Staging Capitalism: 
Dramatic Surplus and Inefficiency

As in individual organisms, the growth of capitalist societies is sustained by consumption and the attendant production of waste. Unlike individual organisms, capitalism in its present state is built on the unsustainable fantasy of infinite growth. According to Marx, waste is not incidental to capitalism, but constitutive—capitalism depends on the existence of a “surplus” or “redundant” population of workers, a reserve army of the able-bodied but unemployed.¹ This surplus population allows for the extraction of “surplus labor,” or the measure of labor that exceeds what the individual worker must perform to produce the means of her own livelihood. This surplus labor generates the “surplus value” that constitutes the capitalist’s profit. While the proletarian’s contribution is excessive, consisting of more than she can afford to spare, the capitalist can enrich himself excessively because he controls the means of production and is thereby able to press the dispossessed worker into service for a fraction of what her labor is really worth.

Those who constitute the redundant population, this social waste, are often treated as though they are morally culpable for their position, even though their unemployment is structurally integral to capitalism — they are the strikebreakers-in-waiting ensuring that employers can keep wages low. We even criminalize unemployment with anti-loafing and vagrancy statutes and by making gainful employment a condition of probation and parole, the violation of which may result in incarceration. Social failings and structural inequities are transformed into personal failings by that piece of capitalist legerdemain Margaret Thatcher availed herself of when she famously declared that “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women.”

This exaggerated theory of the individual holds that we move through the world, each one of us, neither aided nor encumbered by attachments or external barriers. Saying we are free cannot set us free. This description erases human finitude and blames the victim.

In a world in which finitude has been erased from discourse, not only are all limitations presumed to lie within the individual, all limitations are also presumed to be removable, surmountable by those who are sufficiently strong-willed. The interrelatedness of all things is forgotten. “Being an individual de jure,” Zygmunt Bauman writes, “means having no one to blame for one’s own misery, seeking the causes of one’s own defeats nowhere except in one’s own indolence and sloth, and looking for no remedies other than trying harder and harder still.” This is the “performance principle,” which Herbert Marcuse understands as a self-administered authoritarian regime in disguise, the ethos of “an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the process of constant expansion,” in which “domination has been increasingly rationalized.”

In such societies, the perfor-

2 Margaret Thatcher, “AIDS, Education and the Year 2000!” interview by Douglas Keay, Woman’s Own (October 31, 1987).
mance principle displaces the pleasure principle, work replacing enjoyment. While workers today may in general have more of an ability to choose the type of work they do, “their labor is work for an apparatus which they do not control, which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they want to live.”5 The foreman who presided over Marx’s nineteenth-century factories, policing efficiency and facilitating the extraction of labor from the worker to enrich the capitalist, may no longer be ubiquitous, but only because the foreman is no longer necessary, Marcuse argues. Jon McKenzie asserts that the performance principle is something we come to internalize, rendering that which cannot be “rationalized” useless or excessive, wasteful. “The performance principle entails the repressive sublimation of human desire,” as desire is chaotic and supremely inefficient when left unattended.6 Capitalism harnesses desire, reterritorializes it.

Dramaturgies of Waste

On Western stages, the dominant dramaturgy of the nineteenth century was a dramaturgy of efficiency, the so-called “well-made play,” as developed by the French playwright Eugène Scribe and subsequently imitated widely in Europe and the United States. The well-made play was formulaic, with intricate, technically well-executed exchanges of plot-propelling information taking precedence over nuanced character development or ideas. The well-made play used and reused generic stories and situations in order to reliably provoke an emotional response in audiences. As Wilkie Collins summed up the formula: “Make ’em laugh; make ’em weep; make ’em wait.” In the well-made play, there is nothing excessive; the buildup of suspense is crucial, but all loose ends get tied up by the time the curtain falls. As one admirer of the form puts it, “Each scene must make a defi-

5 Ibid.
nite contribution to the development of the action. [...] [T]he combination of characters to be found onstage at a given moment is determined mainly by the potential for the transfer of information.” The well-made play invites the spectator to admire the choreography of bodies and operative language; the spectacle is exquisitely self-contained: “the primary and most consistent characteristic of the well-made play is the thoroughness with which every action, every event, even every entrance and exit is prepared, explained, justified.”

The twentieth century, however, saw the rise of playwrights who sought to reclaim a space for inefficiency and excess in the theater. As nonproductive expenditure becomes increasingly circumscribed in our late-capitalist lives, we increasingly see artists turning to it as an aesthetic strategy in their work. These dramaturgies of waste, as I call them, have both formal and ideological dimensions. Like modernism itself, dramaturgies of waste are characterized by the questioning and rejection of received forms. Early examples include playwrights concerned with critically re-inhabiting traditional models of dramatic structure. By the century’s end, however, we see playwrights invested in emptying or canceling out structure itself, a reclamation of nonproductive expenditure and an act of resistance against the capitalist regimes of efficiency that organize our lives outside the theater. Today, dramaturgies of waste have embraced negativity to such a degree that formlessness may become the twenty-first century’s legacy.

**Failures of Sublimation: Harley Granville-Barker**

English playwright Harley Granville-Barker cut his teeth as an actor in the plays of his near-contemporary George Bernard Shaw, and the two shared a proprietary stake in what is sometimes called the “drama of ideas.” What distinguished these plays

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8 Ibid., 882.
from their nineteenth-century forebears was that they were about something, some more-or-less pressing social or political issue of the day. In a drama of ideas, an extended disquisition on theories of progress or empire put into the mouth of a character is not a detour from or interruption of the unfolding of the plot—it is itself the substance of the drama. The plot is largely relegated to being the delivery system for that content. Characters stand for particular points of view, hypotheses about the way the world is or should be, and their actions and outcomes function as tests of those hypotheses. Today, plays that proceed by developing a complex theme are commonplace, but at the turn of the twentieth century, such a deviation from the “well-made” model represented what can be seen as a subtle shift away from the prevailing valorization of efficiency in storytelling and toward a dramaturgy of waste. Such plays offered opportunities for provocation, contemplation, and reconsideration. The drama of ideas introduced a mode of engaging with the theatrical event that defied the performance principle, calling for a slower speed, a more attentive ear, and potentially for an unsettling of settled worldviews.

In his 1907 play Waste, Granville-Barker takes up the agōn between unsublimated desire and the performance principle, eros and civilization, rendering it as a gendered opposition. In the Victorian era, which drew to a close shortly before the play’s composition, gender roles became sharply defined, with the public sphere largely reserved for men and the domestic sphere left to women.9 People also responded to the dramatic transformation of social and economic life brought about by industrialization with concern about child labor and the welfare of working families. In an increasingly hard-edged, dirty, dense, urban landscape, women were tasked with cultivating a soft, private, refined space where the bodies and souls of children and men could be nourished and recreated. The distinction between men as producers and women as reproducers took a firm hold. While

the complementary importance of both spheres would not generally have been in question, every binary becomes a hierarchy. As Hélène Cixous observes, we have:

Activity/passivity…
Culture/Nature…
Intelligible/Palpable…
Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.
Matter, concave, ground — where steps are taken, holding- and dumping-ground.

Since “thought has always worked through opposition,” if the public sphere was where men confidently made use of their “higher” faculties, the domestic sphere, we are left to assume, was where women groped around in the dark with only their “lower” faculties to guide them. Generally incapable of sublimation, as Freud put it, “woman finds herself forced into the background by the claims of civilization and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it.” Woman becomes the dumping ground of culture. Patriarchy translates her negativity away as hostility.

*Waste* basically accepts the Freudian paradigm; it is a play that loathes women. More interesting for its blind spots and omissions than for its declarative statements, *Waste* follows ambitious politician Henry Trebell as his life unravels in the wake of a scandal instigated by a failure of sublimation. Trebell is an important man, a politician, an ostensibly progressive man. For much of the play, he is busy working on a bill to disestablish the Church of England. He is a hard-bitten materialist who consid-

11 Ibid.
Summarizing his perspective on passion, Trebell declares that “[t]here are three facts in life that call up emotion . . Birth, Death, and the Desire for Children. The niceties are shams.” His behavior toward women is consistent with this philosophy. When the married Amy O’Connell confesses to him that their clandestine tryst some months ago resulted in a pregnancy that cannot be attributed to her husband who has been in another country for over a year, she is frightened, despairing, indignant that by accident of biology she must bear this shame alone. “Oh, the physical curse of being a woman,” she rails, “no better than any savage in this condition . . worse off than an animal. It’s unfair.” She asks Trebell if the evening they spent together meant anything to him, and he replies, “[l]isten. I look back on that night as one looks back on a fit of drunkenness.” She confirms, “[y]ou mean I might have been any other woman,” and he replies, apparently ingenuously, “[w]ouldn’t any other woman have served the purpose[?]”

Amy’s enforced passivity proves intolerable. “You don’t know what it is to have a thing happening in spite of you,” she complains to her unmoved, erstwhile lover. Wounded by his indifference and unable to countenance bearing the child of a man who does not love her, Amy seeks out a doctor willing to perform a back-alley abortion. The dangerous procedure results in her death. When the scandal outs and Trebell’s colleagues learn that he is responsible for the whole sordid affair, they decide they can no longer work with him. He is ousted from their coalition, his life’s work destroyed. For confused reasons, partly an inability to see the purpose of life now that his career is over, partly a desire to make his colleagues rue the day they cast him

14 Ibid., 236.
15 Ibid., 257–58.
16 Ibid., 258.
17 Ibid., 259.
18 Ibid., 255.
out, Trebell kills himself. In the final line of the play, Trebell’s secretary bemoans the suicide: “I’m angry . . just angry at the waste of a good man. Look at the work undone . . think of it! Who is to do it! Oh . . the waste . .!”

We are invited to recognize Trebell’s death as the “waste” of the play’s title, to see his death as a tragedy, the great but flawed man unjustly felled by a single foolish mistake. Amy O’Connell’s death goes largely unmourned. As recently as 2000, the critic John Simon dismissed the character of Amy O’Connell as “highly neurotic.” If neuroses are symptomatic of an imperfect ability or unwillingness to adjust to the demands of culture, she is a neurotic simply by virtue of her gender. The play pits the “masculine” virtues of detachment, order, and discipline against the destructively “feminine” vices of attachment, chaos, and desire. Diametrically opposed and irreconcilable, “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship.” In private life, such as it is, and in work, efficiency, Trebell remarks on more than one occasion, should be of paramount consideration. The rest is a waste of time.

If Waste is about a life destroyed by a failure of sublimation, a fatal hiccup in a life otherwise strictly ordered in accordance with the performance principle, Granville-Barker’s 1905 The Voysey Inheritance is about a surfeit of sublimation and the ruin it brings to a family. The Voysey patriarch, like his father before him, is a financier. His firm has a reputation for expeditiously making money into more money. As heir apparent to the firm, Edward Voysey learns, however, that his father and grandfather have long been helping themselves to the funds other people have entrusted to them, speculating with their clients’ capital, “pocketing the gains, cutting the losses; meanwhile paying the

19 Ibid., 342.
client his ordinary income.”22 By the time Edward is old enough to hear the truth, the firm is deeply compromised. The family's homes, their fine clothes, Edward's sister's dowry—all of it has been purchased with stolen money and the elder Mr. Voysey is in much too deep to be able to pay it back even if he wanted to.

He does at least claim to want to set things right. Mr. Voysey's story is that he inherited this sorry state of affairs from his own father and has righteously dedicated his life to wrangling the debt down to a manageable size. Edwards later discovers that this is a lie, that his father did at one point manage to get the firm in the clear, only to begin illicitly speculating again fifteen years later. But Mr. Voysey has every intention, he tells his son, of catching up before the time has come for Edward to take the helm of the firm. Edward protests that if his father had really wanted to make amends, he would have “lived poor” and devoted himself to his client's good and not to his own aggrandizement.23 But Mr. Voysey does not see it that way: “[w]hat has carried me to victory,” he asks his son, but “the confidence of my clients. What has earned that confidence? A decent life, my integrity, my brains? No, my reputation for wealth . . . that, and nothing else. Business now-a-days is run on the lines of the confidence trick.”24 Without giving his clientele the impression that he was enjoying considerable success, Voysey argues, he would never have been able to convince them to keep investing. Without their investments, he would never be able to turn a profit, and the whole corrupt edifice would come crashing down. Voysey is not wrong. Capitalism itself is a kind of Ponzi scheme, depending on ever-increasing populations, resources, and levels of consumption in order to sustain itself. A cosmic confidence trick is all that keeps it going. There may be no such thing as a financier who is both successful and scrupulously honest.

23 Ibid., 45.
24 Ibid., 46.
Edward takes a youthfully idealistic hard line against this justification, only to find himself tempted by it after his father's untimely demise. To confess everything would mean not only hurting his own family, who have, after all, become accustomed to a certain style of living, but further hurting his clients as well. Once the truth comes out, there will be no chance of Edward's recovering even the principal for anyone, but as long as no one knows the game he is playing, he can still hold out hope of catching up. He soon finds himself taking up the family business. The only adjustment he makes is that he reprioritizes recuperating the investments of his less well-to-do clients over those of his wealthier clients.

Women prove pivotal in *The Voysey Inheritance*. In *Waste*, Amy O'Connell stood for the hero's tragic flaw, embodying all the stereotypical shortcomings of femininity, but the women of *The Voysey Inheritance* exist on a spectrum of worthlessness. At the end of *Waste*, while everyone else is lamenting the death of the great man, a pair of female characters spare a moment to reflect on what became of Amy. “When will men learn to know one woman from another,” one asks. Her companion replies, “[w]hen will all women care to be one thing rather than the other?” The supposed indistinguishability of women is attributed not to any deficiency of male vision or attention but to some pernicious female conspiracy. By contrast, in *The Voysey Inheritance*, several models of femininity are proposed. Edward’s sister Honor is introduced by a striking, gratuitously cruel stage direction indicating that the world would be better off if she were dead. “Poor Honor,” as she is called, “is a phenomenon common to most large families. From her earliest years she has been bottle washer to her brothers. While they were expensively educated, she was grudged schooling; her highest accomplishment was meant to be mending their clothes.” The playwright goes on to tell us of Honor’s parents’ general distaste for her sex,
then continues, “[i]n a less humane society she would have been exposed at birth.”

Honor is barely tolerated, and her existence assumed meaningless, presumably because she has never had any marriage prospects and spends her time scurrying around fetching cigars for the men in her family. One of her brothers wonders aloud, “I wonder they bothered to give her a name.”

Honor is not an important character in the sense of driving the action of the play forward in a significant way. Granville-Barker seems to include her merely to demonstrate that there is such a thing as a woman who is less valuable even than a dumping ground.

The other women are the products of their economic status, determined by their access to capital down to the way they experience desire. Beatrice, married to one of the Voysey brothers is asked if she married for love. She replies: “I’ve had to earn my own living, consequently there isn’t one thing in my life that I have ever done quite genuinely for its own sake . . but always with an eye toward bread-and-butter, pandering to the people who were to give me that.”

Juxtaposed with her is Alice, Edward’s paramour, who is independently wealthy and therefore equipped to selflessly redeem Edward when he is at last found out. They will be married, she assures him, and her income will suffice to sustain them. Their only problem is that, should he go to prison, she will have to be careful not to be excessively proud of him. “My heart praises you,” she tells him just before the final curtain comes down. Perhaps she is proud of him for facing the music, though if he could avoid doing so, it seems he surely would. Perhaps she perversely feels as though there is something chic about having a spouse who has done time for white-collar crime.

Alice (and her money) undo the emergent morals of The Voysey Inheritance. It turns out that crime does pay. Woman, with

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 116.
30 Ibid., 38.
31 Ibid., 130.
her less robustly-developed superego can always be counted upon to enable, forgive, and recompense. The Voyseys oversublimated, forgetting that the figures in their ledgers meant something tangible to actual people. Alice undersublimates, taking it upon herself to break Edward's fall with sexual absolution. Here, rather than complement one another, eros and civilization bring out the worst in each other.

**Ibsen: “Life Is Work”**

Henrik Ibsen elaborated on — some say perfected — Scribe’s well-made play, elevating the form into something substantial enough to bear the weight of such complex themes as the problem of the individual in relationship to society. Ibsen also made ample use of the nineteenth century’s other major popular theatrical genre, melodrama. Where the well-made play privileged technique and intrigue, the melodrama’s emphasis was on emotion. In the classic *mélodrames* of August von Kotzebue and Guîlbert de Pixérécourt, the dramatic action was accompanied by continuous musical underscoring, which guided and heightened the audience’s emotional experience. Also exaggerated in melodrama are the stakes of the conflicts driving the plot. On the surface, melodramas appear to be about a family that can’t pay the rent or the virgin ingenue’s seduction by the corrupt aristocrat. The melodramatic imagination, however, is Manichaean, that is, perceiving the world as divided along the lines of absolute good and absolute evil. At its most primal, melodrama is just this naked conflict. As Eric Bentley argues, melodrama “is drama in its elemental form; it is the quintessence of drama.”

Melodrama is emotionally excessive, because it exceeds itself — the laughter of the moustache-twirling villain is not the villain’s alone but satanic laughter.

In the nineteenth century, melodrama was also typically marked by the godlike intercession of “poetic justice,” which unfailingly ensured that the virtuous prosper while the ne'er-

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do-wells got their comeuppance. As the genre congealed, it too became formulaic, working to reinforce conventional conservative values by punishing the wicked outsiders and libertines by the time the curtain fell, while sparing the righteously chaste defenders of honor, home, and country. One of Ibsen's contributions to modern drama was the way in which he often used melodrama as a kind of red herring, adopting many of the trappings of the form only to subvert the genre's clearly defined polarities. Rather than presenting clearly delineated, internally consistent representatives of good and evil, Ibsen tends to make it difficult for his audiences to discern with any certainty who is doing the right thing for the right motives, the wrong thing for the wrong motives, or some combination of the two. There are neither true heroes nor villains in Ibsen, only human beings susceptible to venality and self-delusion, people struggling mightily with the various uncertainties introduced by the onset of modernity, people who more often than not do rash and regrettable things to escape the discomfort of such uncertainties.

Like the Voysey men, the eponymous protagonist of Ibsen's 1896 *John Gabriel Borkman* is a man whose outsize ambition and self-regard blind him to his own needs and the needs of those closest to him. Borkman is another financier who illegally speculated with his clients' money in an attempt to enrich himself. Once Borkman was caught, he lost everything and went to prison. The play begins eight years after he is released, but Borkman is still a prisoner, living separately from his unforgiving wife in their own home, never showing his face in public. He spends his days pacing the floor of the attic to which he has exiled himself. Like so many in his line of work, Borkman does not see himself as a thief; he is a zealous believer in the capitalist fantasy of infinite economic expansion. He maintains that with their money in his capable hands, his entire stable of unwitting investors would eventually have had their down payments on his future returned to them; Borkman planned to use the capital to fund a large-scale project extracting valuable minerals from the earth. But Borkman's motivations are complex. He is not exclusively inspired by cold self-interest. He legitimately believes
that if he were to once again assume control of the appropriate resources, he would have “the power to create human happiness for vast multitudes around me.”33 The son of a miner, he comes from humble origins and is not indifferent to the struggles of the working class. Even so, Borkman’s hubris eclipses in his mind the ethical implications of gambling with other people’s money, and it ultimately leads to tragedy.

In his isolation, Borkman’s embrace of capitalism takes on a perversely religious dimension. He equates the accumulation of wealth with the attainment of “the kingdom — and the power — and the glory,” a quotation from the Gospel according to Matthew.34 In the biblical scene from which the phrase is drawn, Christ is instructing his disciples in the proper way to pray. Addressing himself to the Father, Christ avows, “[f]or thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever.”35 The irony of Borkman’s misappropriation of the locution is twofold if considered in the context of the Catholic Mass, during which worshipers still recite this doxology in response to the Lord’s Prayer. At this moment during the liturgy, the entire congregation has taken hands, symbolically joining together as one body. All hands are then lifted heavenward together, signifying a community of believers united in self-abnegation. Borkman’s sacrilegious rewrite both deposes God in favor of Mammon and erases all suggestion of a communitarian ethos.

What we call “futures trading” is big business on Wall Street today. This investment practice might well have appealed to both Borkman and his wife. Gunhild Borkman’s obsession with attaining a personalized “kingdom” is as keen as her husband’s. Being a nineteenth-century wife and mother, however, her path to power and glory differs. Now that living vicariously through her disgraced husband is no longer an option, she has invested all her hopes in her son Erhart. The language of finance

34 Ibid., 394.
is ubiquitous in the play even and especially when characters are speaking of matters of the heart, but Gunhild’s vocabulary is more religious than economic. Erhart, for example, presents Gunhild with a path to “restitution” for her wasted life.\textsuperscript{36} Her son will undertake the “sacred mission” of restoring the honor of the family. By dedicating his life to an as-yet-to-be-determined noble cause — but certainly something substantive, legal, and dignified — he is expected to turn a profit for his mother in some cosmic sense, repaying the debt she is owed by his father.

Gunhild’s mercenary model of motherhood is contrasted with that of her twin sister Ella Rentheim, who fostered Erhart when he was a child during the worst of the fraud scandal surrounding his father. Ella listens to her sister’s grand plans for Erhart’s future with alarm. Ella’s maternal concern manifests in what appears to be a less self-serving way; she just wants to love and be loved by Erhart and to see him happy, like (as we later learn) she just wanted to love and be loved by his father many years ago. Gunhild’s ideas about love are bound up with profit and possession. She adapts the avarice that drives her husband in the public sphere for use in the private sphere. Ella’s attitude toward the young man’s dalliance with a slightly older local woman is blasé, romance and pleasure-seeking being the prerogative of the young, in her view. Gunhild, by contrast, is deeply threatened. Not only is Erhart frittering away his valuable time at dances and the like, he is also drifting into another woman’s sphere of influence, a woman young enough to be sexually appealing but mature enough to lead him from the straight and narrow path Gunhild has prescribed for him.

Before long, Ella reveals that she is not prepared to divest herself of her adopted son either. When she arrives at the Borkman’s home, it is to stake her claim not to power over Erhart but to his name. If he disavows the name Borkman and agrees to carry on the name Rentheim, then they will forever be bound together as mother and son, a bond Ella covets more than ever now that her health is failing fast. Greed has devastated the lives

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 316.
of Borkman, Gunhild, and Ella, but Ella’s is perhaps the most barren. Formerly in love with Borkman, she was rejected in favor of her sister because someone with the power to offer Borkman a promotion at the bank had fallen for Ella. Confronting Borkman, she says, “It’s ages since the two of us met […]. A whole lifetime between. A lifetime wasted […]. For us both.” Borkman “abandoned [Ella] for higher incentives.”

**Borkman:** I couldn’t get on without his help. And he set you as his price.

**Ella:** And you paid the price. In full. Without a murmur.

**Borkman:** I had no choice. It was win or go under.

**Ella:** *(her voice trembling, as she looks at him).* Is it really true what you say — that I was dearest in the world to you then?

**Borkman:** Both then and after — long, long after.

**Ella:** And still you traded me away. Bargained your rightful love to another man. Sold my love for a — for a bank presidency.

Borkman objects to Ella’s assessment of their “wasted” lives. Perhaps she wasted hers. She could, after all, have married the man who came between the two of them. And Borkman made certain that while his own family and clients’ fortunes disintegrated, she at least came out financially secure. But Ella and Borkman have no common vocabulary with which to productively discuss things like waste and necessity. “There’s no such thing as a sexual relationship.” As Borkman explains:

**Borkman:** I suppose it’s very natural for you to see this the way you do. You’re a woman. And so it seems, to your mind, that nothing else in the world exists or matters.

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37 Ibid., 352.
38 Ibid., 355.
39 Ibid., 355–56.
ELLA: Yes, nothing else.
BORKMAN: Only what touches your own heart.
ELLA: Only that! Only that! Yes.
BORKMAN: But you have to remember that I’m a man. As a woman, to me, you were the dearest in the world. But in the last analysis, any woman can be replaced by another.  

Ella’s doppelgänger Gunhild ends up with the man, who doesn’t matter to her without the money, and Ella ends up with the money, which doesn’t matter to her without the man. As women, they are interchangeable and expendable. “Oh, these women!” Borkman laments, “[t]hey corrupt and distort our lives! They completely botch up our destinies — our paths to glory.”  

Women distract, ensnare, draw men into a relational existence rather than allowing them to merely preside over their own lives and the lives of others. “Life is work,” Borkman tells his son, hoping to save him from the dangerous pull of the feminine. A familiar figure from Ibsen’s oeuvre, Borkman is an “all or nothing” extremist. There can be no happy marriage of work and love, masculine and feminine. So he remains isolated, his emotional life as much of a wasteland as those of the two women who loved him. As Borkman finds himself nearing death, he stands alone with Ella in a small clearing high in the woods. Just at the moment when it seems he might repent, see the error of his ways, tell his beloved that he was wrong to forsake her, Borkman instead delivers a melancholy ode to the untapped potential of his true love — rocks:

BORKMAN: I can sense them, the buried millions. I feel the veins of metal reaching their curving, branching, beckoning arms out to me. I saw them before me like living shadows — the night I stood in the bank vault with a lantern in my hand. You wanted your freedom then — and I tried to

41 Ibid., 357.
42 Ibid., 348.
43 Ibid., 376.
set you free. But I lacked the strength for it. Your treasures sank back into the depths.\textsuperscript{44}

So, too, have Ella’s treasures sunk back into the depths. Left uncultivated, her body and soul are wasted, landscapes rich in resources never harvested, never put to any use. But Ella was never looking for a return on her investment, as Gunhild was; Ella wanted to spend herself but found the market closed. In \textit{Borkman}, Ibsen shows how when love and work are at odds, the harder of the two to quantify is often the loser. Only one currency is accepted here; the rest is waste.

\textbf{Policing Catharsis: The Passion of Politics and the Politics of Passion in Brecht}

Bertolt Brecht’s expressly anti-capitalist epic theater was highly waste-conscious, but Brecht’s was the obverse of a dramaturgy of waste. Brecht instead resisted the performance principle by attempting to carefully regulate the economy of emotion in the theater. Rather than letting inflated passions overflow or run to extremes as in melodrama, Brecht believed that catharsis was too precious a thing to waste on an aesthetic experience. Catharsis should rather be instrumentalized, put in service of altering the material abjection of the human condition. According to Brecht’s liberationist worldview, the basic facts of social reality are subject to change. Because the present conditions of social existence are always already the result of specific human actions, specific human actions can be undertaken today to willfully shape the conditions of social existence tomorrow.

Brecht defined his epic theater as the antithesis of Aristotelian tragedy, which he saw as politically enervating. The experience of catharsis purges the spectator of pity and fear, but for Brecht this purgation represented a waste of emotions that could and ought to be put to better use. Properly incited and channeled, pity and fear could be fomented into righteous rage that could propel the spectator from her seat into the street to

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 394.
join the revolution. Tragedy, Brecht thought, left the spectator drained, resigned to her fate, and prepared to tolerate even what ought to be intolerable. Brecht’s dramaturgy was shaped by the anti-fatalistic belief that the body in pain could be liberated by the mind, by *homo faber*, architect of better futures and other possible worlds. Brecht sought to appeal to the spectator’s intellect — emotion should remain bottled up as fuel for struggles to come. During his lifetime, Brecht objected when his plays were performed in an overly emotional style, in a style that invited catharsis, as though each drop of incidentally spilled sentiment reduced the potency of his larger project.

The irrepressibly pathos-inducing *Mother Courage and Her Children*, co-authored with Margarete Steffin, gave Brecht more than its fair share of trouble in this respect. Leopold Lindtberg helmed the 1941 premiere production, and audiences were overcome by the sympathy they felt for the heroine, Anna Fierling, who loses her children one by one while roaming Europe during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), staying alive by selling provisions to soldiers of any affiliation out of a cart she drags behind her. Brecht thought that this empathic response demonstrated an inadequate exercise of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, on the part of the actors and an inadequate understanding of it on the part of the spectators. The ideal, Brechtian actor was to stand some distance apart from and comment on rather than *be* the character. Brecht frequently used humor and cultivated incongruity to interrupt the flow of narrative and interfere with emotional momentum. Suspense was to be avoided by telegraphing the events of the plot using text displayed on placards so that audiences could focus not so much on what happened as on how and why it was happening. Though Brecht tried to make it more difficult for audiences to sympathize with Anna Fierling, the how and why of *Mother Courage* — brutal economic necessity — has often been subsumed by the what — the death of the innocent. At the climax of the play, Fierling has only one child remaining, the mute Katrin. Katrin climbs up to a rooftop, begins beating a drum to warn the villagers of approaching soldiers, and is shot dead. Historically, it has proven
nearly impossible to stage the play’s climax without calling forth an emotional response.

The affective potential of the play, however, need not be seen as a pitfall to be avoided. In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner observes that Brecht, though he would have denied it, gave us a new kind of tragedy, the “tragedy of waste.” In this context, waste means loss, senseless destruction, meaningless suffering — the waste of the capitalist system that in Brecht’s plays appears in human terms. Where Aristotelian tragedy generates pity and fear by emphasizing human helplessness — the inevitability of our ultimately succumbing to forces more powerful than ourselves — a tragedy of waste such as *Mother Courage* presents suffering that is terrible to behold precisely because it is *not* inevitable. In a tragedy of waste, the events that produce the suffering are presented as avoidable, the results of human choices rather than divine mandate or natural law. According to Steiner, *Mother Courage* is an allegory of pure waste not only because the heroine loses all of her children, but because she learns nothing from her experience.45 There is no scene of recognition, no lamentation. The play closes with Fierling leaving her daughter’s body for some peasant women to bury, taking up her wagon again, and trundling off down the road to continue following the soldiers, her market, intoning, “I must get back to business.”46

The “tragedy of waste” is what Steiner proposed as a possible survivor of what he identified as the “death of tragedy” proper in the Western dramatic tradition. With the West having lost its grasp on religious faith, Steiner argued, our culture no longer possesses in common an adequate shared background for tragedy, a shared set of myths or creeds concerning how human destiny is arbitrated by higher forces. Raymond Williams responds to Steiner by arguing that even if the pagan pantheons

are in ruins and God is dead, Western peoples still share plenty of beliefs—the belief in the invincibility of global capitalism is among the most powerful. One need not be a church-going Protestant to endorse and strive to live by a Protestant work ethic, eschewing idleness and devoting oneself to enhancing one’s performance, increasing one’s productivity.

Though it is not set during wartime, Brecht’s 1943 *The Good Person of Setzuan* demonstrates that capitalist “peace” retains much of the violence that characterizes periods of official conflict. *Good Person* is a tragedy of waste in which the heroine learns something and is literally transformed by the acquisition of knowledge. Brecht originally intended to title the play *Die Ware Liebe (The Product Love)*, reflecting his conviction that even love, affection, and altruism can be commodified, reterritorialized by capitalism. The heroine of *Good Person* is Shen Teh, a virtuous young prostitute. The gods come to visit Shen Teh’s province and find that she alone has not forsaken their principles. Poor as she is, Shen Teh is generous and charitable, while greed has consumed the rest of her community. The gods give Shen Teh a sum of money in exchange for the hospitality she shows them and also to see if her virtue will hold up once she knows how it feels to have something to lose. Shen Teh buys a tobacco shop and soon finds that the more she has, the more her neighbors need from her. To avoid being ruinously exploited while struggling to manage their demands, Shen Teh assumes the identity of her fictional cousin, the hardheaded and unyielding Shui Ta, a male authority figure who has no difficulty saying no to those in need. She learns that capitalism loves only the lonely. Feminine selflessness and passionate attachment are liabilities Shen Teh must forsake in favor of Shui Ta’s masculine individualism if she is to survive. Though she has never been more affluent, for the first time, she is truly afraid.

A perennial problem with the scarcity mentality inculcated by an economics of fear is that it creates inequality from abundance. A society built on fear becomes a society of anxiety once fear has fulfilled its function, when stability and broadly shared prosperity is within reach. Anxiety has no purpose or object,
but it cannot be reasoned away. It lingers, telling us that we are not safe, that we are not enough, don’t have enough, that the catastrophe is right around the corner. In *Good Person*, that anxiety leads to the exploited becoming the exploiter. While Shui Ta is called into being to eliminate waste, he takes to his role so well that he becomes the “Tobacco King of Setzuan,” owner of an ever-expanding business and a factory that employs more than twice the lawful number of workers. Shen Teh falls in love with a depressed, unemployed pilot only to have him use her for money, get her pregnant, and abandon her. As her pregnancy progresses, Shen Teh struggles to conceal her femininity, even as the business she runs as Shui Ta becomes a more and more high-stakes enterprise, the pressure to perform as a hypermasculine taskmaster ramping ever-upwards. The transformation prompted by Shen Teh’s acquisition of knowledge alienates her from herself and ultimately leaves her crying out in vain for help to the sympathetic, but useless, gods. The play’s epilogue situates the possibility for truly revolutionary transformation in the audience, asking, “[c]an the world be changed? […] You write the happy ending to the play! There must, there must, there’s got to be a way!” Deliberately denying the audience catharsis, Brecht seeks to catalyze political action with aesthetic frustration.

**Postdramatic Theater/Postideological Theater**

Brechtian dramaturgy exposes the means of production to prevent dramatic absorption, to train the spectator to regard the world outside the theater skeptically, and to furnish the spectator with the basic tools of Marxist analysis. A more recent revolution in Western theatrical form creates even more distance between theater and drama. Brechtian theater invites the spectator to take a close and critical look at cause and effect, while what Hans-Thies Lehmann has termed “postdramatic theater” declines to treat narrative causation as the primary fulcrum.

of the theatrical event at all. Postdramatic theater largely does away with the “fictive cosmos” crucial to the coherence of much dramatic theater. Rather than inviting spectators to “suspend disbelief” and temporarily invest in the independent reality of the world of the play behind the proscenium arch, postdramatic theater acknowledges that the theatrical event is taking place in time and space shared by performer and spectator, permitting rupture and irruptions of the real. Yet, for Lehmann, postdramatic theater is not a theater that exists “‘beyond’ drama, without any relation to it.”\textsuperscript{48} Postdramatic theater still measures its distance from drama. It is still mourning and recovering from drama. According to Lehmann, postdramatic theater should be understood as “the unfolding and blossoming of a potential of disintegration, dismantling, and deconstruction within drama itself.”\textsuperscript{49}

While not a unified style or movement, the work characterized by Lehmann as postdramatic shares a few general formal features. In addition to the elimination of the intact fictive cosmos, postdramatic theater de-hierarchizes the various theatrical elements that have traditionally been organized in service of the text. Borrowing a grammatical term, Lehmann calls this new ordering of things “parataxis.” Light, sound, costume, rhythm, and spatiality are no longer subordinated to a text as in the dramatic theater; they are not subordinated to anything at all, but rather coordinated. There is no default center, no spine. New combinations of intelligences inform the composers of postdramatic theatrical scores.

According to Aristotle, the ideal drama should have a certain magnitude. A vanishingly brief drama, like an infinitesimally small creature in nature, lacks the duration or dimension to be properly beheld. On the other hand, a drama that is too long and sprawling cannot be embraced by the mind of the spectator; the unity of the whole escapes us. “Beauty,” Aristotle tells us,
“is a matter of size and order.” Postdramatic theater strives for something other than that which Aristotle, advocate of moderation in all things, would have found beautiful. In postdramatic theater, “[t]here is either too much or too little.” Postdramatic theater tends to inundate and withhold, sometimes simultaneously. It runs to the extremes of form, “the wasteland of unseizable extension and labyrinthine chaotic accumulation.”

These approaches dispel passive, total absorption and demand a different type of engagement from spectators. In psychoanalysis, Lehmann tells us, the term “evenly hovering attention” is used to characterize the way the analyst listens to the analysand. This is the kind of attention that postdramatic theater requires. The dramatic theater, particularly of the tidily packaged, Scribean variety, sought to delight, to ingratiate itself with the spectator. The dramatic theater was an efficient employee, but the postdramatic theater is a frequently uncooperative analysand, structurally selfish, needy, and often ultimately unknowable. An unusual amount of patience may be required with this patient. In the psychoanalytic context, “everything depends on not understanding immediately.” Like the analyst’s, the postdramatic spectator’s perception must “remain open for connections, correspondences and clues at completely unexpected moments, perhaps casting what was said earlier in a completely new light.” Meaning is deferred, perhaps indefinitely.

In psychoanalysis, a session might be quiet and uneventful, with a recalcitrant patient offering only a cough here or a twitch there to give the analyst anything to go on. In another session, a patient might release a torrent of memories or tears or recriminations. Similarly, in the postdramatic theater, the density and intensity of signs may vary. The performance may try to seduce, disorient, repel, or remain aloof, but the spectator must do the

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52 Ibid., 90.
53 Ibid., 87.
54 Ibid.
work of determining what is of import. Postdramatic theater, like psychoanalysis and the psyche itself, is inefficient. It generates a great deal of apparent waste in the form of either excessive stimuli or empty, underutilized time and space. Of course, in the theater, nothing is really wasted. The theater’s prodigiously wasteful economy of meaning can only be possible, and ethical, because time and space, the theater’s basic ingredients, are infinitely renewable resources — our only infinitely renewable resources.

**Wallace Shawn’s Predramatic/Postdramatic Soliloquies**

Wallace Shawn’s monologue-driven plays present a paradox of classification; they can be understood as either pre- or postdramatic. Lehmann’s precursor Peter Szondi saw postdramatic theater arising out of a crisis of the dialogic form, a crisis of confidence in the ability of the human subject to communicate its content in language. Lehmann noted that in postdramatic theater, monological and choral structures come to supersede dialogical structures. Shawn’s *The Fever* exists in this postdramatic space while simultaneously harkening back to the earliest theatrical artifacts of Western civilization, notably *Prometheus Bound*. *The Fever*’s action, such as it is, is narrated, not dramatized. It toys, however, with eliminating the fictive cosmos, allowing Shawn to give voice to his own actual beliefs about his own actual class.

When Shawn first staged it in 1990, he chose to perform *The Fever* in private apartments rather than in a theater, and he chose to perform the sole role himself. He hoped to avoid making something that would be consumed as mere entertainment and to allow the theatrical event to be consumed by the real. Shawn has explained, “I’m trying to tell somebody something that I mean. And you can’t do that in a theater, because if you put a person on stage in a theater, that person will be interpreted
as a character in a story.”\textsuperscript{55} The Fever has since been performed by other actors, but the sole speaker is unmistakably Shawn, scion of Manhattan literati, educated at Harvard and Oxford, connoisseur of the finer things in life. In The Fever, he reports that his hitherto pleasant, privileged life begins to putrefy after he reads Marx, which he does “at the very same time that Communism had finally died.”\textsuperscript{56} Referring to the fall of the Berlin Wall, which took place just a few months before the first performances of The Fever, Shawn also here invokes “The End of History,” the essay in which Francis Fukuyama announced that the end of the Cold War presaged more than the end of a particular era of geopolitical conflict but of the end of history itself. “We may be witnessing,” Fukuyama wrote, “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”\textsuperscript{57} With the fall of the Soviet Union, Fukuyama believed, the Western liberal democratic model stands alone and vindicated because “the class issue has actually been successfully resolved in the West.”\textsuperscript{58}

The Fever questions this conclusion. The play begins as an account of the scales falling from its speaker’s eyes. A devoted lifelong student of his own thoughts and feelings — those things that make the speaker, he believes, an individual and an ethically solvent human being — the speaker has missed the obvious. More than his particular taste in classical music, relationships with intriguing friends and cherished family, or opinions about politics, it is his class that makes him who he is. It is his class that has made it possible for him to grow up believing that things like his taste and opinions are special or significant at all. Because, as Shawn has said, “America has a blind spot on the issue of money and class,” in The Fever, everything but class falls


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 9.
away. People are reduced to their class privilege, or lack thereof, and it becomes impossible to ignore the issue.

When the speaker of The Fever begins to become aware of the relationship between his pleasure and the pain of the poor both in his own city and in far-flung beleaguered nations convulsed by revolution, he becomes afflicted by constant, violent nausea. The play begins with the speaker lurching to the bathroom to kneel before the toilet. He has recently received, as an anonymous gift, a copy of Marx’s Capital. Soon after, he visits a series of poor countries, where at first he cannot help romanticizing, aestheticizing them. He eats the ice cream that the wealthy people of the countries eat in glittering restaurants while the poor rebels are raped and tortured out of sight. One day, the ice cream he had been inhaling with such relish begins to taste bland and unappetizing. His enjoyment is gone. “I’d always said,” the speaker reflects, “I’m a happy person. I love life,’ but now there was a sort of awful indifference or blankness that was coming from somewhere inside me and filling me up, bit by bit. Things that would once have delighted me or cheered me seemed to go dead on me, to spoil.”59 The depression persists.

As is often the case in Shawn’s work, the body and the mind are not fully synchronized. The speaker is plagued by physical torments long before he is able to understand what is rotten on an intellectual or sociopolitical level. Over the course of the play, he confronts a chambermaid who sleeps in filth and Marxist revolutionaries imprisoned or murdered for their convictions, along with other human refuse of global capitalism. These encounters force the speaker to confront the fact that he is directly responsible for these people and has in fact produced them. His fate and the chambermaid’s are linked. Her existence, the filth she sleeps in, her ignorance and poverty are the cost of his prosperity. He does not own the factories. He does not set wages or determine the length of the working day. But his habits of consumption alone render him culpable, “the end of history” notwithstanding. “[W]e can’t escape our connection to the poor,”

the speaker says, because “[w]ithout the poor to get the fruit off the trees, to tend the excrement under the ground, to bathe our babies on the day they’re born, we couldn’t exist. Without the poor to do awful work, we would spend our lives doing awful work.”60 For Shawn, because capitalism has not liberated the chambermaid, capitalism has not been vindicated. *The Fever* poses a challenge to Fukuyama’s post-ideological narrative of world history, suggesting that ideology is most insidious when invisible, when we allow ourselves to be persuaded that we are “post” as in “beyond” rather than “post” as in “recovering from.” Shawn grapples with the consequences of global capitalism by presenting violent parables of inequality that make ideology’s presence in our lives starkly visible once again.

In Marxian terms, ideology creates false consciousness, blinding us to the relationship between the commodities we purchase on the market and the exploitation of the laborers that produced them. “Ideology” as Althusser elaborates, “has a material existence,” a self-reinforcing apparatus comprised of our actions and conventional behaviors.61 The sudden illness and disaffection of *The Fever*’s speaker can be read as a rupture in the fabric of this apparatus. The unraveling begins when he finds that he can no longer make the gestures of the good bourgeois. For Althusser, ideology does not, as Marx believed, simply cover up “the real.” Rather, “[i]deology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”62 Following Lacan, Althusser understands our relationship to ideology as always already bounded by language, something we can observe in Shawn’s internally riven monologue. The speaker is constituted by his capacity (and incapacity) to explain himself to himself, to his imagined interlocutors, and first his own friends in their apartments in the early 1990s performances, which

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60 Ibid., 49.
62 Ibid., 109.
Shawn has described as “like a secret meeting of the bourgeois class, in which I would speak frankly about what we were.”

A plot can be teased out of The Fever, but the play is mainly one long scene of recognition, an unexplained awakening. Marx’s Capital comes out of nowhere and goes to work not on an intellectual level but as an emetic. Everything is as it was, yet suddenly everything is transfigured. Suddenly, everything is intolerable. There is no event, only knowledge. The postdramatic theatricality of The Fever, however, lies in the impossibility of the self coinciding with itself, and the impossibility of the bourgeois self seeing itself, let alone changing itself. Describing the experience of attending a dinner party in a posh quarter of a city much like New York, Shawn’s speaker broods over a distinction he would not have been aware of before his awakening. He experiences himself as a person thinking about a dinner party, thinking about the complicated feelings he has about the party, about how he likes some of the people, but not others, likes the centerpiece, but not that woman’s dress. “But no,” he corrects himself, “[n]o. I see it so clearly. I see myself with my little fork — I wasn’t a person who was thinking about a party. I was a person who was at a party, who sat at the table, drank the wine and ate the fish.”

The person thinking about the party is comprehensible, complicated, sympathetic. The person at the party is a George-Grosz caricature of a blasé, cigar-smoking capitalist. The two cannot be reconciled, just as the contradictions of the speaker’s life, of all our lives under capitalism cannot be reconciled. The things he loves, the things he lives for, are the same things that make him, him and every member of his class, a murderer and a destroyer of human dignity. There is no reason why he deserves what he has or why the chambermaid deserves her lot, and every day he holds onto what he has, his guilt grows. “Keeping the money is just a choice I’m making, a choice I’m making every day.”

He could make another choice, the speaker reflects. Why

63 Shawn “The Art of Theater No. 17.”
64 Shawn, The Fever, 6.
65 Ibid., 67.
not give everything away? If people are starving, give them food. Until one is starving oneself, there is no other defensible choice. But the speaker knows he will never make this choice. “The life I live is irredeemably corrupt,” he finally concludes, “[i]t has no justification.”

If this was Brecht, such recognition would prompt a demand for change, but *The Fever* ends with the newly awakened speaker going back to sleep, choosing private shame over public action. *The Fever* is a peculiar kind of tragedy of waste because the knowledge acquired by the protagonist is wasted, not acted upon. He learns something. He even cares. He is sickened by his knowledge. But Shawn takes a bracingly cynical view of such isolating, unactionable, liberal guilt. There is nothing ennobling about merely feeling bad for the poor or about merely recognizing that the life one lives is irredeemably corrupt. It is only honest, another expression of the privileged, twentieth-century person’s narcissistic obsession with self-knowledge. The contained, monologic form of *The Fever* reflects the solipsism of not only a post-ideological but a post-social world. “There is no such thing as society.” Without class consciousness, when the collective ceases to exist in the imaginary of the people, collective action becomes impossible, leaving only impotent, misdirected, individual actors presiding over kingdoms of one.

This civic atomization is explored more exhaustively in Shawn’s plays featuring multiple characters telling different versions of the same story. *Evening at the Talk House*, Shawn’s 2015 play on themes similar to those of *The Fever*, takes place in a post-ideological world that has so thoroughly inoculated itself against conceiving of any alternative to capitalism that it is no longer necessary to keep capitalism’s violence entirely hidden from view or fully banned from polite conversation. In the twenty-first century, it is possible for capitalism to go essentially unchallenged, even when fewer and fewer of those who once benefited from the inequalities that capitalism produces are managing to stay on the side of the class divide they feel is their

66 Ibid., 64.
birthright, without committing atrocities with their own bare hands. *Talk House* is both a dark fantasia on the emerging gig economy and a referendum on the state of theatrical art, ironically reverting to a more tame, naturalistic dramaturgy even as Shawn is suggesting that as goes the theater, so goes civilization. The demise of this communal art form is imagined as a symptom, or even cause, of a decadent society’s descent into barbarism. *Talk House* takes place in the once-tony private club of the play’s title, a favorite haunt of theater folk back when that endangered species roamed free. A group of them have reunited to commemorate the ten-year anniversary of a production they worked on together, a highlight in many of their lives. The fortunes of those assembled have risen and fallen unevenly in the ensuing years, but they quickly settle back into familiar habits, trading showbiz snark and memories of the good old days. There is some perfunctory talk about politics, and while certain irregular details, such as the fact that elections are now held every few months though one of the same two candidates always wins, may cause us to prick up our ears, they are not treated as cause for alarm.

Portents of darker developments emerge when the conversation turns to how these erstwhile artists have been scraping together a living now that the theater no longer keeps them in Scotch and hors d’oeuvres. The playwright Robert and leading man Tom have found a measure of success working in television, while the composer Ted and costume designer Annette eventually admit that they have had to take on some freelance work doing “targeting” for the government to supplement their more meager incomes.

“Targeting,” Annette insists repeatedly, is “a very simple mechanical process” that happens to involve identifying individuals destined for elimination under the state Program of Murdering.67 While everyone is aware of the existence of this program, those whose financial circumstances have insulated them from

WASTE

its practical operations are rather shocked to discover that their friends are involved in such things. Annette defends her work and the regular paycheck it guarantees. “I study lists of people and decide who has to be killed,” she explains. “Like half the people I know,” Ted adds. The murder program might be distasteful, and is for that reason handled secretly, but it is a necessary evil. Annette likens dropping bombs onto people to politely excusing oneself from a meal and “dropping some waste into the toilet.”69 It isn’t the done thing to raise such topics in mixed company, but no one denies that they are a part of life.

That this all remains fairly abstract for most people is what makes it possible for the program to exist, but the specter solidifies when formerly beloved actor Dick (played by Shawn in the 2017 US premiere) unexpectedly intrudes on their little party sporting a badly bruised face. He has been beaten by his “friends,” a warning issued for expressing unspecified objectionable opinions, and the gossip he has to contribute has to do with mutual acquaintances who have recently dropped dead at dinner, their drinks poisoned by friends in another offshoot of the murder program. Before the Evening at the Talk House is out, another life will be claimed in this manner.

How have things reached this point? Where is the resistance? Tom, who hobnobs with the most powerful politicians in the country describes them all as very “nice.”70 The other guests are only concerned with their own comfort and safety. And television ratings. When Jane, a young waitress, shares that she spent time in Nigeria doing some of the murder program’s actual murdering, it is remarked that Robert’s show isn’t at all successful in Nigeria, and the conversation turns to regional tastes in frothy, prime-time offerings. In an introductory soliloquy, Robert admits that he does not really miss the theater, which after all is nothing more than “a small group of humans sitting and star-

68 Ibid., 39.
69 Ibid., 37.
70 Ibid., 54.
ing at another small group of humans.”71 This reductive, but not entirely inaccurate, definition sums up much of what is challenging about the theater, what makes it both vital and easily dismissed. It is most often a small-scale operation with a tiny reach compared with film and television. It asks for the sort of sustained and intense attention that makes intimacy possible. It insists on singularity — that of a character trapped in a particular set of circumstances, a director’s idiosyncratic way with time and space, or a performer whose heart was pounding a little harder on Friday than on Saturday. It also insists on community, however provisional. We make plays in groups, gather to watch them in groups. Deep knowledge of the other traverses the psychic space between collaborators, and ideally a similar exchange traverses the proscenium. Annette says that she divides her life in two: life before the group’s last play together, when her world was shaped by the relationships she cultivated as a theater artist, and life after. Now she sews alone in her apartment doing piecework for wealthy clients. She also does targeting. Society becomes possible when individuals gather together to engage in a wasteful communion. The new scarcity mentality precludes such rites. In Talk House, we see social isolation and economic precarity engendering a bourgeoning underclass of contract killers, and we see that the theater will not save us. No, even and especially in the West, the class issue has not actually been successfully resolved.

Elfriede Jelinek, Regietheater, and the Disposable Text

Scholars of postdramatic theater often emphasize the postdramatic’s deprivileg ing of the text, but the Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek’s plays present the special case of the fully realized, postdramatic text. Jelinek’s earliest texts for the theater were scripts, blueprints for productions. They designated characters and dialogue and provided stage directions indicating how speech was intended to drive, conflict with, or otherwise coexist

71 Ibid., 10.
with action. In their relatively conventional form, plays such as *Clara S.* (1982), *Illness or Modern Women* (1987), and *Services* (1994) retain readily discernible relationships to narrative causation even though each veers into grotesquerie, with women transforming into vampires in *Illness* and an orgy punched up with bestiality taking over the stage in *Services*. In these texts, though she does not direct her own work, Jelinek took responsibility for the mise-en-scène of her plays. She would establish a passably naturalistic situation and then, over the course of the play, turn it inside-out, rendering latent violence and sexuality manifest. Even in her early plays she always leaves the seams of language showing—characters wear their speech like ill-fitting suits—and this obvious incongruity invites performances that exploit the uneasiness of the speaker’s singular physical presence trapped inside a prêt-à-porter vocabulary.

In the German-speaking theater world, however, directors in the *Regietheater* ("director’s theater") tradition are the ones who typically take responsibility for ripping plays apart. Jelinek’s texts have contributed significantly to tutoring the current generation of major directors in this approach.72 *Regietheater* is known for aggressive interpretations.73 Radical cuts, interpolations, transpositions of time and place, and a disregard for the type and number of performers specified by the playwright are all commonplace in the *Regietheater* tradition. This lack of deference to authorial intent and the text itself is distasteful to some, but far from objecting to interventionist approaches to her texts, Jelinek has perhaps uniquely relished tussling with her directors or co-authors. In 1995, the German director Frank Castorf staged a version of *Services* which closed with a staged violation of the body of the author herself—a caricature of Jelinek as a huge, mechanical, sex doll, complete with blinking nipples and genitalia, took the stage and mumbled incomprehensibly...

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for ten minutes, at once crudely sexualizing Jelinek and making a mockery of the long, digressive, monologic form of her texts. Jelinek approved. Though the choice was offensive, she said, it was absolutely the correct one for the play.

Embracing the fact that, within the Regietheater tradition, her texts were bound to be (ab)used as pretexts for the vision of a director, Jelinek began leaving her plays more and more open. Beginning with Sports Play in 1998, her prefatory stage directions have been exceedingly minimal and, in tone, ironically resigned to being ignored. “The author doesn’t give many stage directions, she has learned her lesson by now. Do what you like,” read Sports Play’s. In her 2002 “Princess Play,” Jackie, her initial proposal for a mise-en-scène is followed by the sardonic coda: “But I’m sure you’ll think of something completely different.” The description of the opening tableau for her 2008 Rechnitz concludes more amiably with: “Of course, it can also be done completely differently, as always with my plays.” For her 2009 The Merchant’s Contracts she is particularly blasé: “The text can start and stop anywhere at random. It doesn’t matter how it is staged... whatever...” Opening stage directions for her 2003 Bambiland are comically ornery:

I don’t know I don’t know. Just stick a knit stocking cap on it, the kind with a tassel on top like my dad used to wear with his old overalls while building our little single-family home. Never seen anything uglier than that. I don’t know what kind of crime you’d have to commit or sentence you’d have to get to get stuck wearing something that ugly on your head. Cut off a knit stocking, tie it off at the top to form a sort of pom-pom, and stick it on your head. That’s that.

74 Jelinek, Sports Play, 39.
76 Jelinek, Rechnitz and The Merchant’s Contracts, 64.
77 Ibid., 176.
She sounds as though she has just been asked for guidance by an incompetent costume designer who has been pestering her for hints all morning. The answer she gives is characteristically confounding. Willfully obscure, saying too little of what is necessary to efficiently convey meaning and too much of what seems extraneous, opaque, inappropriately autobiographical, and glib. “Like my dad used to wear” does not provide the director or reader with an objective description or image of any kind. It is a hopelessly personal association. The author’s affect overwhelmed her content. Communication is subordinated to attitude.

In each of these cases, Jelinek is at once provoking directors, confronting them with a challenge, and surrendering to their authority. She provokes by writing texts that are often literally unstageable as written. Too long, too formless, and too impenetrable, her texts for the theater have been called “language planes” (Textflächen). “Since the drama in her texts does not unfold in the action,” her frequent translator Gitta Honegger writes, “but is buried in the language itself — quotes from literary and philosophical canons, from historical sources, popular culture, political speak, and the Web — it is up to the directors of Jelinek’s plays to cull the narrative they will stage from the 150-odd pages of texts.” This type of challenge also presents enormous opportunities; a director has a great deal of leeway when it comes to determining what in the text they would like to emphasize or deemphasize, criticize, mock, ignore, or cut (indeed, in most cases, they must cut simply to wrestle a piece down to a manageable scale. Einer Schleef’s landmark 1998 production of Sports Play included 142 performers and lasted seven hours, an undertaking that very few theaters would have the resources to support. Regarding the necessity of imposing cuts on a Jelinek play, the director Nicholas Stemann once said that “[y]ou don’t cut it with a pencil as with other theatre texts where you may draw some lines. No, with Jelinek’s texts you have to cut with a machete [einer Schleef]!”

or porous text for the stage has become more and more ubiquitous and accepted, especially in the German-speaking area, Jelinek goes even further in her willingness to allow her texts to be treated as assemblages of waste, where nothing is deemed essential, no constituent part of a text deemed more important than any other. Chop them up and cast aside hours’ worth of material and so long as the texture of her texts remains, they still accomplish the work of imaginative resistance that they were designed to do, offering themselves up as metaphors for the very culture of overconsumption and disposability in which they were produced.

The Merchant’s Contracts: Shoveling Shit

Where Shawn’s vision of late capitalism is one of violence perpetuated by depression, Jelinek’s is one of violence perpetuated by desire. In her “Comedy of Economics,” The Merchant’s Contracts, Jelinek takes on modern finance capitalism, where capital’s movements need not be tethered to anything so twentieth-century mundane as the production of goods. Capital can now exist in a state of near-total abstraction aided by, as Fredric Jameson points out, “the intensification of communications technology to the point at which capital transfers today abolish space and time, virtually instantaneously effectuated across national spaces.” Contracts was written in response to an Austrian scandal. The unscrupulous investment practices of two trusted Austrian financial institutions led to many small investors losing their life savings. The script was completed just a few weeks before Lehman Brothers in the US filed for bankruptcy in 2008, setting off the global financial crisis and instantly enhancing the resonance of Jelinek’s text. “In the age of global economy,” as Honegger puts it, “Jelinek turned the merchant of Vienna into a universal comedy of errors.”

Necessity seemed to demand leaving *Contracts* more open than any Jelinek text to date, given the events rapidly unfolding in the financial sector and around the world. Director Nicholas Stemann developed an open-ended dramaturgy that allowed for the interweaving of up-to-the-minute topical material so that the production could keep up with cascading current events. In the main section of the text, which Jelinek titles “The Real Thing,” money and those who possess the mystical power to make more of it, to make something from nothing, are repeatedly referred to as “doing God’s work.” For the 2009 premiere in Cologne, Jelinek wrote an epilogue taking into account the Lehman Brothers debacle in which she portrays speculative capitalism run amok, “Capitalism as Dionysus.” This is a different kind of god, a god of excess, a god who gives his blessing to those who risk much and lose control. “Capitalism is the only power we must acknowledge,” the bacchants/investors intone, “[w]e don’t exist without it. How else should we distinguish ourselves from the other? How else to use ourselves as weapons? Wouldn’t that mean even more violence? That without capitalism we would not be?” He moves in mysterious ways.

In subsequent productions of *Contracts*, different cuts, additions, and rearrangements continued to be made as the effects of the churning economic catastrophe continued to ripple out. Though the uncut text clocked in at over five hours, Stemann decided to make only minimal cuts. Given the staggering volume of text and the incessant revisions, actors performed with scripts in hand and Stemann himself directing traffic onstage. Sections of text were delivered at a frenetic, sometimes incomprehensible pace, sometimes overlapping, and in a variety of conflicting styles. “If it is impossible to grasp the entire text this way,” Honegger writes, “its frantic performance reflects the degree society is able (or unable) to absorb the onslaught of stock market lingo (an unintelligible language for most).”

84 Ibid.
It was to be assumed that much of the language would remain inaccessible to audiences, that it would be thrown away, wasted from a syntactical point of view, from the standpoint of efficient communication. As Honegger rightly points out, the highly specialized jargon of the financial industry is impenetrable to most. The financial services sector depends on this jargon alienating laymen, making them feel intimidated enough to turn their portfolio over to a wealth manager or their taxes over to an accountant. Intimidating inscrutability is good for business — without it, few would be willing to pay a fee to someone who knows how to navigate the thicket and promises to score their client a good deal. The *Textflächen* of finance contribute to enormous discrepancies between top insiders and those whose money they play with. The voices in *Contracts* rise and fall between the small investors for whom a nest egg meant a livelihood, a home, retirement and the speculators for whom the small investors are just another abstraction, like money. People don't work. Money works. You are only as valuable as the capital you are willing to part with, so that your money can work for other people.

One of the local scandals that inspired *Contracts* concerned the beleaguered Bank for Labor and Business, which belonged to the Austrian Labor Union but was purchased by an American company, Cerberus Capital Management, after coming close to collapse. This gave Jelinek a useful associative starting point. In Greek mythology, Cerberus is the three-headed hound that guards the gates of the underworld for his master, Hades. Capturing Cerberus was the last of the twelve labors of Hercules, which he was pressed to perform in order to atone for murdering his wife and children in a fit of madness. The financial crisis produced an Austrian echo of this fabled horror as well, and Jelinek duly appropriated it. In 2008 a Viennese public relations manager who had lost all his family’s money in toxic stocks purchased an axe. He killed his wife and seven-year-old daughter, then drove to a neighboring town, killed his parents, then drove to another town and killed his father-in-law. He planned to kill
himself but lost his nerve after realizing that it took at least thirteen blows of the axe for each of his victims to expire.86

But Jelinek does not organize the text around the capture of Cerberus or around the little guy who has been duped by the powerful exacting his revenge against all odds. Jelinek focuses on the fifth labor, when Hercules was sent to King Augeas, owner of more cattle than anyone in Greece, and told that he had to clean the king’s stables in a single day. Hercules told the king that he would perform this amazing feat if Augeas would give him one tenth of his precious cattle. Certain that what Hercules had proposed couldn’t be done, King Augeas agreed. Hercules tore great openings in opposite walls of the stables, dug wide trenches to two nearby rivers, redirecting them so that they flowed through the stables, flushing out all the animal waste. Though he had succeeded, cleaning the Augean stables was deemed not to “count,” because Hercules had accepted payment for his labor.

In Contracts, the shit is debt, the buying and selling and leveraging of which has come to undergird much of modern finance. For a performance in 2010, Jelinek wrote another epilogue titled “You Bet! (A Sequel)” in a which a figure designated as “I or Another Animal” celebrates: “Isn’t that dandy, something is coming from nothing […]. The shit’s coming too, there it is, it always comes.”87 While the financiers are moving vast amounts of imaginary money around at dizzying speeds, the subprime mortgage crisis hits, and real people who bet on their real homes find that everything they thought they had is worthless. “[T]hat’s only human that debts turn into shit, that everything turns into shit, that most of all money turns into shit, that money already IS shit before it’s even there, but it’s never there when it’s needed.”88

87 Jelinek, Rechnitz and The Merchant’s Contracts, 322.
88 Ibid.
In *Contracts* the shit keeps piling up, debt that suddenly no one can profit from, but in a further, grotesque twist, Jelinek has the sewer system that is the Augean stables that is the global debt market mortgaged, itself held hostage now that even the callous creditors have seen their money disappear. Finally, no one gets bailed out. There is not enough liquidity, only constipation:

Okay, it would have to pay, if the owner of the shit processing plant would have to pay, but he doesn’t have to either, he has to take a shit, but he doesn’t have to pay. We all have to shit, but no one wants to pay for it and no one has to, if he’s already taken his shit and making a shitload, he doesn’t have to take any more shit, he won’t poop or pay, it’s been paid for, it paid for itself, and now no one will pay.  

Jelinek’s comedy of economics has antecedents in the simpler, more straightforwardly scatological fare that dominated the Parisian boulevards when mercantilism still represented a relatively new world order. A short 1756 farce by Thomas-Simon Gueullette titled “The Shit Merchant” shows a Harlequin figure tricking the naïf Gilles into believing that he can make a killing selling his own excrement. Desperate for cash, Gilles makes a spectacle of himself touting this allegedly hot commodity around the fairground, crying, “[w]ho wants my shit? Money for my shit! It’s fresh.”

Gilles is a figure of ridicule, but he is also tragic, in Artaud’s sense, reduced to the most basic and base of human functions. “There where it smells of shit,” Artaud writes, “it smells of being.” Must eat to shit. Must shit to eat. Capitalism, however complex, reveals itself in Gueullette’s burlesque to be modeled on this very cycle of abjection and incorporation.

89 Ibid., 304.
In Jelinek’s play, “streams of capital and shit” are said to flow together indistinguishably. Few can separate them. Most drink from the wrong source and get poisoned.

Only an elite, priestly caste can decipher the signs of collapse or revival; they are said to be able to read the language of God. In _Contracts_ a number of Angels answer the lamentations of a chorus of small investors. The Angel of Justice begins to sermonize: “[l]abor is the source of all wealth and all culture,” she says, “and since profitable labor is only possible in society and through society, the yield of labor belongs wholly, with equal rights for all, to all members of society.”92 But she loses faith in her message half way through her speech: “None of this is true, not true, any of it, none of it true [...]?”93 Since “wealth” has become an unrecognizable category, some fluctuating combination of toxic debt and abstract credit, “growth” comes to replace the old markers of stability and prosperity. More angels intercede to palliate the Angel of Justice’s socialist logic with a ringing, triumphalist battle hymn of neoliberalism:

Those are the essences, those are the essentials of a truly free country, all our freedoms depend upon this freedom. We want a totally free economy, not only because it guarantees freedoms, but because it is the best way to create wealth and prosperity for the entire country, for Europe, for the country which has our name and is us! Wealth is the single resource for our growth, no, for your growth, no, for everyone’s growth, for wealth in itself is thriving, but only when it grows, when it increases, when it grows, right, no? Right!94

While this seraphic choir sings of eternal glory, its appearance, as in the Book of Revelation, is a harbinger of the apocalypse. The growth they praise is death.

92 Ibid., 243.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 262.