ARTICLE

Postdramatic Musicality in *The Black Rider*

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ABSTRACT

With the English publication of Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic Theatre* in 2006, Theatre Studies has been confronted with a profound and controversial categorisation of a method of theatre which emerged in the 1970s and aimed to challenge the foundations of the dramatic form. This paper discusses the supposed binary opposition between dramatic and postdramatic theatre as purported by Lehmann. Further to this it aims to challenge this assumption through an appropriation of Catherine Bouko's ideas of *musicality* as set out in her newly published article "Jazz musicality in postdramatic theatre and the opacity of auditory signs."

KEYWORDS

Postdramatic Theatre, Musicality, Robert Wilson, Musicalization, Hans-Thies Lehmann

The majority of discussion and criticism on Hans-Thies Lehmann's (2006) book, *Postdramatic Theatre*, is occupied by the dichotomy presented between postdramatic theatre and its proposed counterpart, dramatic theatre. In an essay titled "Jazz musicality in postdramatic theatre and the opacity of auditory signs" Catherine Bouko challenges the notion of a strict binary opposition between the two concepts and argues that the majority of theatre exists on a spectrum between the two. Bouko (2010: 75-76) claims Lehmann's theories have not been widely accepted in Europe, especially in France, and that his work has been taken as the 'putting to death' of the dramatic form. This reaction may in part have to do with the 'post' in the title. However, a closer reading of Lehmann's text reveals that he is in fact urging the reader to identify postdramatic theatre not as an opposite of the dramatic form, but as a form of theatre that is not afraid to ask questions and challenge its predecessor (2006: 27). He claims that postdramatic theatre continually makes reference to dramatic texts, even with the absence of a text. The difference between dramatic theatre and postdramatic theatre, he argues, lies in the handling of textual authority. Therefore postdramatic theatre is that which does not rely on a scripted text as its primary means of theatrical production whereas the majority of dramatic theatre requires a narrative thread which the spectator can follow. However, Lehmann is using his book as a means to signpost and classify productions and practitioners that fall into the postdramatic heading. This act seems almost contradictory to his prior statement. If dramatic and postdramatic theatre are not meant to be opposing forms, then how could one classify any production as entirely dramatic or postdramatic? With this paper I aim to use Lehmann's established parameters and ideas on postdramatic theory and his term 'musicalization' in conjunction with the *jazz musicality* as outlined in Bouko's article, to determine if Robert Wilson's *The Black Rider* (1990) can be classified as postdramatic or if Lehmann's claims to this effect should be reconsidered or further contextualised. In order to explore Wilson's relationship to dramatic and postdramatic theatre, I will look at the audience contract established in the introduction of Wilson's piece, discuss how it uses the voice for sound instead of for discourse and how the singing body manifests itself through postdramatic musicality.

Bouko (2010: 76) defines musicality, or *musicalité* in French, as a musical construction of a performance, therefore a piece of theatre which is constructed as music. This is very similar to the quote Lehmann (2006: 91) uses to describe his term, musicalization, from a talk by Eleni Varopoulou in Frankfurt in 1998:

music has become an independent structure of theatre. This is not a matter of the evident role of music and of music theatre, but rather of a more profound idea of theatre *as* music.

Both of these definitions describe musicality and musicalization as theatre which behaves like music. Lehmann however does not engage significantly with Varopoulou's quote, other than stating that musicalization is an important factor of postdramatic theatre as it aids in an emergence of auditory semiotics. He then gives a further example of his interpretation by stating that Wilson tends to term his work as 'operas', thus implying that this is a sufficient means of musicalization. Bouko, however, does further the concept of postdramatic musicality in her article and presents her own theory of auditory semiotics. For the purposes of this article I will not be able to engage with Bouko's auditory semiotics; however, I will discuss the parameters she sets for postdramatic musicality and if these are apparent in *The Black Rider*. Therefore, if musicalization and musicality can be read as being the same term in this instance, Bouko provides a context with which to analyse postdramatic productions. I am aware that the term musicalization needs a more rigorous investigation than presented within the limitations of this article, but the intentions of this investigation endeavour to show one way in which the modern researcher could approach musicalization as a means to unpick the vague definitions purposed by Lehmann's survey of postdramatic theatre.

From reading Lehmann's text and relating it to Wilson's work, there are strong associations between his pieces and the postdramatic theory outlined by Lehmann. This can be seen with Wilson's breaking away from an authority of text. For example, in one of Wilson's most acclaimed pieces, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), he along with his composer Philip Glass began exploring ideas for the opera over lunch meetings once a week (Glass, 1988: 28). Firstly they decided upon a subject matter, in this case Einstein, and from there arrived at the title. They then determined the length and structure and derived some of the major themes of the piece; the train, the trial, and the spaceship. The only scripted text in the piece was written by the performers themselves during rehearsals and was used sparingly as monologues throughout the opera. This production process offers a stark antithesis to much of dramatic theatre which relies on the completion of an entire scripted text prior to rehearsal.

Additionally, Wilson is one of the most heavily cited practitioners in Lehmann's book as an example of postdramatic practice. For example, one of the first mentions of Wilson's name in *Postdramatic Theatre* is in the prologue of the book when Lehmann states:

the postdramatic theatre forms of a Robert Wilson, Einar Schleeef or Jan Lauwers - to name a few of the more 'accepted' theatre practitioners of the 1980s and 1990s - have met with little understanding. (2006: 19)

Lehmann (2006: 23) then makes an extensive list of a hundred or so postdramatic practitioners, directors, and companies with Robert Wilson's name at the beginning of this list. Lehmann states that he does not deem all the work of these practitioners as postdramatic in their entirety, but he does not go into any further detail as to which particular qualities or practitioners he is referring to. Therefore, the inclusion of this list along with his disclaimer proves contradictory and limiting in its use for postdramatic discussion as it is unclear as to what exactly Lehmann is identifying as postdramatic in his examples. Furthermore, in the chapter 'Panorama of Postdramatic Theatre' an entire section is devoted to Wilson. Considering that only two other practitioners get this mention (Grüber and Kantor), it does appear as if Lehmann (2006, pp. 77-81) is using Wilson's work as a primary example of postdramatic theatre. However, if Bouko's argument holds any weight, then it is difficult to categorise the majority of theatre as entirely dramatic or postdramatic. According to Bouko, aspects of a piece of theatre may be identified as having dramatic or postdramatic tendencies, but theatre operates on a contingency between these two concepts and can only be read on a relative basis in conjunction with other pieces.

In order to explore Bouko's claims I will look at the prologue of Wilson's *The Black Rider*. The composer of this piece, Tom Waits, indicates on his website that the piece is based on a German folktale called *Der Freischütz* which was also made into an opera of the same name by Carl Maria von Weber in 1821 (Tom Waits Library, 2010). *The Black Rider* premiered on March 31 1990 at the Thalia Theater, in Hamburg, Germany. It was structured into twelve parts with a prologue and ran for two and a half hours with an intermission. Due to Wilson's use of a fable, *The Black Rider* can be classified in the structural readings of Greek tragedy in the six stages of the Dionysiac ritual (Aston and Savona, 1991: 19). In stage one, the agon or contest, Wilhelm must prove his love for Katchem by showing himself as a huntsman to Katchem's father. In order to do this, he must shoot a white dove on his wedding day. In the second stage, pathos or disaster, Wilhelm is unable to complete this task because of his lack of experience as a huntsman and is therefore unable to marry the woman that he loves. In the third stage, a messenger appears in the form of Pegleg, or the devil. Pegleg offers Wilhelm magic bullets which will always hit their mark. In the fourth stage, lamentation and possible rejoicing, the celebrations for the wedding commence. Wilhelm is presented with the opportunity to shoot the dove in order to win his love. In the fifth stage, discovery and recognition, instead of shooting the dove, Wilhelm shoots Katchem. It is at this point when Wilhelm realises that he had made a deal with the devil, and the devil fooled him. In the final stage, epiphany or resurrection, Wilhelm begins his descent from the recognition of his situation to his own epiphany of his actions and damns himself to insanity.

Through this easily recognisable ritualistic structure, Wilson is able to construct abstract images and scenes which are only loosely related to the fable, while still communicating somewhat of a linear narrative. Therefore, although there is a narrative, as witnessed in the majority of dramatic theatre, this narrative is fractured and indirect as with most postdramatic productions.

For the purposes of this article I will focus on the entire prologue of *The Black Rider* which begins with the character of the Old Uncle speaking over an instrumental version of 'Lucky Day' and followed by the song 'The Black Rider', sung by Pegleg and the cast. I have chosen to look at the introduction because this is a defining moment of a performance as it establishes the beginnings of the audience contract and sets the parameters of the piece itself. Elaine Aston and George Savona claim that "traditionally, a first scene needs to supply us with story-line information: setting the scene, introducing characters and establishing the beginnings of an action" (1991: 25). This is most commonly achieved through the telling of current events and the history of the fictive cosmos being revealed. However a piece with postdramatic tendencies does not necessarily adhere to traditions. For example, although the prologue of *The Black Rider* introduces all of the characters in the piece, it introduces them through means of presence and physicality by creating a line-up of the characters along the apron of the stage. Firstly, each character is introduced through the means of individualised gestures. However, these gestures are vague and not immediately recognisable as signifiers within the fictive cosmos of *The Black Rider*. Therefore, these gestures do not help in establishing the beginning of character development or the beginnings of an action. With this action one can identify the dramatic code of character introduction next to the postdramatic tendencies of preventing character development.

In her article, Bouko (2010: 85) lists three steps of the average theatregoing experience. Firstly, she states, the spectator will encounter conventions on their entrance to the theatre. These may include standing in line at the box office, waiting in a lobby, displaying tickets or finding a seat in the auditorium. This of course is not always the case, as seen with site-specific work, but some conventions may still be encountered such as ticket handling, ushers or a designated performance area. In step two, Bouko claims that the spectators may encounter a performance which challenges these conventions and may result in feelings of uncertainty for the spectator. From this, the spectator is likely to go onto the third stage in which thought and reception ensues, since the performance cannot be interrupted immediately with dramatic codes. These dramatic codes include pre-existing conventions

developed in conjunction with the dramatic form and typically include the expectation of text and actions to perform a narrative role in a production.

In *The Black Rider* the spectator is confronted with both traditional and untraditional conventions upon entrance. The traditional dramatic act of a drawn curtain is in place, however the title of the play is written on the curtain in coarse and childlike handwriting reading 'The black Rider the casting of the 12 magic bullets'. The performance begins with the emergence of the character of the Old Uncle standing in the audience with a megaphone. The inclusion of the Old Uncle in the audience immediately breaks the convention of the fourth wall and reminds the spectator of his/her role as an audience member in a theatre. The Old Uncle begins to mouth words into a megaphone; however these words are only realised through the recorded sound of static and grumbles. After seven seconds of this disjointed union, a recording of Tom Waits's voice is played and the Old Uncle begins to mouth along to the recording. However, his mouthing is over-exaggerated and out of sync with the words of Tom Waits. This challenges the expectation of unity between the presence of the actor and his/her own voice. This is further challenged when Waits's identifiable voice is heard. Although there is a union between the physical act of speaking and the sound of a voice, there is a perceivable disjunction between the liveness of the body and the repeated archiving of a recording. After eleven seconds of this action, the Old Uncle begins to speak with his own voice stating, "Form your lines please...". There is another forty seconds of dialogue and then the Old Uncle stops speaking, but continues to mime words until he leaves the stage. This act of disjointed physicalised speaking and voice is underscored by the orchestra playing the melody of the song 'Lucky Day' which reappears later in the piece. So although *The Black Rider* does maintain a dramatic form through its formatting and structuring with the use of a prologue as a means of character introduction, it does also challenge theatrical expectations by immediately breaking the fourth wall, and by the disjointed use of sound, voice and the physicalisations which accompany them.

One of the primary parameters of postdramatic musicality which Bouko proposes is that of "text as *musical sound*" (2010: 77). This refers to the use of the voice as sound instead of for discourse. As Bouko states, "when priority is given to musicality instead of semantic content, the text is first considered as *material*, which is above all constructed on musical constraints" (2010: 78). Therefore when the aural components of the voice are given prominence, the semantic content is diminished or removed entirely. As Bouko claims, this can be achieved through the physicality of enunciation, a

highlighting of the accent or grain of the voice, text which is not in the native tongue of the performers, text which is not in the native tongue of the spectators, and text which is freed from containing any link with the fictive cosmos of the performance.

Text can be broken into two components, that of delivering semantic meaning and that of making sound. Therefore, when the meaning of a word or a phrase is reduced, the significance of the aural qualities of the sound are increased by default and can therefore seem significant. In the majority of pieces which are categorised as postdramatic, meaning is diminished and fragmented, which allows for the aural qualities of the text to be enhanced because they are not attached to semantic meaning for communicative purposes. For example, in *The Black Rider* the text, written by William S. Burroughs, is attached to semantic meaning, but is not necessarily used to further the plot or aid in character development. In addition, the German performers switch back and forth from English to German and sing all of the songs in English. This results in the primarily German speaking audience of the original run being confronted with a text which was both unfamiliar to them and likely to have lost most of its meaning. This, in essence, serves as a means to reduce semantic meaning and thus heighten the aural qualities of the spoken word.

Despite the fact that a large portion of the text is in English, even an English speaker is confronted with deciphering Burroughs cryptic text through the thick accents of the German performers. For example, in the opening number titled “The Black Rider” the character Pegleg who is played by Dominique Horwitz, sings the lyrics:

Come on along with the Black Rider, we'll have a gay old time. Lay down in the web of
the black spider, I'll drink your blood like wine.

Although this song is directed to the audience, a reference to who the Black Rider is is not indicated. One could infer that the Black Rider refers to the devil, and thus Pegleg is referring to himself in the third person as he sings the song. However this reading is challenged in another verse when Pegleg sings “I'll drop you off in Harlem with the Black Rider out where the bullets shine.” Therefore Pegleg must either be referring to an actual third party who is not present at the time or else Pegleg is offering to drop the spectator off in Harlem with himself. This is just one example of the cryptic phrases found in *The Black Rider* which do not allow for a straightforward interpretation. Although text and action are the primary communicative tools in *The Black Rider*, the use of a foreign language and cryptic text helps to position words and verbal content as sound instead of discourse. Because a German-speaking

or English-speaking audience is confronted with a foreign language, this ensures at times the text will hold no significance past its audio qualities. Once a listening spectator has identified a foreign language that he/she is entirely unfamiliar with, he/she will no longer attempt to decode or translate this language into coherent meaning.

Another parameter that Bouko identifies in her article is that of the relation between the voice and its location within the body. She states that:

The musicality created by the singing body has no meaning itself. The suspended meaning has no precise signification, and leaves the spectator free in his sensory interpretation. (2010: 79)

With this statement Bouko claims that the associated physicality of a person singing holds no significance or meaning past the act of vocal production. Although this type of musicality can be apparent in any type of vocal performance, it is most identifiable when the text being sung is freed from semantic meaning as with some cases with *The Black Rider*. The joining of language and music is outlined by Roland Barthes (1977: 181) and designated as the ‘grain’ of the voice. In his seminal article titled “The Grain of the Voice”, Barthes discussed the idea of the *pheno-song* and the *geno-song*. He described the *pheno-song* as the tools which are used in language to communicate all of the conventions associated with a musical style. The *geno-song* is the aspect of the song which does not hold a meaning within itself and is similar to what Bouko purposes with this statement. Grain refers to the point in which the music and the language meet, but only the aspect of the language which does not offer semantic meaning (Barthes, 1977: 185).

Although the insertion of the English language during the original run of *The Black Rider* served as means to use text for musicality instead of discourse, the German-speaking cast of *The Black Rider* also de-familiarised the English language for the Anglophone during subsequent tours and in the video documentation of the live performance. The German accents thus alienated the English language for the English speaker and highlighted the relationship of the body to the language. This is most clearly heard with Horwitz and his rendition of the song “The Black Rider” in the prologue. In his version, the consonants become an obstacle which at times slow down the delivery of the song or at other times are omitted entirely. This is especially apparent when read alongside Waits’s (1993, Track 2) own recording of the song on his album of the same title. On Waits’s album he sings in a pseudo German

accent, thus attempting to adopt the same articulation as Horwitz. However, Waits's rendition has a certain ease to it which is usually only attainable by a native speaker.

Additionally the grain of Waits's voice saturates the recording, thus serving as a constant reminder to any listener familiar with his voice of his adopted accent. Although both singers often sing out of sync with the beat of the song, Waits tends to alternate between arriving slightly early or slightly late. However, the German singer consistently arrives to his consonants slightly late, often lingering on consonants that appear to be difficult to articulate. With Horwitz's strained enunciation one can view his mouth wide open and the fluttering of his tongue through uneasy articulation. Therefore the uncertain movements of Horwitz's tongue aid in de-familiarising the English language for the Anglophone. This also allows the musicalized or singing body to be highlighted along with the audio aspects of a text that are used as sound and music instead of solely for discourse.

Therefore, the text of *The Black Rider* has both dramatic and postdramatic tendencies. Although the text and lyrics provide a narrative framework for the piece, this is frustrated by the German and English lyrics which have been distanced, but not removed from the fictive cosmos of the production. This is further complicated by the struggle between the *pheno-song* and *geno-song* as demonstrated in semantic content of the text and the aural components which alternate in prominence. Even though Lehmann would classify Wilsonian theatre as postdramatic, this is a generalisation and cannot be applied to every aspect of his work, at least not in the case of *The Black Rider*. Bouko (2010: 76) argues that there is not a firm distinction between dramatic and postdramatic theatre, but that most theatre operates somewhere between these two classifications. Therefore they should not be read as opposing styles but as two ends of the same spectrum which a performance could inhabit. *The Black Rider* is an ideal example of this as it seems to resist classification. Although it does have postdramatic tendencies with its use of text as sound as well as use of the postdramatic body by highlighting the 'grain' of the voice and the presence of its actors, *The Black Rider* does have dramatic tendencies as well. This can be seen with an identifiable use of characterisation, a loose narrative which functions around a fable and text which at times supplies and adheres to the fictive cosmos of the theatricalised world. Therefore it is difficult to determine if *The Black Rider* is any more postdramatic than it is dramatic without further analysis such as addressing the entire production instead of the just the prologue in isolation. *The Black Rider* is an example of a production which does operate somewhere within the spectrum between dramatic and postdramatic theatre. Moreover, *The Black Rider* can be

used as an example to illustrate that postdramatic theatre is not the death of dramatic theatre, but simply an extension of it.

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