



Gene A. Plunka. *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010, c2009. vi + 447 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-49425-0; \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-18242-3.

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Theater and Holocaust

In this illuminating study, Gene Plunka traces, discusses, and evaluates the theater of the Holocaust; i.e., plays which “pay homage to the victims, educate audiences, induce an empathetic response from the audience, raise moral and ethical questions for discussion/debate, and draw lessons from history” (p. i). Under thirteen different thematic headings, Plunka discusses approximately thirty “seminal” plays. He provides biographical information about the playwrights, production histories of the plays, as well as information about their sociopolitical contexts. Plunka approaches Holocaust plays from two angles. First, he intends to discuss their faithfulness to the *Shoah*, and second he wants to find out whether they work effectively as pieces of theater.

In his introduction, Plunka convincingly sets the scene by usefully discussing, among other writers, Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno, particularly concerning the question as to whether art can ever deal with the Shoah. He makes it clear that writers and dramatists have not complied with demands put forward by Adorno and Elie Wiesel for a “literature of silence,” and have instead “insisted that the most significant way to pay homage to the dead is through an obligation to bear witness” (pp. 14-15). Plunka clearly advocates dealing with the Holocaust in works of art, and “drama seems to be an ideal medium to represent these eternal conflicts and dilemmas” (p. 16). However, his claim that “despite the objections from Wiesel and Adorno, drama has proven to be an effective medium for representing the Holocaust” (p. 16) seems a bit simplistic. Relating to his own selection of plays in this volume, it is highly questionable if any of these succeed in “representing” the Holocaust and whether this is actually possible—or indeed intended by the respective playwrights. Overall, however, Plunka largely achieves the goals laid out in his introduction in order to provide the necessary context for his investigation. For example, he stresses the importance of the Adolf

Eichmann trial of 1961 in Israel, or the 1963-65 Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, which gave rise to a new dramatic genre, Documentary Theater.

In the second chapter, entitled “Staging the Banality of Evil,” Plunka discusses four plays which follow Arendt’s treatise on the Eichmann trial and the man himself, and in particular relate to her dictum of the banality of evil. Plunka looks at a diverse and exciting range of plays and discusses Donald Freed’s *Secret Honor*, *The White Crow: Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1989), Cecil Philip Taylor’s *Good* (1981), Peter Barnes’s *Laughter* (1978) (consisting of the two one-act plays *Tsar* and *Auschwitz*), and Thomas Bernhard’s *Vor dem Ruhestand* (1979). The next chapter, “Culture and the Holocaust,” focuses on a very different aspect (and the relation to the former is not quite clear). Plunka discusses three plays concerned with the role of culture in ghetto and concentration camp life with the danger of imminent death constantly hanging over the interned Joshua Sobol’s *Ghetto* (1984), Fania Fenelon’s 1980 television film *Playing for Time* and Liliane Atlan’s *Mister Fugue or Earth Sick* (1967) all deal in one way or another with culture as a way of mental and physical survival.

In his fascinating fourth chapter, “The Holocaust as Literature of the Body,” Plunka discusses the human body and its importance in survival during the Holocaust as people lost their individuality, and were reduced to their mere physicality. Culture and intellect were all but useless in the camp environment, where the only remaining dignity was linked to an intact/functioning body. At the same time, however, the jobs that these bodies carried out were often “menial tasks of no significance, such as moving a pile of rocks from one location to another and then back again” (p. 73). Although Plunka is certainly right here this point seems to overlook the forced labor aspect, for example in relation to the huge factories erected close to Auschwitz- Birkenau, in which thousands of prisoners

were exploited for Germany's war effort. In this chapter Plunka looks at Charlotte Delbo's *Who Will Carry the Word?* (1966) and Michel Vinaver's *Overboard* (1969).

In chapter 5, "Transcending the Holocaust," Plunka discusses plays which leave the particular conditions of 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s Germany behind "by universalizing the experience" (p. 94), and he looks at Nelly Sachs's *Eli: A Mystery Play of the Sufferings of Israel* (1951) and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955) in a dramatic version by Lilian Hellman, Frances Goodrich, and Albert Hackett. The choice of these two very different plays, however, is not entirely clear, although Plunka tries to make some connections in this regard.

Plunka then proceeds to discuss in chapter 6, under the title "Marxism and the Holocaust," plays whose Marxist message is of primary importance. Under this heading he turns to Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985) and Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* (1965). This rather narrow interpretation of Weiss's seminal play and its labeling as a "propagandist play" (p. 130) is unfortunate and does not really do it justice. It might have been more rewarding to group together a few plays under the heading of Documentary Theater, a movement that has its roots in the 1960s atmosphere of "coming to terms with the past." Such a chapter would also have linked back to the discussion in the introduction of Adorno, Arendt, and Wiesel—an opportunity missed.

Chapters 7 and 8 are—rather unfortunately—entitled "Aryan Responsibility During the Holocaust" 1 and 2. It is not clear why Plunka uses this term from Nazi ideology instead of "German" or "Nazi." Plunka rightly asserts though that while the Nazi perpetrators often denied that there was any "individual responsibility" (p. 143) as they were only obeying orders, research has shown that this claim can hardly be sustained. Relating to this, Plunka discusses Richard Norton-Taylor's *Nuremberg* (1996), Gilles Segal's *All the Tricks but One* (1993), and Arthur Miller's *Incident at Vichy* (1964). Chapter 8 is entirely devoted to Rolf Hochhuth's *The Representative* (1963), "the most controversial and the most cited twentieth-century Holocaust drama" (p. 170).

In his challenging ninth chapter, "Heroism and Moral Responsibility in the Ghettos," Plunka looks at plays relating to four major ghettos in Budapest, Vilna, Lodz, and Warsaw—such as Motti Lerner's *Kastner* (1985), which dramatizes the difficult decisions taken by Zionist Rudolf Kastner, who negotiated with the Nazis to save Hungarian Jews and was put on trial in Israel after the war. Other plays discussed in this chapter are Joshua Sobol's *Adam* (1989), set in Vilna, and Harold and Edith

Lieberman's *Throne of Straw* (1972), set in Lodz.

In his nuanced chapter 10, "Dignity in the Concentration Camps," Plunka turns his attention to plays "which explore the ethics of human behaviour in a unique environment where maintaining dignity surely meant death" (p. 251). He looks at two plays "that examine whether the preservation of dignity and morality in the concentration camps outweighed survival" (p. 236): Martin Sherman's *Bent* (1979) and George Tabori's *The Cannibals* (1968).

In the following three chapters Plunka turns his attention to post-1945 and the memories of Holocaust survivors. In "Holocaust Survivors in United States and Israel" Plunka discusses Barbara Lebow's *A Shayna Maidel* (1984), Leah Goldberg's *Lady of the Castle* (1974), and Ben-Zion Tomer's *Children of the Shadows* (1962)—plays "that probe the difficulties that survivors had in adjusting to their new lives" (p. 252) in the two countries that accepted the largest numbers of Jewish émigrés after the war. In the following fascinating chapter, Plunka looks at "The Survivor Syndrome and the Effects of the Holocaust on Survivor Families." He makes it clear that apart from a strong feeling of guilt many victims only managed to survive because they wanted to bear witness to the Holocaust after the war. His three well-chosen plays are Gilles Ségal's *The Puppetmaster of Lodz* (1984), Peter Flannery's *Singer* (1989), and Jean-Claude Grumberg's *The Workroom* (1981). Linking well to these plays is the following chapter on "Holocaust Survivor Memory," which focuses on the "fallibility of Holocaust memory" (p. 303). Plunka turns to Emily Mann's documentary drama *Annulla: An Autobiography* (1984) and Armand Gatti's *The Second Life of Tatenberg Camp* (1979). And finally, in "The Holocaust and Collective Memory," Plunka devotes a whole chapter to Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) as a play "which bears witness to the Holocaust and reminds us of our complicity in the world's suffering" (p. 326).

Unfortunately, there are one or two mistakes and oversights in Plunka's otherwise gripping account. For example, Plunka claims that "the extermination of Jews began in June 1941" when it might reasonably be argued that this had already started with the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and mobile killing squads that murdered tens of thousands of people behind the front lines (p. 1). Plunka meticulously lists the victims of Nazi oppression and quotes the established figures of eleven million victims overall, of which six million were Jewish. He continues to list exact figures for all the other victim groups but, surprisingly, fails to say anything about the millions of non-Jewish Polish and Soviet citizens and millions of Russian soldiers murdered by Nazi Germany.[1] Given

the fact that he appears so thorough until that point, the omission is surprising. Apart from this there are a few spelling mistakes when quoting from the original German. On page 9 he quotes the court case of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial as “Stafsache gegen Mulka und andere” when it should have been “Strafsache.” Plunka uses a capital “J” in “Judenrein,” when this should be “judenrein” (p. 20 and throughout). On page 104, the German city of Karlsruhe appears as “Karlstruhe.”

Apart from this, and more importantly, it is not quite clear which criteria Plunka uses in identifying his chosen plays. Plunka states that he examines the most “salient” plays (p. 18)—but by what standard? Critical or commercial success? Number of translations and productions? International reception? Length of run? Plunka adds that he does not want to discuss “minor dramas,” but again, we might ask what “minor” means in this context (p. 18). Plunka seems to be clearer about the plays he does *not* want to discuss, but this does not make his decisions about the ones that are in his study much clearer.

At the same time, Plunka needs to be congratulated for a passionate in-depth investigation which attempts to do the impossible. Although he fails to make his criteria for selection sufficiently clear, it appears that he has largely identified the most influential plays on the topic. The way he groups them under headings is equally convincing—although the chapter structure and the chapter titles are not always entirely convincing—and it makes it easy to navigate through his book. A final conclusion would have been a plus but, given the topic, maybe there could be none.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Ludolf Herbst, *Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933-1945* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 398; and Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theater and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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