
Pia Wiegmink, Protest EnACTed: Activist Performance in the Contemporary United States (Heidelberg: Winter, 2011), 434 pp. + 18 ill.

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.”¹ 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.²

Both studies under review, Astrid Haas’s Stages of Agency: The Contributions of American Drama to the AIDS Discourse and Pia Wiegmink’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” (Wiegmink 391). While Haas’s study is the more traditional one of the two in that it offers a “text-centered approach […] grounded in literary rather than performance studies” (14), Wiegmink 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 rightly 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 significance 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,³ 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.⁴ 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, . . .


by means of understanding U.S.-American AIDS drama “as an agent of social discourse” (4), it probes the contributions of drama to 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 against those who did not live up to the ideal of the strong and healthy individual. Like the bubonic plague, syphilis, and tuberculosis 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
the so-called first generation of AIDS plays. William M. Hoffman’s As Is (1985), Larry Kramer’s The Normal Heart (1985), and Harvey 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 public and gay men in particular about the causes and symptoms of HIV/AIDS. Harvey Fierstein’s Safe Sex is categorized by Haas as a 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, “Widening the Scope: AIDS in American Drama of the early 1990s,” second generation AIDS 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 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 homophobic sentiments in mainstream American thought. The third play in this section, Paula 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. Unsurprisingly, Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes (1991/92) by Tony Kushner is granted a unique role in Haas’s analysis as the two-part play is not only the “most famous 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 experimental and thematically the most diverse play, it is logical that Haas devotes the third part of the chapter exclusively to Kushner’s work. Concentrating “on the nexus of AIDS, identities, and communities and […] on the connections of the epidemic, American 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 adaptation of the play, the extremely successful HBO mini series starring Meryl Streep, Al Pacino, Emma Thompson, and other A-list actors/actresses. The fourth and last section 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 Rudnick’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 distinguishes 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 “individualizing 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 compared 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 conclusion, 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 diligently 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 footnotes in total). I would have preferred an index 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 definition 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 Wiegmink presents a most overdue analysis of these unjustly neglected forms of cultural expressions. Given activist performances’ shadowy existence, Wiegmink 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 Wiegmink, 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 Wiegmink 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) exclusively 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. Wiegmink 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, Wiegmink 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. Wiegmink 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), Wiegmink 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, Wiegmink 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)
and the fact that political action “no longer entirely depends on the interaction of physical bodies” (113) in material space, but might as well happen in a virtual one. At the same time, however, Wiegmink is also anxious to stress the enduring significance of the “territorial space of the nation” (94).

The subsequent three chapters contain insightful analyses of original material Wiegmink has collected firsthand and which has not been treated by critics. Chapter 4 presents the first case study on Reverend Billy and The Church of Life After Shopping. Reverend Billy, the eccentric, white-clad preacher impersonated by New York-based actor Bill Talen, and his red-gowned “congregation” publicly rally against multinational corporations such as Starbucks and Disney. As one of their major topics is the “politics of consumption” (123), they make sure that their performances take place in spaces where the mammon resides, i.e. in retail stores on bustling streets. In this context, Wiegmink differentiates between performances that are staged in corporate spaces and the ones that happen in public spaces. In doing so, she is able to categorize the critique performed by the group. In one of Reverend Billy’s “retail interventions” (125), for instance, which took place at a Disney 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, although abounding with parody and theatrics, was taken rather seriously by the unsuspecting consumer-witnesses. In one of their spectacles in the public space, the “Sidamo Prayer Campaign,” actor Bill Talen impersonated Reverend Billy to “preach” to the yet-unenlightened crowd of bystanders. He and the members of his “church” were singing, chanting, and praying 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 material, Wiegmink persuasively shows how “the performances of The Church of Life After Shopping both aesthetically and ideologically defy dominant political discourse as they articulate politics in a playful and emotionally appealing rather than argumentative and rational way” (200).

In her second case study on the Billionaires for Bush, Wiegmink 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 Republican 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 differences—granted them entry to the inner circle of the actual players in the democratic political process: the CEOs, lobbyists, and private equity managers. In short: the big money. As Wiegmink stresses, The Billionaires for Bush “do not straightforwardly articulate their critique […], but use humor and parody to make their argument” (204). Thus they waved pro-inequality banners during a Republican fundraising 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 Republican 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 spectacle and the changing notions of participatory democracy (249). In a somewhat lengthy excursus, she then expounds the impact of new media/social networking technologies on political campaigning in general, and presidential 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 performative political activism then plays a central role in Wiegmink’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 registering 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 often find themselves invited to business meetings where they stage their “cyber hoaxes” (292), whose sole purpose is “to utilize mass...
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 Wiegmink’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 first-hand, 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 Wiegmink’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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