

1 ASTRID HAAS, *Stages of Agency: The Contribution of American Drama to the AIDS Discourse* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2011), 334 pp.

5 PIA WIEGMINK, *Protest EnACTed: Activist Performance in the Contemporary United States* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2011), 434 pp. + 18 ill.

10 According to Susan Smith Harris, drama—and, one might add, the performing arts in general—have always been treated as the “bastard child” of the American literary family, i.e. “[they have] been marginalized, excluded, or ‘disciplined’ in the culture in general and the university in particular.”<sup>1</sup> She identifies the reasons for the neglect and dismissal of American drama and performances as being both historical and ideological. They range from the contested history of drama and theater in the United States, the alleged “unworthiness” or “non-literariness” of this kind of literature, and the ensuing generic hegemony of poetry and prose, to the increasing professionalization of the field of American Studies. Given this, the persistence of an anti-theatrical sentiment in academia manifests itself in the conspicuous absence of American drama from various anthologies, critical and literary histories, college texts and curricula, literary magazines, scholarly journals, or individual studies.<sup>2</sup>

15 Both studies under review, Astrid Haas’s *Stages of Agency: The Contributions of American Drama to the AIDS Discourse* and Pia Wiegink’s *Protest EnACTed: Activist Performance in the Contemporary United States*, are most welcome exceptions to this (unwritten) rule as they not only focus on (activist) plays and performances, respectively, but, they also demonstrate how American Studies can generally benefit, methodologically and in terms of subject matter, from opening up to “performative expressions of American culture” (Wiegink 391). While Haas’s study is the more traditional one of the two in that it offers a “text-centered approach [...] ground-

40 <sup>1</sup> Susan Smith Harris, *American Drama: The Bastard Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 2.

44 <sup>2</sup> With the exception, of course, of publications exclusively devoted to the study of American drama and theater such as *The Drama Review (TDR)*, *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre (JADT)*, *American Theatre*, etc.

ed in literary rather than performance studies” (14), Wiegink deliberately concentrates on performative rather than textual expressions of activism and political engagement. What both authors have in common, however, is their strong belief in the fact that, as Haas rightfully puts it, “art can [...] serve as a corrective to hegemonic views” (7) and, even more importantly, that politically engaged art is not obsolete but alive and kicking.

*Stages of Agency* is, according to the author Astrid Haas,

the first to analyze U.S.-American AIDS drama produced on the country’s mainstream stage between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s with a focus on the role of theater and drama as social agents in the societal perception and signification of the epidemic through their interaction with and contribution to the diverse medical, socio-political, media, and artistic discourses on AIDS in the United States. (9-10)

Indeed, Haas’s is a pioneering study as it exclusively focuses on representations of HIV/AIDS in American drama and theater of the late twentieth century. While various literary scholars have written about the epidemic in articles and even book-length studies,<sup>3</sup> dramatic expressions of the disease have only been examined in the context of (gay) male sexuality or other artistic renderings of the acquired immune deficiency syndrome.<sup>4</sup> Haas’s monograph pursues a threefold objective: first, it seeks to identify so-called AIDS plays and to trace the evolution of the genre (according to the author, a “thematic subgenre of contemporary (gay) drama” (10) in “which the syndrome plays a defining role” (2)) up to the point of its alleged dissolution in the late 1990s (289); second, it analyzes the representation of HIV/AIDS and the claim to agency in plays “representative of the genre” (4); third,

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, eds. *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (New York: Columbia, 1993) or Judith Laurence Pastore, ed. *Confronting AIDS Through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation* (Urbana, IL: U of IL P, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Nicholas de Jongh. *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1992) or David Savran. *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (Ann Arbor: U of MI Press, 2003).

1 by means of understanding U.S.-American  
 2 AIDS drama “as an agent of social discourse”  
 3 (4), it probes the contributions of drama to  
 5 dominant discourses on the epidemic from  
 the 1980s onwards in a specifically American  
 context (11). In doing so, the study not only  
 (re-)installs theater as a “social practice that  
 actively participate[s] in the formation of social  
 reality through the act of representation”  
 (4), but it also draws attention to the theater’s  
 10 potential to serve as a public arena for democratic  
 debates and negotiations.

*Stages of Agency* is divided into four main  
 chapters: The introductory chapter, which centers  
 on the relationship of AIDS, agency, and the  
 stage, is followed by a theoretical chapter,  
 which aims to set “AIDS in Perspective” by  
 15 not only examining the perceptions, responses,  
 and representations of AIDS in the United  
 States, but also by conceptualizing and historicizing  
 the disease. Chapter 3, then, contains the actual  
 close readings of “eleven AIDS plays from the  
 20 mid-1980s through the late 1990s written for  
 and performed on the mainstream stage” (15).  
 The concluding chapter 4, entitled “Stages of  
 Agency” reiterates some of the previous findings,  
 ties up loose ends, and widens the scope by  
 25 briefly talking about the legacy of 1980s/1990s  
 AIDS drama in a post-9/11 world. Methodologically,  
 the study makes use of a cultural anthropological  
 and New Historicist understanding of culture (4)  
 and draws on Foucauldian discourse theory as well  
 as Iser’s reader-response criticism (5-6). Haas  
 30 could have been more precise about her actual  
 method of reading the plays: To summarize her  
 own approach as a “literary critical [one] based  
 on a close reading of individual works” (14) is  
 somewhat vague and does not really help to  
 categorize the critical lens she uses. As the  
 35 monograph’s title already suggests, the author’s  
 main thesis is that “American dramatists have  
 turned playhouses into ‘stages of agency’ for  
 those who were neglected, ignored, denied,  
 and/or silenced in and by the predominant  
 political and cultural discourses on the epidemic”  
 (14). By using one of Walt Whitman’s Civil War  
 40 poems (“As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap,  
 Camerado”) as an epigram, Haas convincingly  
 argues that throughout U.S.-American history,  
 artists have used their voices to speak out  
 against injustice and discrimination, in particular  
 44 against those who did not live up to the ideal  
 of the strong and healthy individual. Like the  
 45 bubonic plague, syphilis, and tuberculosis  
 46 before, HIV/AIDS, according to Haas, had

been initially interpreted as a threat to the national  
 body and, what is more, it “put the cohesion of  
 U.S.-American society to a crucial test” (2).  
 By drawing parallels between HIV/AIDS and  
 past epidemics, Haas not only alleviates the  
 horrors of the disease, but she also demystifies  
 the alleged exceptionality and exclusivity of  
 HIV/AIDS. After a tour de force through  
 Western “epidemic” history, she zooms in on  
 HIV/AIDS and the “different perceptions,  
 responses, and representations of [the disease] in  
 U.S.-American biomedical science, national  
 politics, grassroots AIDS activism, popular  
 debates, the media, and the arts and letters”  
 (15).

The detailed historical-theoretical chapter  
 is followed by the discussion of eleven plays  
 chosen on grounds of their “representationality  
 and scope of impact” (15). The criteria for  
 selecting the plays entail a number of problems:  
 discussing “plays of national acclaim” (16)  
 means that those, in fact, need to cater to  
 mainstream audiences, which, in turn, might  
 say something about the aesthetics of the plays:  
 vanguard, radical, challenging or subversive  
 plays are less likely to appeal to (conservative)  
 mainstream audiences. One might ask oneself  
 in how far the plays under discussion then  
 really have the power to produce counter-discourses  
 since they first and foremost have to succeed  
 at the box office. What is more, as a consequence  
 of this pre-selection, one could easily get the  
 impression that AIDS drama is predominantly  
 written and produced by white (gay) men.  
 To be fair, Haas is well aware of this shortcoming.  
 The inclusion of works by Paula Vogel, Cheryl  
 West, and Chay Yew is meant to create a more  
 complete picture of the status quo of AIDS  
 plays in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, the majority  
 of the plays in *Stages of Agency* are not only  
 male-authored, but also male-centered.

The close readings of the eleven plays are  
 organized chronologically in order to trace the  
 evolution of the genre as well as the reception  
 of and responses to HIV/AIDS by the general  
 public. After each close reading, Haas presents  
 a conclusion which is most helpful for readers  
 who want to get a brief overview of the plays  
 and an understanding of their status in the  
 history of AIDS drama. Moreover, the individual  
 conclusions also help to follow the study’s  
 overall trajectory. The plays discussed in the  
 first section, entitled “The Personal is Political:  
 Early AIDS Drama and the Gay Men’s Crisis,”  
 belong to

1 the so-called first generation of AIDS plays.  
 2 William M. Hoffman's *As Is* (1985), Larry  
 3 Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), and Har-  
 5 vey Fierstein's trilogy *Safe Sex* (1987) were  
 written and staged in the heyday of the AIDS  
 crisis in the 1980s. Particularly the first two  
 plays display strong autobiographical traits  
 and were meant to educate the general pub-  
 lic and gay men in particular about the causes  
 and symptoms of HIV/AIDS. Harvey Fier-  
 stein's *Safe Sex* is categorized by Haas as a  
 10 transitional play that "widen[s] the scope"  
 (16) as it focuses on "people without AIDS"  
 whose lives are nevertheless determined by  
 the disease. In the second section, "Widen-  
 ing the Scope: AIDS in American Drama of  
 the early 1990s," second generation AIDS  
 15 plays, which are formally and thematically  
 more diverse than the precursors of the 1980s,  
 are scrutinized. While Cheryl West's *Before  
 It Hits Home* (1991), the first AIDS play by  
 an African American woman playwright of  
 national acclaim, as well as Larry Kramer's  
 20 *The Destiny of Me* (1992), a companion piece  
 to the more famous *The Normal Heart*, still  
 bear strong autobiographical traces, they  
 also attempt to chart the persistent homo-  
 phobic sentiments in mainstream American  
 thought. The third play in this section, Paula  
 25 Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992), is also  
 concerned with the disease's impact on the  
 family of the afflicted, and, like West's, with  
 the role of women in this context. Unsurpris-  
 ingly, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on  
 National Themes* (1991/92) by Tony Kushner  
 30 is granted a unique role in Haas's analysis as  
 the two-part play is not only the "most fa-  
 mous and widely-produced U.S.-American  
 [sic] AIDS play to date" (17), but it is also the  
 play which has received the greatest critical  
 attention so far. Being also formally the most  
 35 experimental and thematically the most di-  
 verse play, it is logical that Haas devotes the  
 third part of the chapter exclusively to Kush-  
 ner's work. Concentrating "on the nexus of  
 AIDS, identities, and communities and [...] on  
 the connections of the epidemic, American  
 40 politics, and history set up in the drama"  
 (17), the author offers an insightful reading  
 of the characters and politics of the play. In  
 addition, she briefly discusses the screen ad-  
 44 aptation of the play, the extremely successful  
 HBO mini series starring Meryl Streep, Al  
 45 Pacino, Emma Thompson, and other A-list  
 actors/actresses. The fourth and last section  
 46 of chapter 3 is quite tellingly called "Beyond

*Angels: AIDS on the American Stage since  
 the mid-1990s."* One cannot help but notice  
 that this subchapter is considerably shorter  
 than the other three although it discusses  
 the greatest number of plays, i.e. Paul Rud-  
 nick's *Jeffrey* (1992), Chay Yew's *A Language  
 of Their Own* (1995), Terrence McNally's  
*Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994), and Paul  
 Rudnick's *The Most Fabulous Story Ever  
 Told* (1998). It is not just quantity that distin-  
 guishes this chapter from the previous ones,  
 but *Angels in America's* repercussions make  
 the plays discussed here seem unjustly weak  
 and insignificant. Because of their "individu-  
 alizing and depoliticizing" HIV/AIDS, they,  
 according to Haas, allegedly mark the end of  
 the "serious" U.S.-American AIDS drama  
 (284). Yet, virtually all plays concerned with  
 the representation of HIV/AIDS appear to  
 be ordinary and one-dimensional when com-  
 pared to the landmark piece by Kushner,  
 which renders Haas's critique of their failing  
 to address the gay political struggle of the  
 1990s (284) rather unimpressive. The conclu-  
 sion, although offering a glimpse of post-9/11  
 AIDS drama and bringing in Judith Butler's  
 theory of grievable lives, does not offer new  
 insights; it is, however, to a certain extent a  
 wrap-up of her previous findings.

*Stages of Agency* is a well-argued and dili-  
 gently researched study. While recent cases  
 of plagiarism have perhaps caused a new  
 sensitivity for ethical practices in research,  
 Haas's rather excessive documentation does  
 not make for an easy read (there are 914 foot-  
 notes in total). I would have preferred an in-  
 dex rather than cross-references which are,  
 again, given in the form of footnotes. This  
 means that, at times, one finds oneself in a  
 loop of cross-references, from one footnote to  
 another. A more consistent form would have  
 also been desirable as the plays discussed by  
 Haas are sometimes cited in parentheses and  
 sometimes in footnotes. Content-wise, Haas  
 is somewhat vague about some concepts and  
 theories which are pivotal to her work. "Political  
 theater," for instance, is only mentioned in  
 a footnote and it is not even Haas's own defi-  
 nition of the term but Ilka Saal's (67). That  
 being said, scholars and students will find  
*Stages of Agency* a most valuable source for  
 detailed close readings of seminal American  
 plays of the late twentieth century, and it will  
 hopefully initiate further thinking and writing  
 about the contributions (and interventions)

American drama can make to ongoing (socio-political) discourses.

While political American drama and theater have frequently played a minor role in American Studies in Germany, the aesthetics of political or activist performances have virtually been ignored by members of the discipline. With her ambitious study *Protest EnACTed: Activist Performance in the Contemporary United States*, Pia Wiegink presents a most overdue analysis of these unjustly neglected forms of cultural expressions. Given activist performances' shadowy existence, Wiegink devotes a considerable part of her monograph to elaborating on the theoretical, terminological, and methodological framework of her subject. Because she conceives of activist performances as "both theatrical and political acts" (28), she examines the topic from various angles and meticulously points out the characteristics of this particular kind of "engaged citizenship" (11). Activist performance then, according to Wiegink, can be defined as

a form of political action which is located *outside* the political consensual realm of party politics as it is not institutionally affiliated with parties, unions or other organizations. Activist performance comes into existence as a *physical act of dissent of engaged citizens*, and because it takes place outside the institutionalized realm of politics, activist performance uses alternative aesthetics to articulate, or rather, to stage its political agenda. In this sense [...] *activist performance can be conceived as the temporary formation of a counterpublic which both aesthetically as well as ideologically defies prevailing, dominant political discourses.* (79-80)

What Wiegink describes as "temporary formations" of activist performances are actually three performer-activist collectives that rose to prominence between 1999, the year that marked "the birth of the global justice movement" (3) in the form of mass protests during the WTO summit in Seattle, and 2008, when Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac became synonyms for the neoliberal system gone wild and the beginning of the global financial crisis. The three activist groups she studies in detail are: Reverend Billy and The Church of Life After Shopping, the Billionaires for Bush, and The Yes Men. She mentions "the intricate and at times precarious relation between the activists' identities as (almost) ex-

clusively white, male, middle-class men and their activist agenda of criticizing the global hegemony of American transnational corporations" (21) as the main reason for her interest in the groups. Wiegink carefully disentangles the social, political, ethnical, and ethical node of both the groups' general make-up and their actions in the public sphere. Consequently, in chapter 2, she not only examines performance as a cultural practice "with which the three collectives discussed in this study articulate, render visible, and enact their political protest to a larger public in a playful, yet effective manner" (30), but she also makes a case for performance as a cultural model and a theoretical concept for cultural analysis within the larger field of transnational American Studies. In addition, Wiegink critically examines the protesters' "status and privilege as white middle-class men" (143). Discussing the protesters' whiteness through the categories of critical race theory, she convincingly illustrates how "the activists use the socially constructed norm of whiteness as a Trojan horse" (142) in order to engage in and produce public discourses on politics. Wiegink is not only admirably well-versed in contemporary performance scholarship, but because of her diligent and competent mapping of the theoretical terrain, she manages to get hold of even the most ephemeral performative acts. Since almost all actions of the three collectives she later studies in detail take place in the public sphere, the majority of chapter 3 is concerned with the different approaches to the concept of the public sphere. Deviating from the Habermasian consensual ideal of the public sphere, which is marked by the "rational-critical" public discourse of citizens" (75), Wiegink sides with Chantal Mouffe who not only conceives of the public in the plural and stresses the necessity of "the contestational character of public dissent" (77), but who, in contrast to Habermas, draws attention to the affective element of politics. By including Nancy Fraser's notion of the counterpublic into her reflections on the public sphere, Wiegink persuasively argues for a re-examination of the "different aesthetics of politics" (79) and for a widening of the concept towards a transnational public sphere. As a most current, twenty-first-century state of the art study, *Protest EnACTed* also takes into account the impact the new media has on the "sense of community[,] presence[,] and agency" (113)

1 and the fact that political action “no longer  
2 entirely depends on the interaction of physical  
3 bodies” (113) in material space, but might  
as well happen in a virtual one. At the same  
time, however, Wiegink is also anxious to  
5 stress the enduring significance of the “terri-  
torial space of the nation” (94).

The subsequent three chapters contain in-  
sightful analyses of original material Wieg-  
mink has collected firsthand and which has  
not been treated by critics. Chapter 4 presents  
10 the first case study on Reverend Billy and  
The Church of Life After Shopping. Rever-  
end Billy, the eccentric, white-clad preacher  
impersonated by New York-based actor Bill  
Talen, and his red-gowned “congregation”  
publicly rally against multinational corpora-  
15 tions such as Starbucks and Disney. As one of  
their major topics is the “politics of consump-  
tion” (123), they make sure that their perfor-  
mances take place in spaces where the mam-  
mon resides, i.e. in retail stores on buzzing  
streets. In this context, Wiegink differentiates  
20 between performances that are staged in  
corporate spaces and the ones that happen in  
public spaces. In doing so, she is able to cate-  
gorize the critique performed by the group. In  
one of Reverend Billy’s “retail interventions”  
(125), for instance, which took place at a Dis-  
25 ney Store on Broadway, NYC, the collective  
made use of Augusto Boal’s invisible theater,  
i.e. the random customers were not aware that  
they were part of the “audience;” the ensuing  
anti-consumerist sermon inside the store, al-  
though abounding with parody and theatrics,  
30 was taken rather seriously by the unsuspecting  
consumer-witnesses. In one of their spectacles  
in the public space, the “Sidamo Prayer Cam-  
paign,” actor Bill Talen impersonated Rever-  
end Billy to “preach” to the yet-unenlightened  
crowd of bystanders. He and the members of  
35 his “church” were singing, chanting, and pray-  
ing in front of a coffee shop in order to protest  
against Starbucks’s exploitation of Ethiopian  
coffee farmers and also to raise awareness for  
the local effects of global capitalism. Applying  
her theoretical framework to her source mate-  
40 rial, Wiegink persuasively shows how “the  
performances of The Church of Life After  
Shopping both aesthetically and ideologically  
defy dominant political discourse as they ar-  
tulate politics in a playful and emotionally  
44 appealing rather than argumentative and ra-  
45 tional way” (200).

46 In her second case study on the Billionaires  
for Bush, Wiegink focuses on a group of

activists who “use performance and parodic  
impersonation as their primary means of  
protest” (33) and who were most active in the  
2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential campaigns.  
The Billionaires for Bush “impersonate Re-  
publican political campaigners” (203) by  
dressing in tuxedos, top hats, and ball gowns,  
and by using limousines to get to the venues.  
Their performing class—and class differ-  
ences—granted them entry to the inner circle  
of the actual players in the democratic politi-  
cal process: the CEOs, lobbyists, and private  
equity managers. In short: the big money. As  
Wiegink stresses, The Billionaires for Bush  
“do not straightforwardly articulate their cri-  
tique [...], but use humor and parody to make  
their argument” (204). Thus they waved pro-  
inequality banners during a Republican fund-  
raising reception or played croquet in Central  
Park demanding to “Privatize Everything”  
(234), while they were actually protesting  
against the authorities’ prohibition on using  
the park as a rally site during the 2004 Repub-  
lican Convention in NYC. The author traces  
the development of the collective’s initially  
parodic protests to their actively supporting  
Obama’s “politics of change” (279) in 2008.  
In this context, she meticulously discusses the  
various approaches to the concept of specta-  
cle and the changing notions of participatory  
democracy (249). In a somewhat lengthy ex-  
cursus, she then expounds the impact of new  
media/social networking technologies on po-  
litical campaigning in general, and presiden-  
tial elections in particular, to show how the  
Billionaires for Bush, as representatives of a  
new kind of engaged citizen, “make use of the  
possibilities of new information technologies  
to mobilize and to thus act across multiple  
public spheres” (282).

The potential of new media for performa-  
tive political activism then plays a central role  
in Wiegink’s last case study of the The Yes  
Men. The author argues that the work of this  
collective would not only be unthinkable but  
impossible without the internet (34). Their  
idiosyncratic performances consist of regis-  
tering domains with web addresses that are  
quite similar to those of corporations such as  
Halliburton, Dow Chemical, etc. By means  
of virtually impersonating the corporations,  
they then replicate the original websites and  
“correct” them. As a result, The Yes Men of-  
ten find themselves invited to business meet-  
ings where they stage their “cyber hoaxes”  
(292), whose sole purpose is “to utilize mass

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media as a tactical tool for their activist agenda” (309). The author examines several spectacles in which The Yes Men appear as pseudo-spokespersons for big corporations, fake agents for funding art, or prankster activists who produce and distribute their own documentaries. While I find Wiegink’s reading of The Yes Men’s “BBC hoax,” the related discussion of the tactical use of whiteness, and her analysis of the highly problematic act of speaking for others particularly intriguing, I do have problems with her arguing that “the Internet expands the opportunities for engaged citizens to become politically active on- and offline” (287). As most of the users of social media have already experienced firsthand, it is much easier to “like” a campaign, statement or initiative on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter than to actually go out on the streets and physically demonstrate one’s dissent. While presenting a new or updated form of “citizen involvement in political processes” (369), “digital dissent” (290), in

my opinion, is less risky, rather impersonal, and, most importantly, inapt to produce long-lasting effects.

*Protest EnACTed* is a substantial work that not only acquaints the reader with new forms of political protest but might as well serve as a reference book for most recent developments in performance studies and related fields. The clear structure and valid arguments in the theoretical part plus the diligent index at the end make Wiegink’s monograph a fine example of systematic thinking and writing. Moreover, the author’s attempt to grant performances a more prominent position within the academic field of American Studies is to be applauded because, as she has convincingly demonstrated with her project, American Studies can only ever benefit from being open to models that help to explain the ever-shifting cultural and socio-political landscape of the United States in the twenty-first century.

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