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Book Review of *New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater* by Ilka Saal

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Book Review of *New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater* by Ilka Saal

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Moore's desire to critique the "feminized Celt" made popular by Arnold and Renan.

Although the term Celtic would seem to flaunt the linguistic basis of ethnic difference among Britons, historically it has served to suppress it by representing Gaelic and Welsh cultures as geographically and historically remote. (xiv)

O'Connor's excellent work on the Pale/Fringe dynamic in *Haunted English* offers important new insight into how three poets observe and subvert the domination of English and the political, psychosocial and poetic reverberations of "The Pale."

Lisa Weihman, West Virginia University

New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater by Ilka Saal. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2007. 244 pp. \$69.95.

The most common narrative of political theater in drama courses across the United States and perhaps elsewhere is dominated by discussions of Bertolt Brecht's alienation techniques (*Verfremdung Effekt*) which were meant to jar the audience out of empathy and identification with the characters and to compel them into acts of revolution. Ilka Saal's 2007 book, *New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater*, seeks to complicate this history of political theater in the West. Her fascinating revision of the canon of political theater examines the aesthetics and politics of leftist theater in 1930s America.

While Bertolt Brecht remains an iconic figure in the history of leftist theater, Saal begins her study with the failure of the 1935 Broadway production of Brecht's *The Mother*. After asking in the Prologue, "what went wrong with Brecht on Broadway" (1), Saal in Chapter 1 provides a detailed account of Theatre Union's disastrous production of *The Mother* which led to an outraged Brecht being thrown out of rehearsals and dismal reviews from the critics. Theatre Union's Paul Peters, attuned to the American public's desire for realist and naturalist forms, adapted Brecht's play—reconstituting the Fourth Wall and attempting to rid it of many of the high modernist "alienating" techniques the original contained. Regrettably, the adaptation left many theater critics displeased with its "odd hybrid of styles, a blend of naturalism and epic theater with a dash of musical and agitprop" (16). Saal convinc-

ingly contributes the failure of high modernism on the American stage to the political climate of 1930s America, the lack of the historical avant-garde which paved the way for the politically engaged theater of modernist Europe, and an overwhelming sense of individualism and the common man which was perpetuated by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies, among other causes. In the chapters that follow, Saal analyzes the aesthetics of New Deal Theater, arguing that political theater in 1930s America employed "vernacular" strategies to maximize political engagement by bringing in both working class and bourgeois spectators.

Saal's narrative of American leftist theater is so vivid, the reader, not having seen the originals and most likely not having seen, when applicable, revivals of the productions featured in this book, are still able to imagine the plays as staged. Her descriptions, for example, of the successful infusion of agitprop and realism in *Waiting for Lefty* in Chapter 3, of the political melodramas *Peace on Earth*, *Stevedore*, and *Black Pit* in Chapter 4 and of the highly successful experiments of the *Living Newspaper* and musical revue *Pins and Needles* in Chapter 5 provide the reader with a clear visual image of the aesthetic transitions in what Saal calls vernacular political theater—a movement which she argues comes to fruition during New Deal America.

Employing theoretical concepts of "vernacular" by Fredrick Jameson, Grant Farred, among others, Saal defines vernacular political theater as seeking

to stimulate political action by eliciting the audience's identificatory pleasures in the political. It teases out this moment of pleasure with the help of the culinary appeal and visceral affect of forms of popular and commodity culture, which it utilizes for elucidating, animating, and transmitting the political. (39-40)

Throughout her study, Saal provides her readers with examples of vernacular strategies. The hero, for example, in the vernacular tradition is usually of common origin, speaks in his/her dialect, is individualistic, egalitarian and rebellious (41). Furthermore, the use of commodity or mass culture, such as melodrama as seen in political plays of the first half of the thirties and the employment of songs that resembled popular tunes in the plays that made up the second half of the thirties, secured the praise of both middle and low brow audiences. New Deal Theater worked very hard not to alienate the audience, and as Saal's

study reveals they succeeded in appealing to workers and the bourgeois by offering low ticket prices and aesthetic forms that would appeal to most. The different approaches of the leftist theater of Europe and those of America, Saal explains, stemmed from the very commercialization of American theater. European theaters were government subsidized whereas those in America were dependant primarily on ticket sales.

Indeed, this privatization of theater in America, according to Saal, was also the predominate limitation of vernacular political theater. *Pins and Needles* (1937-1940), the highly successful musical revue which turned garment workers into actors, began as a rough, politically charged but nonetheless aesthetically pleasurable production which exposed working conditions of the garment industry and the ethnic texture of the workers. "But the more the show was groomed and polished for the Broadway market," Saal writes, "the more it lost its distinctive working-class and ethnic markers" (140) and ultimately the less political force it had. Saal's study repeatedly demonstrates that despite the belief that change could occur through government reform, New Deal Theater often did little more than maintain the status quo; their popularity among the bourgeois and the conservative theater critics' omission of the political themes presented before them were in part to blame. What *Pins and Needles* expressed to the bourgeois spectators and critics was not that reform was needed in the garment industry but rather that the American dream was still alive: through hard work a garment worker could become a star.

Saal concludes her informative study with a broad overview of the political vernacular on the post-modern stage. Although American theater in the sixties finally embraced Brecht's theories of epic theater, evident in the works of Bread and Puppet, Teatro Campesino and later Tony Kushner, those of the post-modern age still incorporate the vernacular tradition. What Bread and Puppet, the sixties anti-war, street troupe, saw in Brecht was a way to emphasize the moral effects of political conflict through an excess of images which resembled the historical avant-gardes' use of collage (159). In Teatro Campesino, a group born out of the 1965 Delano Grape Strike, Saal sees "an effective amalgamation of Cantinflas [a popular Mexican clown] and Brecht, collapsing the great divide between (a white) high modernism and (ethnic) popular culture" (172). In addition, the theater troupe mixes English, Spanish and *caló* to make up a distinctive Chicano idiom

