Performing Sexual Difference: a Feminist Appropriation of Brecht

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Contemporary theory has a tendency to needle away at performance and the critical relation between theory and practice is never more troubled than in Brechtian theatre. Brecht’s play texts are inscribed with both theory and practice but they also tell of bygone times, of a belief in an intact Marxism and social progress. What are the possibilities for a Brechtian theatre to speak to current obsessions with sex and gender, postmodern pluralism and the apparent collapse of the fable as a form that speaks its times.

This article examines a Melbourne University production of Brecht’s Santa Monica version of Der Gute Mensch von Szechwan, translated by Michael Hofmann. Given the new title, The Good Person of Sichuan, the translation was commissioned and staged by Deborah Warner and the National Theatre, London, in 1989. The Santa Monica version, written for the American stage during Brecht’s exile, features a pared-down narrative and reduced list of characters, a feature that persuaded Warner and Hoffmann that it was better suited to a contemporary audience than the longer original. While long plays are no longer fashionable, the National Theatre decision also attests to a further waning of interest in the full working-out of the original texts.

The Melbourne University performance was similarly drawn to the shorter version, but it intended to use the savings in time to investigate a set of questions concerning Brecht and feminism. The piece was presented as a full-scale student production in the University’s theatre, The Open Stage (there had been an earlier performance of The Good Person of Szechwan in The Open Stage in 1980, directed by Sue Neville). In the combined role of director and researcher, I was concerned with the way in which feminist theory has needled away at Brecht and how this might be played out in performance. The tension between past practice and present concerns is best understood within the broader context of the historicization, to heed Herbert Blau, of the Brechtian project for the contemporary period. One of the driving forces of the performance was the interrogation of recent feminist writings on Brecht with a view towards the revisioning of Brecht for feminism, a move I acknowledge as an appropriation, for better or worse, in the title of this essay.

New Essays on Brecht / Neue Versuche über Brecht
Maarten van Dijk et al., eds., The Brecht Yearbook / Das Brecht-Jahrbuch
Volume 26 (Toronto, Canada: The International Brecht Society, 2001)
The production concentrated its revisioning of Brecht for feminism on the creation of *mise en scène*. This was because any revision of the play text (even if rewriting were allowed by copyright law) runs into the problem of the tightly woven and theoretically inscribed composition that resists change. Brecht's dramaturgy continues to weigh heavily on the creative development of the plays in performance. Notwithstanding these constraints, my production was interested in how far we could stray from and derail the original text, to reposition the play within a contemporary context.

But before moving on to analyze the production, I want to take some time to set out the main lines of feminist critiques of Brecht and of the *The Good Person of Szechwan* specifically. My survey is highly selective and limited to English language essays and books. The production of *The Good Person of Sichuan* will then be positioned as a response to these critiques.

**SHEN TE/SHUI TA: SEXUAL STEREOTYPING AND GENDER FLUIDITY**

Brecht fell from grace in feminist circles during the 1980s when he was associated with a form of misogynist sexual stereotyping that, it was said, absented real historical women, including his male collaborators, from the master fables of history and class consciousness (Lennox 1978, Herrmann 1990, Wright 1994, 121). A consensus of sorts was reached that Brecht exhibited a typical “Marxian blind spot” towards the role of sex and gender in the social constitution of the female subject. Anne Herrmann criticized the construction of Shen Te, the prostitute with the heart of gold and soon-to-be new mother, as an instance of the persistence of the “eternal feminine” in writing that on other counts represented a new way of thinking about representation in performance. While there is no doubt about the historical facticity of a “Marxian blind spot” towards gender, this is not to say that the plays remain bound to the period and its thinking.

Following a more productive critical line, Alisa Solomon looked beyond stereotypical images of women to consider the possibilities of the Shen Te/Shui Ta figure as a critique rather than a reinforcement of conventional gendered subject-positions (1994). Solomon was not the first feminist critic to argue that the lack of critical attention on the formal elements of the plays had contributed to a misreading. I have long thought that within these kinds of critiques, there was a feminist blind spot to the productive possibilities of *Verfremdungseffekt* and *Gestus*. Solomon rightly pointed to the use of the male/female character as a representation of social contradiction as a very useful way to estrange the contradictions of the male/female binary. The critical possibilities of staging sexual difference as a representation of the wider problem of the binary opposition of male and female, man and woman, masculine
and feminine challenge feminists to find the openings in the plays to stage the problematics of sexual difference. Exposing the “structurality of the structure” of these binaries, to apply Derrida’s phrase, is quite different from the consideration of the male and female types represented within that frame (Derrida 1981, 278). When Herrmann wrote that Shen Te is “conceivable only in relation to the masculine,” she was closer to the issue of sexual difference than she owned. (Herrmann 1990, 302). As Elin Diamond has explained,

When the performer “plunges into visibility” (in Peggy Phelan’s fine phrase), s/he enters a space that, since the 1970s, feminist theory has described as socially, culturally, and psychically predicated on sexual difference. (Diamond 1997, 151)

As the masculine is constructed on the feminine character, the possibility exists for a feminist performance to critique conventional representations of sexual difference through the demonstration of gender as a fluid and strategic theatrical performance. Rather than performing the plays as misogynist constructions, it is now possible to stage the Shen Te/Shui Ta figure as a progressive and malleable figure and to play with the theatrical possibilities this suggests. Despite the political and historical formation of the plays, the example of The Good Person of Sichuan will demonstrate that the plays are open to a range of feminist possibilities.

**THE GOOD PERSON OF SICHUAN AND THE ESTRANGEMENT OF GENDER**

One of the possibilities involved historicizing Brecht, turning his own techniques of estrangement and distantiating against the assumptions that underpinned the original theory and practice.

To this end, we claimed “the good woman” as a feminist subject and turned much of the *mise en scène* into a feminine space. Appropriating masculine dialogue for the feminine subject, female actors played the three gods and Wang the Waterseller as well as other minor characters. Our fictional Sichuan was a postmodern space that was severed from its orientalist past and released from the onus of representing Brecht’s critique of 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. Neon signs and moody dark lighting attempted to re-inscribe the text with the techniques of postmodern theatre and mark the distance between tradition and the contemporary.

In terms of the unspoken dialogue, that which Patrice Pavis refers to as the “discourse of the *mise en scène*” (Pavis 1992, 34), the re-inscription of the play text began by revising the situation of enunciation for the verbal text. Whereas in the text Shen Te makes her first
appearance halfway through the Prologue, in my production her first appearance is brought forward to the opening moments of the play.

DESCRIPTION OF THE OPENING MOMENTS OF THE PERFORMANCE

As Wang begins to speak, a female performer enters wearing a pair of black loose cotton trousers and a loose-fitting red satin blouse. The performer’s long hair is tied back in a ponytail and make-up is minimal. She is barefoot and carries a pair of grubby white high-heeled shoes. A plastic feminine facemask hangs around her neck. The performer stops slightly upstage of Wang and places the shoes at her feet. She then puts on the mask and becomes the dramatic character Shen Te. Once she puts on the mask, she makes her presence known to Wang whose recognition of her as Shen Te assists in the establishment of the character’s identity. As if to confirm the moment, Wang offers Shen Te some water from a cup. Shen Te accepts the cup but rather than drinking from it, tips the water over her dirty feet and washes them with her hands. Wang tells her about the gods and how they are expected any minute. Her feet clean after a fashion, Shen Te puts on her high-heeled shoes. The putting on of the shoes, and a gestic change in demeanor, marks the beginning of another character layer — the performer plays Shen Te who now plays the part of the prostitute. As other characters such as the Carpenter and the Gentleman enter, Shen Te, not wanting to be seen out on the street, slips away. She conceals herself from view with her hand as she crosses and exits behind the plastic that lines the stage left and right performance space walls.

When a female actor plays a female character, the estrangement of gender (here femininity) is problematic given the iconicity between actor and character. Whereas in the text, the difference or distance between the performer’s female body and the male character she plays is clear, the text does not imagine the showing of the distance. Instead, the Brechtian text turns a blind eye to the iconicity between the performer’s body and the female character, with the effect that embedded in a work of epic theatre is the kind of mimetic representation more often found in the dramatic theatre that Brecht criticized. If this is followed, as in conventional performances of the play, the feminine remains an unexamined body.

In my production, the female performer is distanced from the character through a number of devices. First, there is the much-quoted Brechtian estrangement device of the half-face mask. But here the mask draws attention to the performance of the feminine rather than, as in the more traditional performances, the estrangement between actor and character. Furthermore, traditional performances of The Good Person of Szechwan use the mask to show the masculine character. In this production, the distancing effect of the mask is aimed at the iconicity between the female performer and the female character she plays. In addi-
Figure 1. Shen Te with Wang the Waterseller. Open Stage, Melbourne, 1993.
tion to interrupting the seamless continuity between performer and character, the mask represents a heightened femininity, a deliberate adoption of the role. The high cheek-bones, the high-arched and fine eyebrows, the smooth plastic surface, neat nose and red lips of the mask parody and enlarge idealized femininity, the femininity most often associated with masculine desire (fig. 1).

The mask is a concretization of the Irigarayan notion of playing the feminine as a “playful repetition” (Irigaray 1985, 76). Making the signs of femininity visible is another aspect of Verfremdung in so far as the latter foregrounds aspects of language, gesture and tone which normally blend into the background. Shen Te’s mask makes the signs of femininity visible. It shows femininity as a plastic “man-made” surface to be put on and taken off by the performer. The performer plays with the mask, touches it, adjusts it and wears it for the spectator. Her playfulness gives her control of the image, taking away her historical subordination as female dramatic character. The mask also shows femininity as a surface without a correlating interior. It draws attention to the signs of gender inscribed on its surface and to the distance between it and the body that manipulates it.

The performer demonstrates self-inscription — she stands, as a subject herself, in the space marked by performance and demonstrates the putting on of the mask of gender, the adoption of a sexual identity. She writes her own body into the performance and erases it under the mask. The representational system at work in the performance space absents natural subjects and replaces them with theatricalized signs.

The distancing of the performer from her own gender employs the mask in a way that was not originally intended by Brecht, but neither is it precluded by the dramatic theory or the play texts. The more traditional Brechtian performances use mask to mark the distance or difference between the performer’s and the character’s social attitudes. My production argues that if Shui Ta is an impersonation, a male character placed on a female body, then so is Shen Te an impersonation, a female character placed on a female actor. This was not to suggest that underneath the mask is Judith Butler’s shibboleth, the pregendered “person,” but to show that gender, like class, is not outside “the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler 1990, 3).

In the text, the female body is represented as unruly and unreliable. Shen Te throws herself into Yang Sun’s arms in a storm of emotion, gets pregnant, feels dizzy and cries out in despair. Shen Te’s female body gets wet in the park and succumbs to her biological destiny. From the dramatic text it is possible that in the case of Shen Te:

Female sexuality and women’s powers of reproduction are the defining (cultural) characteristics of women, and, at the same time, these very functions render women vulnerable, in need of protection or special treatment,
Yet it is at the moment of Shen Te’s self-definition through the discovery of her powers of reproduction, that the female character subverts the cultural inscriptions of frailty. The female actor’s body, meanwhile, does not get wet in the park and does not get pregnant, feel dizzy or grow fat. The consciously-controlled female body of the actor shows that unruliness and frailty is not the defining characteristic of female-ness. Rather, it is a casting decision as to how frail or robust the Shen Te character will appear on stage.

PERFORMING SEXUAL DIFFERENCE: SHEN TE/SHUI TA

The second change to the dramatic text involved the Shen Te/Shui Ta transition. In the text, Shen Te exits at the end of Scene 1 and returns after an Interlude to begin Scene 2 dressed as Shui Ta, who is described in the text as a young gentleman dressed in a mask and suit. It is not necessarily apparent to the audience that Shui Ta is Shen Te; this is not revealed until The Song of the Defenselessness of the Gods and the Good. By Scene 7, the prosperous Shui Ta is expensively dressed and fat/pregnant (fig. 2).

In a move against the tradition of a complete costume change for Shui Ta, the suit was discarded in favor of an overcoat. The coat was made visible in the space from the beginning of the performance hanging on a coat-hanger in the downstage left area of the space. A pair of men’s shoes was placed on the floor underneath an old man’s herringbone coat that had seen better days on a much larger man and that hung loosely around the female performer’s body. Hanging on the suspended coat-hanger, and visible to the spectators from the moment they entered the space, the coat carried a load of signification that was less easily definable than a businessman’s suit, the sign par excellence of the modern masculine subject. The overcoat belongs to the streets, it conceals what is underneath; the suit belongs to bourgeois social and economic spaces and is associated with respectability, power and authority. In opting for the more ambiguous signifier of the overcoat, the performance emphasized male power as something that moves in public space but remains concealed (fig. 3). At the same time, however, placed on the double sign, the only partially concealed body of the female performer and the character of Shen Te, the masculine is defamiliarized and disempowered. On her body, male power is a surface, the performance of an attitude backed by hastily adopted representational systems, which give it credibility.

The pockets of the coat held a mask and a microphone (fig. 4). The mask was not the conventional theatrical half-face with moustache, but a surgical pressure-mask worn by burn patients (fig. 5). The pressure-mask bore no immediate relation to the coat, with the effect that the
Figure 2: Conventional figuration of Shui Ta. Open Stage, Melbourne. 1980.

Figure 3: Shui Ta and overcoat. 1993.
Shui Ta figure was a montage of unrelated signs whose only unity was their placement on the one body. The performer's body visually linked unrelated objects, disturbing the expectation that dramatic costume is a coherent signifier of socially stable dramatic character. The pressure-mask evoked the burnt body: the body whose surface is made up of grafts, a surface made of fragments and held on by a tight material-surface. The effect also suggested the balaclava of the terrorist or criminal, the comically "terrifying" mask of the wrestler, the executioner's hood and the head of the cyber body. It had a criminal, comic, sinister and monstrous look. In performance, the mask exceeded these connotations and initiated its own dramatic trajectory. As a sign it was characterized by its lack of closure.

At the end of Scene 1, during the Interlude and in preparation for the entry of Shui Ta in Scene 2, the performer puts on the coat, the shoes, the mask and the microphone in full view of the spectator. The cross-dressed figure of Shen Te/Shui Ta is an incomplete transition. It is a shabby and decrepit version of Shui Ta. There is no transformation of one character into another, only imperfect and shabby theatricality. Diamond suggests that the cross-dressed figure that is "not quite perfect" heightens the critique of gender norms (Diamond 1997, 46).

The incomplete cross-dressing of Shui Ta foregrounds gender, shifts the focus away from the drama of the class-struggle. It continues through to the representation of a number of characters. The bourgeois Man and Woman, who cross the stage in the Prelude, blur the boundaries of the masculine and feminine through their costumes and accessories. The man wears a pin-stripe suit, but neither a shirt nor a tie. Instead, he wears a woman's pearl necklace. The Woman wears a man's dark suit and a pink woman's hat. The incomplete cross-dressing plays with gender codes drawing attention away from the representation of social types based on class (fig. 6). The effect is to show that masculine and feminine identities are alterable, and not fastened onto a sexed body. Elin Diamond theorizes that the estrangement of sex and gender in cross-dressing theatricalizes gender. Demonstrating gender through a citation of stylized acts, cross-dressing critiques the way in which the "dominant culture understands [gestures, appearances etc.] as indices of feminine and masculine identity" (Diamond 1997, 46). Within The Good Person of Sichuan, the other characters perform a "mode of belief" (Butler 1990, 271) in the incomplete cross-dressing, and the spectator views that belief for what it is — a performance, an agreement and a kind of contract between stage and auditorium.

The performance of gender is foregrounded with astonishing clarity in the "Song of the Defenselessness of the Gods and the Good." Solomon argues that the song is the "theatrical crux" of the play in which the dialectic of "things as they are and, at the same time, as other than they are" is most forcefully presented. She asks:
Figure 4: Shui Ta with mask and microphone with Yang Sun. 1993.

Figure 5: Shui Ta. 1993
Who sings this song? That is, what stage persona commits the action of — in Brecht's words — zeigen gestus ("handing over") "The Song of Defenselessness"? (Solomon 1994, 44)

Solomon's answer draws attention to the actor's demonstration of how she performs both Shui Ta and Shen Te in the performance. The song calls for the actor to show "Shen Te playing Shui Ta," invoking the "Not-But" element of the Verfremdungseffekt, as the performer not only plays Shen Te, but also Shui Ta. In this sense, the Verfremdungseffekt is inscribed in the play, as a product of the writing process, an inescapable element of performing the part.

In the performance, Shen Te begins the song in her own voice and, as she sings, puts on Shui Ta's coat and the shoes. She takes a few steps, puts on his mask and the microphone and carries on singing in a voice that is marked as "his" by the amplification. The spectator sees the cross-dressing take place and is simultaneously made aware of its social context. Crucial to the demonstration is that it is not accompanied by a change in subjectivity. The words of the song betray no shift from a female to a male perspective. Nor does the music alter its rhythm or tempo to mark the transition from female to male. It is only in the following scene in the Tobacco Shop that Shui Ta's language and point of view differ from Shen Te's.

Solomon had shifted the focus of feminist debates about the play from the dramatic text, on which much early criticism is based, onto the performance. The metatheatrical element in the Song is crucial to the creation of Verfremdungseffekt through the Gestus of showing. And it is through this showing, as Solomon points out, that we see Shui Ta as an invention or "impersonation" performed by Shen Te, and Shen Te, in turn, as an impersonation performed by the actor. Through this tripartite model, neither Shen Te nor Shui Ta has a relation to the real.

This reveals, ironically, that Brecht (himself/themselves) had already set up the possibility for the estrangement of gender. The text provides the impossible situation that induces Shen Te to take a desperate measure. The solution is gestic: Shen Te disguises herself as her male cousin Shui Ta and disappears. As the fable unfolds, invisibility protects Shen Te and improves her prospects, but it also complicates matters, particularly as the male body begins to display ambiguous markings — is it fat or pregnant? In addition, the invisible subject is always in danger of being heard and audible female sobs finally point to her concealed presence. Shen Te is a female character who attempts to "unmark" herself as feminine in order to improve her prospects in the world. Her performance as feminine is marked with goodness and kindness, that are exposed as "sucker values" within the inverted moral climate of Brecht's capitalist society. These are the imperatives from which she seeks escape. Peggy Phelan has written of the relative value of bodies marked as feminine and masculine:
The male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning...He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks. (Phelan 1993, 5)

Phelan goes on to argue that there is, nevertheless, power in being unmarked, that visibility can be a trap. Shen Te learnt this lesson well. Phelan cautions against the assumption that visibility is the starting-point for political action. There are times, she says, when it is better for the disenfranchised to remain invisible, although this should not be a long-term strategy. Visibility attracts unwanted attention: “it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonial/imperial appetite for possession” (1993, 6). As a prostitute, Shen Te’s visibility invoked all these incursions. In the performance, as soon as the citizens of Sichuan enter, Shen Te averts her gaze, covers her face and goes indoors because her visibility is not free but for sale. Invisibility becomes, for her, a form of resistance. The binary of “the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility” is shown to be false because it rests on the assumption that visual representation has truth value. The Good Person of Sichuan allows, through the contradictory operations of the Shen Te/Shui Ta double, for a disturbance of the notion that visual representation has truth-value.

These examples point to the way the Shen Te/Shui Ta character offers multiple reading possibilities. One of these is that as a female playing a male, gender is shown to be a social and cultural inscription. Using gender as the position from which the performer distances herself from the dramatic character subverts the Brechtian imperative that the class war provides the grounds for distanciation. But no sooner has this subversion been affected, than the ground shifts again. Shen Te/Shui Ta’s gender, like gender itself, is a far less stable point than the old class-based binary of ruler and ruled. The Shen Te/Shui Ta character is gendered as a binary, but she is also differentiated within, producing, in the process, another reading of sexual difference. Theoretically, Shui Ta is the concretization of the view that gender is a cultural and social construction grafted onto the body, and on that view a Gestus revealing the social formation of gender. It is also a concretization of sexual difference within the subject itself, an actualization as Diamond argues, of the “Not-But” aspect of Verfremdungseffekt applied to sexual difference. Shen Te/Shui Ta embodies sexual difference, not as the difference between the two characters, but as sexual difference within the one performing body. In performance, the body of the performer — its sexual identity, its gender, its subject position — shifts before the spectator’s eyes, suggesting a fluidity within the sexual identity of the subject itself.

This is what makes the Shen Te/Shui Ta character suitable for feminist performance. On this analysis, it is of no consequence whether, as separate characters, Shen Te and Shui Ta represent sexual stereotypes.
The fascination is with the way in which the character in performance can be seen to embody, so ambiguously and fluidly, the questions of sex, gender and sexual difference that energize feminist theory. For the feminist spectator, the Shen Te/Shui Ta figure suggests the multiple rather than the fixed subject-position.

Elin Diamond writes of the political potential of theories of difference and recuperates Brecht, through the “Not-But,” for a politics of sexual difference:

Keeping differences in view instead of conforming to stable representations of identity, and linking those differences to a possible politics are key to Brecht's theory of the “not...but,” a feature of alienated acting that I read intertextually with the heterotopia of difference. (Diamond 1997, 48)

The notion of the “Not-But” ensures that the meaning of each action contains difference that always undermines the authority of the visible or present on stage. Shen Te as Shui Ta points to and conceals the feminine as a site of difference from the masculine, but also shows the shifting point between visibility and invisibility of the feminine and the masculine and the spaces between those two poles. It is a shifting point within Brecht’s theory that has the potential to deconstruct its phallogocentric basis from within and open it up to a more fluid politics.

My production was enlivened by the fact that performance is always in a position to mark the historical distance between the time of its writing and its staging. Brecht was historically positioned in a masculine world, but he was also positioned in a world that was different on a number of political, aesthetic and theoretical fronts. Brecht himself expected dramaturgy to change with history so that critique could keep up with changing circumstances:

The epic theatre is chiefly interested in the attitudes which people adopt towards one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant (typical). (Brecht 1984, 86)

The attitude that Brecht as a social subject adopted to other subjects (women) becomes eminently suitable material for epic theatre today. Brecht's notion of “the historicizing theatre” allows for the interrogation of every piece of action, including his own, for its historical significance. The discursive and material construction of the categories of sex and gender was not made visible in his play texts. These categories were not, in Brecht’s time, widely understood as discursive systems with a different history and set of practices from the class war. Despite that, the treatment and use of sexual difference in the play is ambiguous, open and both within and outside the economic frame. The Good Person of Sichuan is significant today because it represents capitalism’s contradictions in terms of sexual difference.
Figure 6: The Gentleman and Woman. Prologue. 1993.

Play Texts

Articles and Books


Performances cited


