

## BOOK REVIEWS

Benedikts Kalnačs. *20<sup>th</sup> Century Baltic Drama: Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2016.

Benedikts Kalnačs' *20<sup>th</sup> Century Baltic Drama: Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options* brings to the foreground the socio-political, historical and aesthetic development of twentieth century Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, while overtly and decisively pleading for an expansion of the term 'postcolonial', so as to include formerly Soviet Eastern-European countries and the Baltic littoral in particular. The genesis, development and consequences of this region's German colonization, brief period of interwar independence, Soviet occupation, as well as subsequent decolonization are tackled by means of case study analyses of dramatic works penned by late nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first century Baltic playwrights. As a professor of literary studies and director of the "Institute of Literature, Folklore and Arts" at the University of Riga, Kalnačs' extensive knowledge on the history of Latvian drama is coupled with an ambition to reveal the intricate relationship between different manifestations of (post)modernist Baltic theatre and the three states' collective political and intellectual history.

In Benedikts Kalnačs' study, postcolonial criticism is interwoven with new historicism in the analysis of "manifestations of identity in literary texts" (14) with the aim to examine the manner in which "Baltic cultures [can be seen] as agencies of Europe's internal others" (14). Hence, despite of the somewhat overwhelming number of examples of dramatic works, what Kalnačs proposes is far from being merely a literary endeavor. The underlying quest is to shift the attention of postcolonial studies towards the affinity between postcommunism and postcolonialism and the effects of Soviet colonialism on countries situated at a crossroad between the East and the West even after the fall of the Iron Curtain and their reclaiming of independence in the 1990s. The physical, spiritual and symbolic violence with which the Soviet power established its dominance, the imposition of USSR cultural standards, the forcible eradication of the national specificity and cultural memory of the occupied territories, along with the recognition of what Madalina Tlostanova calls "a second-rate type of Soviet citizen" (27) and the discrimination against the 'others' who distanced themselves from the ruling center are only a few of the reasons mentioned in favor of "the considerable widening of the field which tackles colonial practices" (21) towards a more global perspective that involves "a discussion about internal European colonialism" (21).

In this respect, Benedikts Kalnačs goes beyond the works of established postcolonial critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and stresses the utmost importance of redrawing attention to studies such as David Chioni Moore's article "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique." *Baltic Postcolonialism*. Ed. Violeta

Kelertas. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.<sup>1</sup> Only in this key, can regions such as the Baltics, Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia be envisioned in the broader context of formerly colonized states. Kalnačs also follows in the footsteps of Romanian critic Bogdan Ștefănescu – whose work *Postcommunism/Postcolonialism: Siblings of Subalternity*. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Publishing House, 2013 provides a thorough discussion of this topic – and acknowledges the crucial contributions of Cristina Șandru, Epp Annus, Ewa Thompson, Neil Lazarus and Violeta Kelertas to the field. In addition, Latin American scholars such as Walter Mignolo are commented for having tackled the issue of underrepresentation of certain social groups in postcolonial discourse and for their attempt to “decolonize the logic of coloniality” (22), although Kalnačs also underlines the necessity for further discussions based on the Baltic area in particular.

*20<sup>th</sup> Century Baltic Drama: Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options* is structured into six parts that are presented as being illustrative of anti-colonial thought in the Baltic countries: the national, the philosophical, the historical, the contemporary, the absurd and the postcolonial. The twentieth century subject matter is further divided into two periods: 1) from mid nineteenth century until the 1940 Soviet occupation and 2) the second half of the twentieth century, characterized by colonial rule and its aftermath (57). An insightful introduction and an afterward section enclose these parts, providing the necessary contextual details for readers who may not be specialized in the field and allowing for a more accessible perusing of the work.

The chapter entitled “The National” lingers on the history of dependency of the Baltic littoral, the population of which had been referred to as non-Germans throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, highlighting the subaltern position of the three countries with respect to the ‘noble’ German colonizers and consequently stressing the necessity for local native communities to undertake (literary) endeavors to represent themselves. National Latvian playwright Rudolfs Blaumanis’ plays *Prodigal Son* (1893) and *In the Fire* (1905) are regarded as having raised awareness to ethnicity by means of both the language used and the characters who challenged the domination of their colonial masters by countering their reason with passion and their Germanness with locally-constructed identity. “The Philosophical” section of the volume delves into the analysis of Rainis’s plays *Blow, Wind!* (1913) and *Joseph and His Brothers* (1919), among others, in order to portray the use of folkloric and biblical sources that provide a wider frame of reference and place national experience in the global context of European modernism, “underlining the inner tension of individual experience within broader societal structures” (106).

“The Historical” facet of anti-colonial thought begins with a presentation of the period of Lithuanian independence between 1918 and 1940 and the subsequent Polonization of the upper class, focusing on the newly found interest in the documentation of the nation’s history via local dramatic works such as Vincas Krėvė-

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<sup>1</sup> Benedikts Kalnačs also mentions what David Chioni Moore called “reverse cultural colonization” when describing the imposed cultural backwardness of the colonization model that he considers to be a Soviet mimicry of the global colonialism imposed by Western empires in the case of the Baltic region.

Mickevičius' *Skirgaila* (1925) and Balys Sruoga's *The Shadow of the Giant* (1934). The chapter continues with the initially ambiguous literary reaction to the Soviet occupation on the part of writers who both challenged and supported the dominant ideology and concludes with the ever more insistent USSR attempts at suppressing national history and the ensuing dissolution of the imposed black-and-white, stereotypical patterns of historical representation imposed by the Soviet ideology, with examples from Estonian drama in particular.

As opposed to the previous chapter's focus on the aesthetic expression of the past, "The Contemporary" deals with the literary trend of socialist realism and the staging of plays that tackled the present reality of local communities and their daily lives. As the dominant aesthetic doctrine of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, socialist realism was officially established in 1934 and enforced the "rejection of pre-Soviet culture and its erasure from public memory" (131). The means by which this was implemented in literary works included censorship, the replacement of 'dangerous' books with new editions that supported the 'correct' ideology, the polarization of what and who is valuable or worthless according to their position with respect to the metropole, the antagonistic portrayal of the enemies of the Soviet state as negative characters in opposition to positive heroes, as well as the emphasis on the great family, social integration and the mentor/disciple relationship. According to Benedikts Kalnačs, the Baltic countries suffered an even stricter implementation of Soviet doctrines than the imperial center itself, where a certain amount of openness towards the West was allowed (132). Hence, out of fear of persecution or personal conviction, many Baltic writers were constrained to producing a type of literature that appeared to be more Soviet than local, despite claiming to be illustrative of Baltic experience. For instance, Arvīds Grigulis' *To Which Harbor?* (1945) and *How History Was Made in Garpēteri* (1946) mocked Latvian intelligentsia who attempted to oppose Soviet forces and rewarded characters who were loyal to the Soviet state, conforming to the underlying principles of socialist realism. It is important to mention that in this chapter Kalnačs also dwells on drama which marked a turning point in Baltic literature after the death of Stalin in 1953. Plays such as Juhan Smuul's *The Atlantic Ocean* (1956) proposed to go beyond hypocritical Soviet propaganda and depict the everyday life of the Balts in a more authentic manner, from the view point of the subaltern. In this sense, works similar to Priede's *The Youngest Brother's Summer* (1957) succeeded in avoiding Soviet clichés and binary oppositions by offering a more complex perspective on human relationships.

"The Absurd" addresses the Baltic attempt to follow the trend of the artistic experimentation involved by the theatre of the absurd and the latter's acknowledgement of the irrationality of existence. However, "the colonization of minds" (56) carried through by socialist realism throughout the years deterred the public from being receptive to other forms of literary representation and limited the possibilities for a full immersion into the absurd aesthetic. Nonetheless, certain playwrights among whom Arthur Alliksaar with his *The Nameless Island* (1966) and Paul-Eerik Rummo with his *Cinderellagame* (1968) found a way to combine absurdist elements with traditional structures, so that the incomprehensibility of life be turned into meaningful messages with social and political

undertones of resistance (173). The final chapter entitled “The Postcolonial” is described as “the expression of post-independence feelings in the Baltic countries at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to a certain extent . . . a synthesis of previous trends in drama” (57). Dislocation and difficulty of adaptation to new ways of life, as well as feelings of in-betweenness and unhomeliness experienced by the characters in Rūta Mežavilka’s *Strong Northerly Wind* (2002) are added to the loneliness and isolation of Inga Ābele’s *Dark Deer* (2004) protagonist as proof of the Balts’ sentiment of inadequacy at the turn of the century, as they are split between old and new models of existence, between the elders’ familiarity with the former Soviet rule and the younger generation’s attraction towards the West. Postcolonial time and space are tackled in the analysis of Jaan Undusk’s *Goodbye, Vienna* (1999), among others, in which a sense of inferiority and insecurity are mixed with both allure and repulsion towards Vienna/ the West. This analysis of the fractured psyche and “unavoidable sense of hybridity” (201) of the postcolonial subject is continued in the afterword, as Kalnačs brings into discussion the social and psychological legacy of Baltic colonial history.

Although the discussion of the six sections is not as clearly delineated as the table of contents would have the readers believe, they offer a useful systematic division that is coherent with the overall narrative presented and although the author’s Latvian background and personal experiences are very visible at times, Benedikts Kalnačs manages to offer a balanced view of Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian shared cultural heritage, without implying that the respective countries have an identical history and fully overlapping identities or belief systems. Thus, the author makes sure to also briefly pin down some of the differences between the above mentioned countries in terms of their cultural peculiarities. However, when it comes to decolonial options, Kalnačs does not necessarily meet the expectations given by the title, since apart from the need to have an acute awareness of the past and present political situation in the Baltic littoral in order to be able to discuss the transformation undergone by these nations, not many decolonial options are offered.

Benedikts Kalnačs joins the ranks of critics who consider that the post- in postcolonial is indeed the post- in post-Soviet, placing the Baltic lands “among other victims of the global coloniality of power” (216). His *20<sup>th</sup> Century Baltic Drama: Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options* represents a valuable addition to the field, as it focuses on the common trends and patterns in the development of Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian literature, analyzed from a postcolonial perspective. Despite the fact that the multiplicity of literary examples at times takes away from the focus and clarity of the arguments provided, Benedikts Kalnačs’ impressive research into the social milieus and aesthetic contexts of the twentieth century Baltic states, along with an organized rendition of essential information with respect to the overtly stated aim of the volume, allow for a thorough analysis of the region’s rich history of ideological and cultural foreign occupation, as well as the long lasting consequences it entails.

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