventions and is a creative response to an impossible situation. Where gods stay on the rails (they have to do with rails, boundaries, and properties), going off the rails, as in delirium or hysteria, is demonic. This aspect of hysteria was not lost on Victorian doctors who branded its exponents as morally lax, but Deleuze is characteristically affirmative about abnormality. For Deleuze, the demonic jump across borders brings about change, while gods mark out the boundaries and maintain the status quo. One is revolutionary and the other conservative.23

Applied to the performance, the second god embodies restraint and repressed anger as the cost of staying on the rails. Deleuze's opposition between gods and demons, between reason and madness, conformity and rebellion, loyalty and betrayal, suggests the dual constitution of the god. Played as female, the second god carries the dual signification of the boundary marker and the delirious hysteric. The character is destabilized through the added signification of the female
body. The second god as female is energized by the struggle to keep control over her and others’ physical matter — the performer presents a body “whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, improvement.” Yet this conforming body has not completely suppressed the outburst. This is not to endorse representations of the female as hysterical, but to tap into the subversive possibilities of going off the rails. When her earthly experiences begin to take a toll on her nerves and she appears unbuttoned, unbraided, and corseted, her dress half torn off in her efforts to stay on the rails, she reveals not a demon or the hysterical but a body in transit, ranging across the space. The more she traverses the space over time, the further she departs from the normalized docile body. She is no longer a god marking out boundaries but a deterritorialized subject. The figuration of the feminine as a subjectivity in transit, looking for and finding points of exit from the phallogocentric text — whether Brechtian, Biblical, or Christian — is produced by the second god.

By way of contrast, the third god is covered by a large piece of calico drapery, so that she appears as a draped statue. She signifies the absence of a visible body. The space marked by the cloth is the space of her absence. As the body moves around the performance space, signs rearrange themselves on the body covered in calico. The body begins to appear as a location for signification. The calico, again, functions as a materialization of the body as a text, as a cultural surface across which signification moves. Each move creates a new image, with each one building on and enriching the other. When she stands with her back to the audience and spreads out her arms, she becomes a tent pitched on the desert-colored floor of the stage; as she squats on the floor, she becomes a surrealistic shape in a sparse landscape. As she peeks out at the world, she is a face in a cloth. The transformations on the body of the third god point to the interplay of presence and absence on the performer and work to de-essentialize the body as an anatomical construct. The performance presents the body as neither biological nor representational, but fluid. The third god conceals corporeality but retains a presence in the space and does not stand in for an absent subject. Rather, the body is a site for shifting images which are connected to the performer’s body (she moves and the cloth moves) and disconnected (she has no idea how she looks).

When the moment comes for her to discard the drapery, a body appears in the space of its absence and it is suddenly a female body already dressed in a long white skirt and white cotton blouse. The text has been written on with costume. She becomes the historical, white European woman, the nineteenth-century traveler in strange and exotic territories that mark the borders of the civilized world. Just like a god on earth, she is out of place and ill-dressed for the place.

The covering of the third god in the drapery created a sensual, voluminous stage figure. At the same time, the image refers to the way patriarchal culture hides the female body under purdah or requires it to wear long sleeves, cover hair, and abide by codes of modesty in dress and behavior. The body of the third god is initially hidden from view. Only after she has entered the space does she shed her cover. Then it reveals another layer of cover, the long skirt and sleeves of the nineteenth century.

In the final scene, Wang is the only one who knows that the three new judges are the gods in disguise. Her body stands taller as it savorsthe information. This knowledge, which in the Brechtian text is between gods and men, becomes women’s knowledge in our production. In this courtroom scene, concealment and disclosure are played out on the bodies of the gods masquerading as judges and Shen Te masquerading as Shui Ta. The female characters play with the borders of gender and identity. Disguise, concealment, and conspiracy are dispersed among the female characters as each tries to maneuver her way around the impossible situation set out for them by the play’s narrative. This is not to reinforce the stereotype of the female as deceptive and duplicitous, the unreliable signifier, nor of her body as the site of deception. Rather, Wang, the gods, and Shen Te/Shui Ta appropriate the play of signification in the performance and embody a critique of the fixed identity. From such a position, their texts become transient, provisional, open, and subject to change.
This article has focused on the feminine body as a counter text to the Brechtian official or root-book. The bodies presented by the performers told a fragmented and transliterational narrative of the construction of the female body. It is variously inscribed by medical discourse, constituted by weighty and symbolic visual images, and textualized as a medium of culture. However, it is also apparent that the notion of the body as a site for the interplay of cultural discourse takes on additional meaning in performance when the agency of the performer is considered. The performer’s energy, artistry, and mobilization of theatrical convention means that the interplay of cultural discourse does not occur on the passive body. The second god shows the struggle to achieve the docile body, practiced and habituated to the rules of cultural life. The interplay between a repressive cultural inscription and a more enabling emancipatory text is played out on her body. The body is not only marked by the movement of these texts across its surface, but it produces points of resistance and incorporation. The actor winds the cloth around her body and then unwinds it. She inscribes and erases. The interplay of textual material at the site of the body is also shown to relate to a changing feminine subjectivity, from an ordered and passive inscriptive surface to one that has gone off the rails, her future unwritten.

Reading the performance through the bodies of the performers and through theories of the body connects Brecht’s plays to more contemporary concerns with corporeality and subjectivity. Rejecting the political and social text and sidestepping the question of Verfremdungseffekt and Gestus allow for a re-invigoration of the performance through the politics and discourse of gender. This reading of the performance (while not entirely outside the frame of Brechtian theatre and to which the frequent references to the body in Brecht’s writing bear witness) connects Brecht to discourses that are strange and foreign to his work. It positions Brecht within a more rhizomatic network of discourses, where no one discourse is placed at the top of the hierarchy. Focus on the body displaces the social construction of dramatic character and foregrounds the actor in the present as a producer of signification that is historically removed from Brecht and his times. It also displaces the centrality of the Brechtian fable, sending out lateral lines of signification that do not return to the root-book by the end of the performance but continue through subsequent analysis and debate.

Endnotes


5. Grosz, VII.

6. Grosz, 141.


15. Four years after this production a photograph depicting Wang and Shen Te in the Prologue hung on the wall outside the drama studio. Present day students have spent considerable time speculating on the gender of the actor who played Wang. There are equally strong opinions for both genders. Some point to the cheekbones as evidence of femininity and others counter that the arm is masculine. Gender attribution is indeed a fluid and context dependent business.

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VICTORIA THEATRE GUILD'S  
MOTHER COURAGE
April 20—May 6, 2000
Langham Court Theatre
Victoria, Canada
Director: Lina de Guevera

CUNY PRODUCTION OF  
THREEPENNY OPERA
March 8-12, 2000
Loving Theatre
City University of New York
Director: B.D. Bills
Information: 718 / 960-8134

HAPPY END IN LOS ANGELES
February 23-27 and March 1-5, 2000
The Museum of Contemporary Art and the Geffen Contemporary
152 N. Central Ave.
Los Angeles, California
Information: 213 / 621-1752

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN
AT SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA
May 25, 26, 28, 29, 31
June 1, 2, 3, 4, 10, 11
Dock Street Theatre
Charleston, South Carolina
Director: Nancy Meckler
Http://www.spoletousa.org/Theater.html

THE GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN IN AUSTIN
February 23—27, March 1-5, 2000
St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas
Information: 512 / 448-8484

THE GOOD PERSON OF SETZUAN IN MADISON, WISCONSIN
May 5—27, 2000
Esquire Theater
Director: Mulcahy
Set Designer: Richard Hoover (Tony Award)
Information: 608 / 294-0740

BAAL IN KANSAS CITY  
April 12-29, 2000
Alanz Theatre, 612 E. 63rd Street
Kansas City, Missouri
A Gorilla Theatre production
directed by Jason Vivone
Information: Vivone01@aol.com
Author/s: VARNEY, DENISE

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