

## REVIEWS

### A WELL-VERSED OVERVIEW OF VERSE IN THEATRE

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Kasia Lech. *Dramaturgy of Form: Performing Verse in Contemporary Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2021. 130 pp. ISBN 978-0-367-20193-7 (hbk), 978-0-429-26005-6 (ebk).

Verse tends to be something which is lost in the shuffle in contemporary literary studies. This holds doubly true for verse in the theatre. Kasia Lech's recent book *Dramaturgy of Form* therefore represents a genuine breath of fresh air. The book is part of the Focus on Dramaturgy series published by Routledge, with Magda Romanska, a leading figure in the field, as the series editor. *Dramaturgy of Form* is the seventh out of a planned twenty-volume series.<sup>1</sup>

Lech teaches at Canterbury Christ Church University, but is originally from Poland. She received her PhD from University College Dublin. Her international background and experience make her an ideal interpreter of the topic. Lech is also an actor, puppeteer, and the executive editor of the ground-breaking *The Theatre Times* portal, which although only founded in 2016 by Romanska and Beatriz Cabur has already proved to be a major player on the international theatre scene, providing a forum for theatre scholars and goes around the world to share their knowledge and experience. The mission is to, among other things, combat and counter-balance the overwhelmingly western and Anglo-American bias and perspective of theatre scholarship in the past. Lech's *Dramaturgy of Form* is firmly in line with this mission, ranging over not only a vast time period, but also across cultures and languages, with a focus on not only British and Irish plays and performances, but also a number of works in Polish, Spanish, and a range of additional languages and cultures. She includes an extremely eclectic selection of both primary and secondary texts, harking back to classical times with Sophocles' *Antigone*, moving to Shakespeare, and leading all the way up to Lin-Manuel Miranda's smash hit *Hamilton* from 2015.

The genres of primary texts included in the analysis are also wide and ranging: musicals, Hip Hop theatre, devised performance, digital projects, translations, etc. Lech makes use of this varied range of texts in order to support a call for verse

<sup>1</sup> For the titles in the series thus far, see <https://www.routledge.com/Focus-on-Dramaturgy/book-series/RFOD>.

dramaturgy in theatre to deal with topical issues of our time, including, among other things, post-colonialism, feminism, racism, marginalization, and much more.

In the first chapter, Lech makes extensive use of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia in her analysis, as it very much corresponds with her interest in multiplicity of voices and perspectives. In order to provide a sound foundation for her later analysis, the author discusses verse structure including the lexical and rhythmical aspects. She further explores the role of the actor speaking the lines and the particularities of theatre in connection with use of verse. Lech occasionally grounds her analysis with concrete examples of scanned verse in this chapter, making use of a poem by the Irish poet Eavan Boland and passages from the Polish playwrights Stanisław Wyspiański and Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk. When providing examples from languages other than English, the author always provides a verse translation as well, either an official version or her own. Lech argues forcefully that verse can serve to promote and celebrate multilingualism and translations of plays and poetry. Of particular interest in this respect are the examples provided of translations from Irish into English and attempts to reproduce Irish metre in English.

The second chapter looks at verse in translations and adaptations. It includes an analysis of Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes: Sophocles' Antigone*, translations of Polish plays by Adam Mickiewicz and Stanisław Wyspiański into English both staged and directed by the contemporary director Radosław Rychcik, and a translation of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño (Life Is a Dream)* from Spanish into English. Each of the verse translations breathes new life into the original, addressing contemporary issues in politics, gender and race questions. Once again the author provides the reader with concrete examples in order to bolster her argument. In vivid contrast to popular expectations, verse is employed herein in order to explore a range of contemporary, topical issues.

The following chapter entitled interestingly "(No-longer) Ibsen's 'language of the Gods'" attempts to show how verse in theatre can give voice to the marginalized and suppressed and serve as a means of protest. The examples used here are wide-ranging and provocative, beginning with the controversial play *28 Days: The Tragedy of a Menstrual Cycle* by the young Russian playwright Olga Shilyaeva. In vivid contrast, in terms of time and place, Lech includes a lengthy analysis of a Polish staging in translation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by Anna Augustynowicz from 2016 which manages to address a number of pressing issues faced by Europe and Poland in particular.

Lin-Manuel Miranda's smash hit rap-musical *Hamilton* is also discussed in some detail, highlighting the political impact it has made, while at the same time taking it to task for its failure to provide women characters with much of a voice.

In contrast, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's 2018 play *Emilia*, about Shakespeare's contemporary and possible lover, is praised for its exciting empowering message about women and female artists.

The final chapter focuses on new, innovate forms of theatre and verse. The examples used once again span the globe with a special interest in the use of 'gig theatre' and music on the stage. A lengthy discussion of the Polish playwright Marta Górnicka's experimental play *HYMN TO LOVE for Orchestra, Stuffed-Animal Choir, and Others* from 2017 brings the book to a fitting close. Lech makes use of the piece to encapsulate many of the themes and topics discussed earlier in the book and also points out possible new directions for world theatre in the future.

The strength of the book is also, paradoxically, one of its weaknesses. Lech covers so much space and time, that occasionally the reader (speaking, for example, of myself) might have difficulty keeping up. While I, on the one hand, appreciate how the author makes extensive use of both primary and secondary texts from Poland (her homeland and first language), I wonder if it is not a bit startling for readers who are not familiar with the Polish approach or the Slavic tradition in general. Also, would not there be different issues in verse when comparing English and, for example, Polish? Perhaps an introduction to the Polish literary tradition and critical approaches could have been useful. Having said this, the author should be commended for bringing to the forefront much neglected scholarship which has unfortunately not yet been translated into English. On a personal note, I appreciated the inclusion and discussion of the work of the English poet and performer Kae Tempest in both chapters three and four, whose impressive use of verse has served as a powerful voice for the current generation and also undoubtedly exposed young readers and listeners to the innovative and provocative uses of poetry and the spoken word.

In conclusion, this book is of great value for not only its ideas and content, but also for paving a path to open up, often ethnocentric and closed-mind, scholarship to other cultures and languages than English. One can only help more of the same will follow, not only from the pen of Kasia Lech, but also by others inspired by her innovative approach and ideas.

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