Scholarly Reading Notes · EN

Hans-Thies Lehmann on Comedy, Brecht and German Theatre

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1. The Volksbühne and postdramatic theatre
Lehmann opens with the Volksbühne, which he sees as one of the most important theatrical laboratories of the preceding twenty-five years. Its fragmented, politically charged productions draw their energy from elements beyond the dramatic text.

2. Modern theatre and aesthetics
Contemporary theatre brings documentary practice, politics, philosophy and debate into the space once reserved for aesthetic pleasure.

3. The return of comedy
Lehmann traces the renewed prominence of comedy in German theatre over the preceding two decades. He singles out its absurd, grotesque and political forms.

4. Hegel and the end of art
For Hegel, art survives even as it ceases to be the highest bearer of truth. Its place in modern life changes.

5. Art as a remainder
Art proceeds in the knowledge that its former authority has passed. Modern artists can draw on any material, yet none carries absolute authority.

6. The philosophical significance of comedy
Comedy belongs to a world in which absolute values have begun to dissolve. For Lehmann, irony is fundamental to modern consciousness.

7. Reading Brecht
Lehmann questions the longstanding tendency to read Brecht chiefly as a political writer who imparts lessons.

8. What Brecht makes visible
Brecht makes familiar gestures and routines appear strange. Everyday life becomes something the spectator has to look at again.

9. What makes theatre political?
Lehmann locates the political force of theatre in its capacity to change how spectators perceive what happens on stage.

10. Content and form
The way a performance organises what the audience sees often matters more to its political effect than the subject it addresses.

11. A critique of moralism
A rigid division between good and evil can bring thought to a halt. Lehmann questions theatre that assigns spectators the role of judges.

12. The political work of comedy
Comedy unsettles settled judgements, exposes contradictions and invites spectators to think again.

Conclusion
For Lehmann, Brecht's legacy lies in theatre's capacity to change the habits through which spectators perceive, judge and make sense of the world.

Watch the lecture · Comedy, Brecht and the Theatre of Germany Today