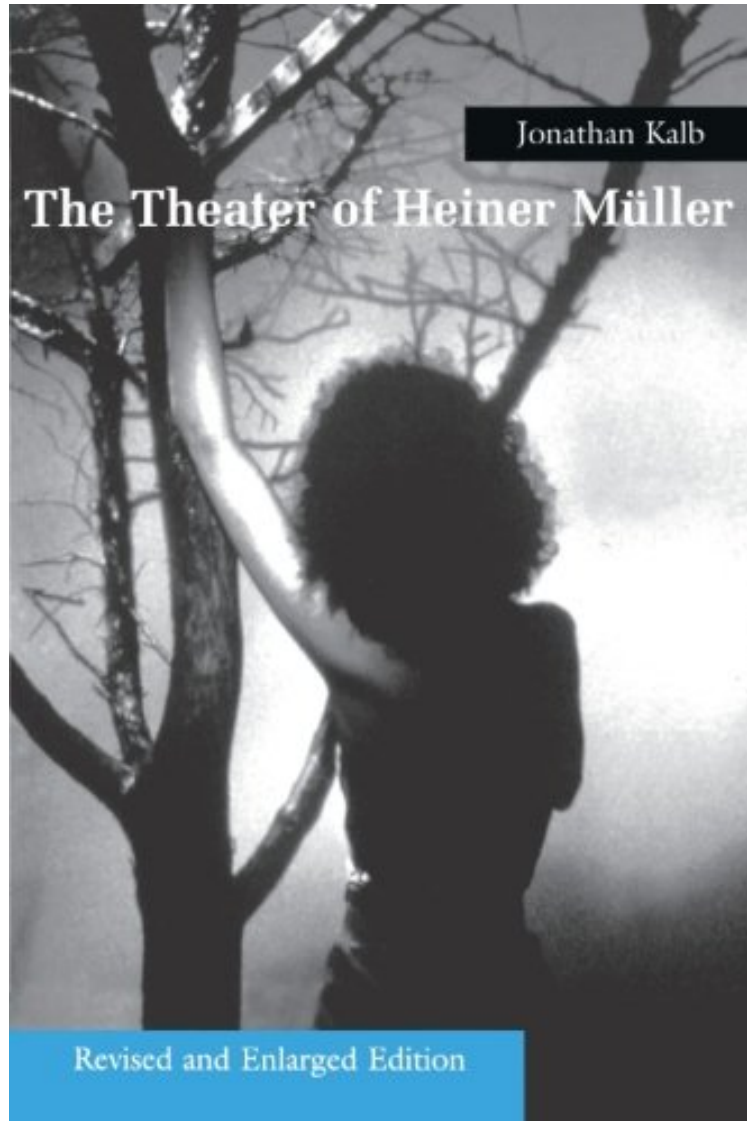


The Theater of Heiner Muller: Revised and Enlarged Edition

Jonathan Kalb

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Jonathan Kalb : The Theater of Heiner Muller: Revised and Enlarged Edition before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Theater of Heiner Muller: Revised and Enlarged Edition:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Brilliant insights into Muller's dramasBy AutonomieusThis is a fantastic book, full of brilliant insights into the dramas of Heiner Muller (1929-1995). Indispensable! Kalb is on the

faculty of Hunter College, and theater critic for the New York Times. Originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1998, this revised edition was published in 2001 with minimal changes. Kalb presents valuable biographical information on Muller in the introduction, drawing on Muller's 1992 autobiography "War Without Battle" among other sources. Kalb met Muller and interviewed him several times before Muller's death in 1995. "The entire Nazi period entailed severe financial hardship and humiliation for [Muller's] family." (5) "...[T]he main result of these painful experiences was the development of 'a hate potential, a need for revenge.'" (Muller 25, Kalb 6). Muller's rage at capitalism is linked in his mind at all times with fascism. "The establishment of the GDR [DDR -- East Germany] was justified, to him, both as a dictatorship to 'establish a new order' and as 'a dictatorship against the people who had damaged my childhood.'" (Muller 181, Kalb 6). Muller's writings and his life are characterized by "belligerent subterfuge and protean elusiveness." (9) Says Kalb, "Every text Muller wrote was, in some fashion, dialogue with the dead. Although he never attended a university, he was one of the most erudite dramatists of the century, conceiving most of his texts in direct response to other literary works." (15) One of his typical practices was "to adopt the manner of the source author entirely, style, tone and all, occupying the corpus like a vampire or virus in order to explode it from within." (15) For instance, "Mauser" is a direct rebuttal to Brecht's "Die Massnahme (The Measures Taken)," in the same style. 1) Muller as Muller (introduction) 2) Muller as Brecht (The Horatian) 3) Muller as Kleist (Volokolamsk Highway, Gundling's Life..., Mauser) 4) Muller as Mayakovsky (The Scab, The Correction, The Resettler) 5) Muller as Shakespeare (Macbeth, Anatomy of Titus Fall of Rome) 6) Muller as Artaud (Hamletmaschine) 7) Muller as Genet (The Mission) 8) Muller as Wagner (Germania Death in Berlin) 9) Muller as Beckett (Description of a Picture) 10) Muller as Proteus (Quartet) As Kalb says, an entire book could be written on the relationship of Muller and Brecht alone. They are both buried in Berlin in the Dorotheenstadt cemetery, a few blocks from the Berliner Ensemble (as are Hanns Eisler, Paul Dessau, and Hegel). Kalb provides an excellent understanding of Brecht's theory of "Lehrstück" -- learning plays. According to Kalb, "...it is vital to remember that Lehrstück praxis is itself morally neutral and extremely malleable and that Muller thrived on this moral malleability. He used Lehrstück techniques and developed his own innovations around them partly because they were rooted in the utopian dreams of others but did not require similar commitment from him." (42) "Volokolamsk Highway" has been set to fantastically inventive music by Heiner Goebbels (see Hrstcke), and Kalb very helpfully explicates one of its five sections which draws directly on Kleist. "Muller as Mayakovsky" analyzes several of Muller's early dramas from the period before the Wall, when Berlin was still an open city and a hotbed of intellectual contestation. Muller and his wife Inge were compelled by the inner contradictions of the Russian poet, "on the one hand the leftist artist who provided a role-model of devotion to the revolutionary state..." and "on the other hand a case of strangulated individual exuberance." (73) Muller pursued a Mayakovskian romantic heroism in the '50s that he would later reject following bruising encounters with the DDR authorities. Muller wrote several Shakespeare adaptations, including the well-known "Hamletmaschine." He shared Shakespeare's obsession with history, and with history as drama. But "Hamletmaschine" is decisively influenced by Artaud, and by surrealism. It is an example of a category of Muller's dramas he called "synthetic fragments," which are not linear narratives and are certainly not social realism. This turn was largely the result of the DDR regime's banning his works from production or publication until 1973 (for the most part). Hence Muller began to use forms that could help him play to the West as well as the East. (106) Kalb brings to light the fascinating fact that "Muller disregarded almost all his own stage directions on the several occasions he directed "Hamletmaschine". (122) The open-ended and provocative quality of the work goes a long way to explain why it has been staged so many times. I will not go on to address Kalb's analysis of the influence of Genet, Wagner, or Beckett on Muller. Suffice it to say that if you are interested in Muller, Kalb is the most well-informed, compelling guide you could have into Muller's harsh and unsentimental universe. I found the last chapter, "Muller as Proteus," quite eye-opening as someone not at all well-versed in theater. Kalb gives detailed descriptions of three completely different productions of "Quartet," each one valid in its own way. Kalb sees not just different interpretations, but "different kinds of theater experience,...an extraordinary range of approaches." (205) Muller's works are incredibly fecund, stimulating an astonishing variety of interpretations. Kalb sees Muller as an engaged intellectual addressing his time in a unique and powerful way. In the late 20th century, "the playwright of lasting importance...must be someone capable of perceiving both the historical impasse in the theater...and the historical impasse in subjective experience (the end of Individualism in a world not quite ready for Collectivism). Only such a writer would have the requisite indifference to reproaches of disingenuousness, evasion, charlatanism, and cynicism as he went about preparing literary bulwarks against the "ice age." (208) (No pro-Western dissident, Muller used "ice age" to refer to a world ruled by commodities.)

The revised and enlarged edition of the first comprehensive English-language study of the work of Heiner Muller, widely regarded as Bertolt Brecht's spiritual heir and as one of the most important German playwrights of the twentieth century. "Kalb's quest to try and penetrate some of the surfaces of what he calls this 'glacially infuriating writer' is engrossing, and he negotiates his own ambivalences and reservations about Muller as theatre-maker and man with both honesty and adroitness . . . As a piece of scholarship [this] is a breathtaking tour de force" -Mary Luckhurst, New Theatre Quarterly

"Pleasing and easy to read...the book includes 15 excellent production photographs. Upper-division undergraduates through professionals." Choice "...Kalb's close readings of the Muller oeuvre are incisive and refreshingly free of critical rhetoric..." Michael Bloom, American Theatre "This book will not only inspire theater scholars to take a closer look at Muller, it could also pave the way for a more engaged confrontation with Muller's work in the English-speaking world--not only among theater directors, actors, translators, and publishers, but for readers who recognize the significance of the most important German playwright since Brecht." Holger Teschke, Theater "The author of this excellent study is a recipient of the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism (1991) and author of a previous volume on Beckett as well as a collection of essays titled Free Admissions: Collected Theater Writings. Jonathan Kalb presents a thoughtful and personally intimate analysis of the life and theater of Heiner Muller by comparing his production with that of various predecessors. An extraordinarily insightful, sensitive book, a tour de force of knowledge of modern drama and its critics, The Theater of Heiner Muller is an indispensable aid in unlocking the riddles and merits of the man and his contemporaries." Erlis Wickersham, World Literature Today

About the Author
Jonathan Kalb