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Axel Schalk and Christian E. Rochow, eds. *Splitter: Sondierungen zum Theater*. Literaturhistorische Untersuchungen. Volume 36. Ed. Theo Buck. Frankfurt: Lang, 2003. 229p.

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With this volume, *Splinters: Probing the World of Theater* (my translation), two literary critics present an unusually lively and topical volume in their fields of modern drama and stage production. The Berlin theater scene since 1990 is (re-)assembled in a provocative and extremely informed style by two experts whose keen minds are known among authors, publicists, and readership to be relentlessly critical. Their experiences of twenty years as theater critics come together here in their work on some twenty playwrights and more than a handful of stage directors, for a period of about a dozen years.

The title of the book does *not* indicate that fragments of texts are offered, but rather is meant to be heading texts out of a fragmented time, concerning contemporary theater and play production in today's technological and in many respects cynical age. Therefore, *Splinters* refers to pieces and soundings. Next to authors and their stage producers, the ideology of theater establishments is discussed in this book; e.g., the *Volksbühne* on Rosa Luxemburg Platz in former East Berlin—what functions do such houses have around and shortly after the German *Wende*? What playwrights are produced and what do these tell the audience? The peruser of this book will find much of the scene, the atmosphere, and the discourse of the time. For these critics are after political theater mainly and are out to discover whether the political theater they find is what it purports to be. The answer is that, in most cases, it isn't. "The post-theatrical age is being pushed aside by a flood of images; the embittered pleasure principle, the *Volksbühne*—images" (59; my translation). In both Schalk's and Rochow's contributions, there is much discussion of the notion of *Staatstheater*—do we need the "state theater" and, if it purports to exist, does it hold up to critical standards and does it fulfill the function it is supposed to fulfill? "A state needs its state theater. And the state theater needs its state—a questionable dialectic" (59; my translation). Thus Schalk's sarcastic comment. The state theater is an apparatus, and the battle between apparatus and art is real.

Axel Schalk, who supplies most of the contributions in this book, is a critic of powerful language; that in itself makes the volume worth reading, or keeping handy for reference, or to impart to students of drama courses some information about the reality of the theater world. Take, for example, Schalk's comments on a

new *Woyzeck* production at the *Volksbühne* (by Kriegenburg): “All fight against all, the world is a maelstrom of nothingness. And the long BDM-braid of Marie doubles as a whip. There are no messages, and the theater refuses to shine in the pale luster of art” (64; my translation).

Aside from the essays, reviews, and observations pertaining to modern and postmodern theater and dramaturgy in contemporary Berlin and elsewhere, the interviews with playwrights are highly valuable; e.g., a long conversation with Stefan Schütz, about his plays and his work progress. The Thirtieth Theater Festival of 1993 receives lengthy and often negative review, the “unidram” Festival of Potsdam mostly positive, and, of course, the numerous events during the year of Brecht’s one hundredth birthday get special, if mixed, treatment. After a long essay by Schalk, “The Virtual Chainsaw: Tracing Dramaturgy in the 1990s” (my trans.), more theater reviews under provocative titles follow, referring to plays and playhouses, again *Volksbühne*, *Schaubühne*, *Berlin Ensemble*, *Maxim Gorki Theater*, *Deutsches Theater*, *Kammerspiele*, etc. Conversations between Peter Zadek and Schalk, or Ercan and Schalk regarding Lothar Trolle, or Rochow and Schalk with Edward Bond, and also Schalk’s essay on Rainald Goetz—these are priceless contributions not to be found anywhere else with quite so much verve and daring enthusiasm.

Together, Schalk and Rochow offer a highly worthwhile volume in the field of theater and theater production. This volume comes out of a world extremely far away both in its packed information and its refreshingly aggressive critical approaches, argumentation, and results. The book should be used by the teacher in literary and cultural studies here and now; its style is a culture study in itself. It is a wake-up call spiced with wit, sarcasm, and irony. Christian Rochow, for example, finds the best re-invented theater not in German material but in a contemporary production of Farid Uddin Attar’s “The Language of Birds” from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Persia. “The crisis of the theater is simply not present here,” says Rochow of Andrea Breth’s work (84; my trans.). Berna Ercan, who also did an exemplary job of copyediting the volume, found plays of successful production to review; e.g., Sewan Latchinian’s Ionesco or Katharina Thalbach’s Shakespeare. Another contributor, Reiner Schweinfurth, waxes on his thesis that “the theater is more political than ever, is a matter of life and death, and not only in Germany” (98; my trans.), in a lengthy essay, somewhat in contrast to the overall philosophy of the collection.

The volume closes with one of Schalk’s excellent essays, “When Galileo Recanted—Bertolt Brecht and Heiner Müller and the Bomb” (216; my trans.). Schalk shines here especially, on account of his previous studies on literature and

the nuclear age, his broad knowledge that reaches beyond the German to international theater, and because of a critical standpoint vis-à-vis aesthetics that is infused with strong social and political concern. His powerful and provocative style makes him a pleasure to read. Decades ago, the profession started speaking of engaged literature; this volume is engaged criticism. ✱