

# **REVOLUTION, SATIRE AND STAGING DISSENSUS: ALICE BIRCH'S *REVOLT. SHE SAID. REVOLT AGAIN.* AND MARLENE STREERUWITZ'S *MAR-A-LAGO. ODER. NEUSCHWANSTEIN.***

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**Abstract:** Jacques Rancière has claimed that dissensus, the riving open of orders of sense and the sensory, is key to politics and political art. The “radical contingency” of dissensual art, however, suggests that performing dissensus whilst simultaneously taking a principled ethical or political stance – or even aiming for a revolution – might lead to a logical conundrum. This article discusses the potential of satirical irony as a means to overcome these difficulties. This is illustrated in the discussion of Alice Birch’s *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* and Marlene Streeruwitz’s *Mar-a-Lago. oder. Neuschwanstein.* and of the Berliner Ensemble production directed by Christina Tscharyiski, which brought these two plays together in the 2018/19 theatre season. Both plays make ample use of satirical irony and hyperbole. The target of the satire is not only patriarchy, but also, in a self-reflexive turn, the plays’ own mode of critique. In this fashion both plays come to perform Rancièrian dissensus and so become sites of theatrical and political dialogue.

**Keywords:** Alice Birch, Marlene Streeruwitz, Jacques Rancière, dissensus, satire.

One of the main questions political theatre has to confront today is how to engage with an increasingly polarised political landscape. If polarisation can be seen as an inherently problematic phenomenon that hinders socio-political progress, then theatre ought to avoid becoming just another political echo chamber in which audiences are served the opinions they want to hear. Yet it is not immediately clear how a play might take up a principled political stance – as continues to be necessary, in spite of polarisation – while at the same time seeking a form of dialogue. How can theatre engage with spectators across the political spectrum and avoid becoming itself too ideological in view of increasing social and political

polarisation? I want to address these questions by looking at two plays, Alice Birch's *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* and Marlene Streeruwitz's *Mar-a-Lago. oder. Neuschwanstein.* Both plays were brought together and performed as a double bill by Berliner Ensemble, directed by Christina Tscharyiski, in the 2018/19 theatre season. Both occupy strongly feminist political positions – a political arena where polarisation has been around longer and has perhaps been more strongly felt than in most – and both approach their topics employing hyperbole and satire. I would like to suggest that it is through this satirical approach, in particular through taking up a self-reflexive, and, importantly, at times self-ironical stance, that the plays question some of their own radical assertions, introduce a genuine form of what Rancière has termed “dissensus” into their theatrical fabric and open up to become sites of dialogue.

In her recent study of *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship*, Liz Tomlin identifies “the degree to which the dramaturgy aims to elicit political responses from the spectator or prioritizes the spectator’s autonomy to produce their own interpretation” as the key question for conceptions of political theatre.<sup>1</sup> Tomlin identifies the former approach with a Marxist dialectical theatre in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht and others and the latter with poststructuralism, and more recently with theorists such as Hans-Thies Lehmann and Jacques Rancière. Where Tomlin’s study seeks not only to investigate but to actively challenge in particular the latter type of theatrical tradition that she associates with the “autonomous spectator,”<sup>2</sup> in this article I want to follow Rancière’s approach, not without taking into account critical voices like Tomlin’s. Rancière has for some time been one of the most influential voices in political theory and theatre philosophy and his notions of politics and aesthetics allow for a way to understand the political potential of theatre. Politics, as Rancière explains, is the breaking up of the existing normative order – the “order of the police” – through the invention of new subjects:<sup>3</sup>

[P]olitics begins when those who were destined to remain in the domestic and invisible territory of work and reproduction, and prevented from doing ‘anything else’, take the time that they ‘have not’ in order to affirm that they belong to a common world. It begins when they make the invisible

<sup>1</sup> Liz Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship: Provocations for Change* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* 36-51.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010) 139.

visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the 'common' of the community. Politics creates a new form, as it were, of dissensual 'commonsense.'<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, this makes clear that feminist concerns, which are at the heart of both Birch's and Streeruwitz's plays, are intensely political in Rancière's sense, as they indeed "make the invisible visible" and voice the plight of women in social settings that are still very much male-dominated. There seems to be little doubt that much of contemporary theatre accommodates the political whenever it becomes a site for the expression of what has been made invisible by what Rancière calls the consensus, by the prevailing social order whose premises are taken for granted.

Besides this thematic parallel which confirms, not exactly surprisingly, that politics play a role in feminism and hence in feminist theatre, it is the notion of a "dissensual 'commonsense'" instigated by politics that proves particularly fruitful for the discussion of the aesthetics and practices of the political in contemporary drama. 'Dissensual commonsense' appears to be an oxymoron, a form of agreement in disagreement: while a form of agreement or commonality among the marginalised is necessary for politics, whose aesthetics are primarily concerned with "the framing of a *we*, a subject, a collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts,"<sup>5</sup> this sense of togetherness precisely springs from the need to disagree, or rather to produce a specific form of commonsense that rejects the consensus of the status quo, namely to produce dissensus. Dissensus, as understood by Rancière, is not "conflict as such, but is a specific type thereof, a conflict between *sense* and *sense*. Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies.'" (139) Dissensus thus means the dislodging of interpretation from perception – that is, a particular sensory perception can never unquestioningly coincide with a particular understanding thereof: dissensus is "radical contingency."<sup>6</sup> Such a dissensual understanding of politics according to Steven Corcoran implies that politics consists "in blurring the boundaries between what is considered political and what is considered [...] private."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus* 139. For a similar argument, see Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 30.

<sup>5</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus* 141-42. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Corcoran, "Editor's Introduction," *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, by Jacques Rancière, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010) 21.

<sup>7</sup> Corcoran, "Editor's Introduction" 3.

This intrinsically unstable notion of the domain of politics is reflected in Rancière's views on the relationship between politics and art, including theatre: where the "aesthetics of politics" (141) engenders the commonality of dissensual commonsense, the "politics of aesthetics' [...] frames new forms of individuality," but "[i]t does not give a collective voice to the anonymous" and so eschews the commonsense of collectivity (142). What it does produce, however, is a "shared impersonal experience" (142). For Rancière, what is presented on stage is then in the first place an individual's fate, not that of, for example, a social class – and this individuality, which takes on a new form precisely when it positions itself against the consensus, is experienced by spectators in a common, but impersonal, experience. Of course, criticism typically tends to understand such aesthetically framed "new forms of individuality" and the community of the suffering that intrude into the public, engendering politics proper, to be in an exemplary or even synecdochical relationship: political art presents a particular example of revolt against the consensus which stands for the experience of an entire group of the hitherto socially invisible. The question is whether the underlying principle of mimesis can be translated into any form of political action easily. It is at this point that Rancière is sceptical. He strongly doubts whether any direct correlation between art and political action can exist: "There is," as he emphasises, "no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action." (143) The members of the audience are 'black boxes,' as it were, whose reaction – the only political action that might ensue from art – is entirely unpredictable.

For that reason, Rancière sees any conflation of politics and art as problematic, as it would mean a "return [...] to the logic of consensus"<sup>8</sup> by demanding a predictable reaction that conforms to an expected 'political' (though not political in Rancière's sense any more) logic. This in turn would result in art's loss of its critical and (in Rancière's sense) political potential because it would violate Rancière's assumption that dissensus should be the guiding principle for any connection between art and politics.<sup>9</sup> While it seems easy enough in the context of a European theatre culture that is by and large uninhibited by censorship to voice dissent and give a platform to the marginalised, as Corcoran has argued, this still happens in the context of a consensual understanding of, first, the social reality that needs to be changed, and second, of art's own capacity to elicit political

<sup>8</sup> Corcoran, "Editor's Introduction" 3.

<sup>9</sup> See Rancière, *Dissensus* 140, and Nic Fryer, "Introduction: Rancière's Theatrocracy within and beyond the Theatre," *Rancière and Performance*, ed. Nic Fryer and Colette Conroy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021) 5-6.

change.<sup>10</sup> Such a form of consensus, even if it is a counter-discursive consensus, one directed against the prevailing social order with the intention to challenge and change this order, also seems to play into the increasing polarisation of society along political fault lines that are usually broadly framed as conservative versus progressive, where most examples of 'political' theatre would reproduce the progressive consensus.

What becomes clear then is that it is difficult to present dissensus in a dissensual way, with the aesthetic and institutional frame matching the contents. The way for art to do this, Rancière suggests, is through self-critique: "critical art is not so much a type of art that reveals the forms and contradictions of domination as it is an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects" (149). For Rancière, the dissensual commonsense of critical (and hence also political) drama should then be directed against *itself* as much as against the social mechanisms it seeks to critique, against theatrical as much as against social consensus. Tony Fisher sums up this position as the "paradoxical idea" that "[p]olitical theatre must be resisted if there is to be a political theatre."<sup>11</sup> Rancière's notion of political art is art that asks questions rather than art that provides answers. As a consequence, Nic Fryer argues, critics should then be concerned with highlighting the questions art asks of its recipients rather than with answering these questions and explicating the 'meaning' of the work of art, with "how the aesthetic strategies employed by the artwork provoke a relationship with the viewer, rather than how the artwork might provide an easily digestible reflection on the politics of the world."<sup>12</sup> However, it is this very openness of the political in the Rancièrian tradition that has raised criticism: Tomlin finds that it leads to the creation of "precarious, individualized and ironic" spectator-subjects whose primary concern is the self rather than the other<sup>13</sup> – and the lack of clear guidance advocated by Rancière certainly allows for individualised and therefore also more strongly self-centred responses than collectivist dialectical theatre with its clear political messaging. This, however, is the price to pay for avoiding the construction of a new police consensus. It is for this reason that, for Rancière, the critical potential of political art, its dissensual commonsense, manifests itself at a meta-level – not, or at least not exclusively, in the message, nor in any given aesthetic form, but in a self-questioning that is mirrored back at the audience.

<sup>10</sup> See Corcoran, "Editor's Introduction" 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Tony Fisher, "Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*," *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy*, ed. Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Fryer, "Introduction: Rancière's Theatrocracy Within and Beyond the Theatre" 9.

<sup>13</sup> Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* 7.

Taking Alice Birch's *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* and Marlene Streeruwitz's *Mar-a-Lago. oder. Neuschwanstein.* as my case studies, I would like to show how the ironical mode of satire can be instrumental in staging this kind of dissensual commonsense and maintain "the alterity of art"<sup>14</sup> that is a precondition for the possibility of staging dissensus. Indeed, irony itself may be understood as inherently dissensual: it formally establishes a disjunction between two senses, the literal and the intended meaning of the ironic statement, and so introduces a doubleness of meaning that undercuts the logic of consensus.<sup>15</sup> What is more, the entire mode of satire can be understood as similarly 'double': on the one hand, critics have long regarded satire as "inherently conservative"<sup>16</sup> and as a genre it is not only dominated by white men but also has a misogynistic tradition.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Birch and Streeruwitz, two female playwrights, employ satire in plays with clearly feminist agendas then is the appropriation of the mode to a new speaker's position – itself a revolt against satire's presumed masculinity and clearly political in Rancière's sense. On the other hand, satire has also been described as a provocative mode that questions norms rather than establishing them and that may "unmask and [...] deconstruct" discourses of power.<sup>18</sup> This 'progressive' view of satire would imply that the satirist's own impetus may, or perhaps must, be questioned as well. The problem is that in cases like Birch's and Streeruwitz's the underlying feminist impulse might then itself be seen as moralising (and hence conservative) – an issue that encapsulates the problem of political art in Rancière. However, theorists of satire tend to agree that neither of the two interpretations (conservative or progressive) of satire is fully satisfactory and allows for a comprehensive definition.<sup>19</sup> There is no definitive mode, political or otherwise, of satire. It would then seem that satire's irony is its contingency: this is the contingency of dissensus. It is a contingency that Birch and Streeruwitz both readily adopt.

<sup>14</sup> Fryer, "Introduction: Rancière's Theatrocracy Within and Beyond the Theatre" 6.

<sup>15</sup> For a different reading of the potential of irony, see Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* 94-98, who argues that irony can achieve political potential only if a clear "ideological steer" (98) gives it an identifiable target.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 23. See also Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011) 11.

<sup>17</sup> See Day, *Satire and Dissent* 9; Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* 25; Marijke Meijer Drees and Sonja de Leeuw, "Introduction," *The Power of Satire*, ed. Marijke Meijer Drees and Sonja de Leeuw (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015) 3.

<sup>18</sup> Day, *Satire and Dissent* 12; see Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* 18-21; Meijer Drees and de Leeuw, "Introduction" 3.

<sup>19</sup> See Meijer Drees and de Leeuw, "Introduction" 3; Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* 3-26.

Birch's *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* (2014) employs the tools of satire to raise a number of well-known points of feminist social critique. Its four acts are connected by common themes but not by a common plot or continuity of action, and are subdivided into similarly loosely connected scenes. In the playtext the scenes are marked with bold titles that present imperatives of a revolution to come. Creating what Marissia Fragkou calls an "instruction manual,"<sup>20</sup> these titles, which have been included in most stage productions so far in Brechtian fashion, on screens or similar, are mirrored in the at times farcical and increasingly violent action of the scenes. Thus, the first scene of Act 1, entitled "REVOLUTIONIZE THE LANGUAGE. (INVERT IT.),"<sup>21</sup> presents a woman and a man whose dirty talking takes a surprising turn when the woman asserts her own active role in the scenario: to the consternation of her partner, she claims reciprocity for actions such as licking or fingering. The dialogue then continues:

- I'm going to fuck you
- I'm going to fuck you straight back
- And I'm going to take my cock / and
- / AndI'mgoingtotakemyvaginaandputitOnyouFIRST

(27)

After brushing aside her partner's feebly stuttered protest that "You cannot Take a a a a Gap" (28), the woman goes on to assert her dominance with increasingly violent language that parodies sexualised male discourse in comparable situations until she realises she may have gone too far, apologises and promises to take her vagina off the man's penis. The scene's comic potential springs as much from the woman's blindsided lover's bewilderment as it does from the ostensibly hyperbolic absurdity of her language, which highlights the linguistic power structures inherent in everyday discourse that privilege the male perspective – a feminist stalwart, as much as the topics of self-determination in marriage or in the workplace and control over one's own body that the play similarly tackles in Act 1. These issues are condensed into the experience of a grandmother-mother-daughter constellation in the second act and then erupt in the postdramatic cacophony of Act 3 that assembles a multitude of tangled voices discussing many

<sup>20</sup> Marissia Fragkou, "debbie tucker green and Alice Birch: 'Angry Feminists' on the European Stage," *Contemporary European Playwrights*, ed. Maria Delgado, Bryce Lease and Dan Rebellato (London: Routledge, 2020) 341.

<sup>21</sup> Alice Birch, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* (London: Oberon, 2016) 21. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

of the same issues, from male condescension and body shaming to female self-determination and rape culture, and was likened by Clara Escoda to the tone of internet chatrooms.<sup>22</sup> The postdramatic aesthetics adopted here are, as Fragkou has pointed out, themselves a “break [with] patriarchal structures.”<sup>23</sup>

Overall, the play then comes across as a clearly political piece, advocating well-known feminist positions. With its flippant tone, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*, which features the initial stage direction that “[m]ost importantly, this play should not be well-behaved” (19), reflects what Miglena Sternadori has called the “utter unladylikeness”<sup>24</sup> of Fourth Wave feminism, a feminism that she goes on to describe as fuelled by “feminist anger”<sup>25</sup> and as “openly aggressive [...] by calling out social injustices and those responsible for them.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* the critique of patriarchal structures is expressed unequivocally and, particularly when it comes to language itself, seeks to invert power structures, so that the critique appears to be an act of what Fisher terms “revolutionary speech.”<sup>27</sup> This is a form of speech that seems unable to escape the very structures it attacks and is, as such, consensual in Rancière’s sense: the mere inversion of current practices leaves the structures that created these practices intact.

However, Birch’s heavy reliance on hyperbole and the mode of satire questions right away any notion of consensus whatsoever. When a marriage proposal is likened to a suicide bombing, or when the second act ends on grandmother and granddaughter cutting out their tongues – a literalized metaphor signifying their speechlessness in the face of women’s subordination – after a series of increasingly drastic calls for revolutionary action in the chapter headings, going from “Don’t Reproduce” via “Don’t Associate with Men,” “Stop Eating” and “Stop Speaking” to a self-destructive call to shut down one’s own body, the hyperbolic nature of these actions and imperatives is clear.<sup>28</sup> This kind of self-mutilation is not the way forward for the revolution, however well-meant

<sup>22</sup> Clara Escoda, qtd. in Fragkou, “debbie tucker green and Alice Birch” 342.

<sup>23</sup> Fragkou, “debbie tucker green and Alice Birch” 342.

<sup>24</sup> Miglena Sternadori, “Situating the Fourth Wave of Feminism in Popular Media Discourses,” *Misogyny and Media in the Age of Trump*, ed. Maria B. Marron (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020) 32.

<sup>25</sup> Sternadori, “Situating the Fourth Wave of Feminism” 35.

<sup>26</sup> Sternadori, “Situating the Fourth Wave of Feminism” 33. See also Ealasaid Munro, “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?” *Political Insight* 4, no. 2 (2013): 23.

<sup>27</sup> Tony Fisher, “On the Performance of ‘Dissensual Speech,’” *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy*, ed. Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 188.

<sup>28</sup> See Birch, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* 51, 55, 56.



it may be. While the spiralling and increasingly hyperbolic violence – Act 3 has a woman chop off her own head at the injustice of it all – is in itself no laughing matter, it is interspersed with unruly and comical moments. They create what Dan Rebellato calls the play’s “apocalyptic and, at the same time, comic”<sup>29</sup> tone that has also been described as “horrendhilarious”<sup>30</sup> by Elisabeth Angel-Perez. These moments of laughter – and there are plenty of them: French director Arnaud Anckaert even likens the play to cabaret<sup>31</sup> – counteract the seriousness of the revolutionary purpose in the same way as the excess of hyperbole. The emotional irrationality of satiric hyperbole is precisely the point of Birch’s critique, which thus employs a form that is intrinsically at odds with the rationality – associated with male gender stereotypes – of consensus that the play seeks to undermine. The effect is that a rift is created between the play’s theme and its mode of presentation – or, in Rancière’s terms, between sense-making and sensory presentation. As Anckaert states, the play asks “Who guarantees sense nowadays? Who guarantees understanding the world?”<sup>32</sup> These questions imply a self-critical quality: in asking them, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* does not presume to have any easy answers. What Birch’s play can do, however, is open up spaces of dialogue precisely through confronting the audience with such questions and drawing them into the conversation.

Birch’s play culminates in its short fourth and final act, which shows a discussion between four women, declaring their readiness for a revolution. They announce their radical plans to “dismantle the monetary system,” “overthrow the government,” create an international movement, destroy “all jobs,” break up “all couples,” and take over control of the media (74). The planning reaches a climax when one of the women says: “And we’ll eradicate all men.” (74) While the others agree with this proposal, some doubt seems to creep in and the play ends in the following lines of dialogue:

– You sound sad  
– I am sad

<sup>29</sup> Dan Rebellato, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre: British Drama, Violence and Writing,” *Sillages critiques* 22 (2017): par. 32, <https://doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.4798>.

<sup>30</sup> Elisabeth Angel-Perez, “‘In the heart of each joke hides a little holocaust’ (George Tabori): Horrendhilarious Wit on the British Contemporary Stage,” *Miranda* 19 (2019): par. 25, <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.19898>.

<sup>31</sup> Arnaud Anckaert, “Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again,” interview by Agnès Santi, *La Terrasse*, 26 June 2016, <https://www.journal-laterrasse.fr/revolt-she-said-revolt-again/>.

<sup>32</sup> Anckaert, “Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.” My translation.

- It won't work if you're sad
  - It won't work if you aren't.
- It failed. The whole world failed at it. It could have been so brilliant.  
How strange of you not to feel sad.  
Who knew that life could be so awful.

(75)

The ambiguity of the pronoun “it” in these final lines leaves open what exactly is seen to have failed: patriarchy or the revolution itself. With the revolution possibly branded as failed at the end of the play, the apparent univocity of the play's preceding revolutionary agenda is called into question. Although this ending is not exactly funny, it provides *Revolt's* greatest source of irony. The overarching irony here is perhaps in-built to any revolution: the revolution's success would at the same time be its failure, a return to a pre-revolutionary state of consensus. A successful eradication of all men, or more broadly speaking, any and all opposition, would itself result in the totality of what Rancière calls the order of the police. Revolutionary speech is, after all, univocal. The revolution's success therefore would only engender the need for a new revolution – rather than bringing about the novelty revolutions typically aspire to, this type of revolution returns to the original meaning of the word ‘revolution,’ to a cyclical or periodic recurrence.<sup>33</sup>

Birch's play not only realises this irony and returns to it time and again through its satirical mode that pitches revolutionary speech against satirical hyperbole, but it also suggests that turning the irony against itself and ironising the revolution is the way out of the underlying conundrum: only in a state of permanent revolution that is also directed against itself, a continuous form of self-questioning and critique is possible. The only way forward from Birch's conclusion, it would seem, is to revolt again, as suggested by the title, and to keep questioning the foundations of the revolution itself – just what the satirical irony in *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* manages to achieve. The revolution's failure then would at the same time be its success: this revolution must remain fragmentary and open-ended.<sup>34</sup> This is Birch's dissensual commonsense.

<sup>33</sup> See “revolution, n.,” *OED Online*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2021), [www.oed.com/view/Entry/164970](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/164970). While, fittingly, the etymology of ‘revolution’ is complex and there seem to be multiple origins of the English word, the oldest ones given in the *OED* are in the above astronomical sense of the cyclical return of an object. The original political meaning of revolution as restoration (as in England's seventeenth-century Glorious Revolution) is likely derived from this astronomical sense, as Hannah Arendt has argued. See Hannah Arendt, “The Freedom to Be Free,” *New England Review* 38, no. 2 (2017): 58-59.

<sup>34</sup> This fragmentation can also be seen in the disconnected scenes of Act 1 and the cacophony of Act 3 as well as in Birch's use of the unusual four-act structure rather than the more

Similar strategies of ironical distancing to open up the possibility of dialogue can be found in Marlene Streeruwitz's 2018 play *Mar-a-Lago. oder. Neuschwanstein*. Coupling in its title the vanity residences of a twenty-first-century American president and a nineteenth-century Bavarian monarch, the play is a relatively a-historical investigation into the mechanisms of male power, which turns on itself by taking the theatre as its site of investigation.<sup>35</sup> In Streeruwitz's play, seven female actors, aged 23 to 73, are assembled by an influential director, who remains an unseen presence on stage, to put on a play about Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao's wife in which the seven women all are supposed to play the character of Jiang Qing, at different stages in her life. Metatheatrical in its very setup, the focus of the play's feminist critique is the theatre itself. The seven women all at some early stage of their careers were in relationships or at least had affairs with the director, who, it transpires, used the same corny pet name for all of them and dropped them for their respective successors. Yet they all feel in some way indebted to him or feel that they need the role in the new play to keep their careers going. At the same time, they do not want to be made into one woman by the play and their director-patriarch, and so stage their protest: initially outside his house, with banners and, in the Berlin production, wearing a giant piece of pink knitwear resembling the 'pussy hats' worn by attendants at women's marches against Donald Trump's presidency,<sup>36</sup> and then, the play turning increasingly surreal, as charwomen outside a fairy-tale castle. In the next scene they find themselves in a flat rate brothel, separated from the audience by a giant one-way mirror they use to don make-up before going out to meet clients: here the critique of chauvinism finally merges with a critique of consumerism and, as becomes clear from the dressing room setting that parallels the theatre scenes, of voyeurism and theatre itself, particularly perhaps of traditions of theatrical realism that conjure up a similar

traditional division in three or five acts. Here the play's aesthetic structure follows the truncated, staccato-like, disruptive rhythm created by the full stops in its title.

<sup>35</sup> The title – to which no explicit reference is made in the play – satirises a certain type of (presumably) 'alpha'-male affinity for kitschy grandeur: there are indeed certain parallels in the interior design of the faux-mediaeval nineteenth-century Neuschwanstein castle and its twentieth-century American golf club counterpart: both are pompous imitations of an original that never quite existed in that particular form, and both try to use that pomp as a legitimisation of power. Implicitly, this is of course connected to Streeruwitz's investigation of the theatre and to the play's ever-absent patriarchal director figure.

<sup>36</sup> See Sascha Krieger, "Feministisches Doppel," review of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* by Alice Birch and *Mar-a-Lago* by Marlene Streeruwitz at Berliner Ensemble, *Stage and Screen*, 16 October 2018, <https://stagescreen.wordpress.com/2018/10/16/feministisches-doppel/>.

‘invisible’ fourth wall between stage and audience. In protest at the demand to go out and perform for the male punters at the brothel, one of the women goes on to smash the mirror; the scene ends on another woman taking one of the mirror shards and slitting her friend’s throat so as to save her from having to go out again.

Like in *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*, the feminist critique of the patriarchal system is obvious in *Mar-a-Lago*. And like *Revolt.*, or perhaps even more so, *Mar-a-Lago* is unambiguous in this critique. However, like Birch, Streeruwitz also finds a way to introduce dissensus into her play. In the last scene, the setting returns to the dressing room at the theatre: the women’s protest was successful and a different play was chosen. Instead of portraying Mao’s revolutionary widow, they are now performing in Maurice Maeterlinck’s *The Seven Princesses*, reduced from a powerful but communising role to powerless individual roles, with some of the women now playing Maeterlinck’s sleeping princesses. As they get dressed for the performance, their conversation reveals that they have never found a common way of addressing the failures of patriarchal society but have each in their own way withdrawn into an a-politicised privacy. For example, Claribella, the youngest, withdraws to an online community where she is a disembodied fairy, “sexless and without skin,” where she is what she wants to be and “what counts is what the others want to see,”<sup>37</sup> while middle-aged Christabella has mastered the art of masturbation and spends her time chatting with like-minded people about it, having given up her fight against patriarchal domination (51). The success of the feminist revolution the women want to achieve is thus cast into doubt – tellingly, the setting of the last scene is the dressing room, the “same as at the beginning” (50) the stage directions insist: the revolution has come full circle. Ironically, as in *Revolt.*, the success of the women’s revolution is also its failure – only this time, the critique is levelled back at women who, the play seems to suggest, use their freedom, hard fought for by older generations of feminists, to fall back into the patterns they were supposedly liberated from.

However, like *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*, *Mar-a-Lago. oder. Neuschwanstein.* also contemplates the logic of revolution itself: “Was Don Juan a Maoist before it was possible to be one?” one of the women asks (54), establishing a connection of the revolution with both the type of Don Juanesque womanising *Mar-a-Lago* takes to task and the mode of satire that is embodied by the legendary libertine. Is revolution then libertinism in another guise and does it necessarily come at the

<sup>37</sup> Marlene Streeruwitz, *Mar-a-Lago. oder. Neuschwanstein.*, 52, [marlenestreeruwitz.at](http://www.marlenestreeruwitz.at), 13 October 2018, [http://www.marlenestreeruwitz.at/wp-content/uploads/Mar-a-Lago\\_2018.pdf](http://www.marlenestreeruwitz.at/wp-content/uploads/Mar-a-Lago_2018.pdf). All quotations from the play are in my translation; further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

cost of others? And does revolution always carry the potential for its own satiric subversion? When the women in Streeruwitz's play realise their own complacency, they again contemplate revolution, this time as a refusal to, quite literally, play along by breaking their contracts with the theatre. In a last moment of satirical revolution, the women start singing (in German), "In breach of contract. In breach of contract. I think she's got it. I think she's got it" to the melody of "The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain" from *My Fair Lady*, the musical adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (59), which itself thematises female emancipation. The suggestion is that the order of the police can only be truly shattered by suspending the very framework of any order, the contract that ties them to their roles in the theatre and, by implication, beyond.

In the end, the success of this final act of revolution remains undecidable: as the actors are called out on stage to perform in *The Seven Princesses*, Streeruwitz's playtext leaves it to the actors to decide whether they want to follow the call and ends on the suggestion that one possibility might be to start anew and stage the beginning of *Mar-a-Lago*. again (60). As Streeruwitz writes in her foreword, "the play's reception is returned to the members of the audience and left without any rules whatsoever to the theatrical moment" (3). Reflection upon this theatrical moment is what gives Streeruwitz's play its critical potential. While the satire in *Mar-a-Lago*. is harsher than in *Revolt.*, and, as some reviewers have pointed out,<sup>38</sup> perhaps even cynical in its repeated critique of the lack of female solidarity among the actors, it is the device of metadrama that introduces dissensus into the former. It demands reflection not just on the consensus of the play's own revolution, but also on the mechanisms of the play itself and of the theatrical setting that enables the attempts at revolution as much as the structures this revolution targets. In calling for such reflection without providing the answer, *Mar-a-Lago*. plants the seeds for a dialogue about social roles as much as about the role of sexism in the institution of the theatre and on the efficacy of revolution; it does so by returning these questions to the audience in typical Rancièrian fashion and by using the contingency of satiric irony to create a dissensual framework for its own staging of revolution.

<sup>38</sup> See Gabi Hift, "Revolution und Verrat," review of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*. by Alice Birch and *Mar-a-Lago* by Marlene Streeruwitz at Berliner Ensemble, *Nachtkritik*, 13 October 2018, [https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=15948](https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15948), and Christine Wahl, "Nenn mich nicht Mümmei," review of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*. by Alice Birch and *Mar-a-Lago* by Marlene Streeruwitz at Berliner Ensemble, *Tagesspiegel*, 15 October 2018, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/doppelpremiere-am-berliner-ensemble-nenn-mich-nicht-muemmi/23185288.html>.

It follows, then, that both plays stage a form of dissensual dialogue, not between competing opinions on feminism, but with themselves, by using the satirical mode to introduce dissensus into the revolutionary consensus they otherwise propagate. In doing so, they create an ironical distance to both their political message and their aesthetic form, a distance that is key to political art in Rancière's sense.<sup>39</sup> What both plays do is to confront audiences with a self-ironic stance: as such they express political critique and a critique of political critique at the same time. Importantly, that does not mean they present arguments for the other side of the political divide (i.e., anti-feminist arguments, for example on the supposed futility of gender-neutral language) but they question the way in which political critique is undertaken. Through their satirical mode, these plays seem to anticipate what Tomlin has described as the typically "ironic response" of the autonomous/neoliberal spectator-subject to depictions of injustice on stage, which itself is a form of distancing the spectator from the staged suffering:<sup>40</sup> however, the irony used in these plays, it is important to note, does not render the underlying injustice irrelevant, but rather asks what effective strategies to affect meaningful change might be and questions the theatre's power to instigate such change. Through the double voice of irony, where on the one hand there is a clear articulation of critique and, on the other, the efficacy of this mode of critique is immediately questioned, the underlying polarity of political positions is undermined. This form of self-ironic doubleness is not one of either/or, of polar oppositions, but rather one of both/and, a simultaneous coming together of critique and meta-critique. In this way, both plays manage to stage a form of dissensual commonsense. This is what gives both Streeruwitz and Birch their political potential in Rancière's sense. And it is from this political potential that the potential for a conciliatory space of dialogue that bridges polarisation arises. The basis for such dialogue is the commonsense thus established; its fuel is dissensus.

Christina Tscharyski's Berliner Ensemble production of the two plays stressed this by inserting *Mar-a-lago. oder. Neuschwanstein.* between the third and fourth acts of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*, which not only emulated the aesthetic fragmentation of Birch's play, but also presented the notion of 'revolt again' of Birch's last act as the finale whilst ending the evening on the stark note of a failed revolution. In this particular failure, however, the seeds of dialogue can be found: this revolution, while insisting on its message, does not take its form too seriously. It is this blurring of boundaries through satire that makes both Birch's and

<sup>39</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009) 23.

<sup>40</sup> Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* 7.

Streeruwitz's plays as well as their amalgamation in Tscharyiski's production appear as instances of dissensual commonsense and hence as sites of genuinely political dialogue. The self-ironising satire employed in both plays continuously and radically questions not just the existing structures of (in this case) patriarchal domination, but also the means of challenging these structures, that is, revolution itself. Political change, the implication is, can only come about through ongoing dialogue that breaks open the forms of consensus and in this way is a revolt, again.

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