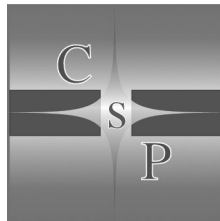


The Cultural Politics of Heiner Müller

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Edited by

Dan Friedman



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INTRODUCTION

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF HEINER MÜLLER

1.

The origins of this collection go back to 1987 when Eva Brenner, then a graduate student in performance studies at New York University, convinced her colleagues at the Castillo Theatre in New York City (including me) to stage Heiner Müller's *Explosion of a Memory/Description of a Picture*. She invited her friend Joseph Szeiler, then artistic director of the Angelus Novus theater in her native Vienna, to fly to New York and direct the production.

The Castillo Theatre in 1987 was three years old. It consisted of a contentious collection of community organizers, leftist political activists and artists trying to work together (not easy with such an opinionated bunch) to build a theatre with ties to New York's poor and working class communities. Some of us came out of the street theatres of the late 1960s and '70s, others out of the feminist oriented stand-up comedy scene. Still other Castillo founders, not originally theatre people at all, but figurative painters, modern dancers, and musicians, looked for new political art to emerge from the street, from the then coming-into-being hip-hop culture (graffiti, rap, break-dancing and so on). It will come as no surprise then that not all of us were thrilled about producing a seemingly impenetrable dramatic poem by a German avant-gardist who appeared to have little to say to the communities we were organizing.

Fred Newman is a former philosophy professor who had left academia in 1968 to become a community organizer. By 1987 he was the leader of the political movement/community that Brenner, myself, and the rest of the Castillo founders were a part of. He was of the opinion that it was Castillo's obligation to bring the poor and working class people we were organizing into contact with the work of the most challenging and experimental artists. It is ordinary people, he argued, who had the most to gain from getting past traditional ways of seeing and they who, in the long run, had the power to do something with the experiences that Müller's texts could provide.

Newman and Brenner won the rest of us over. Castillo produced *Explosion of a Memory/Description of a Picture* and brought out hundreds of community people to see it. In the years since that first production, Castillo has mounted 15 Müller productions—including the North American premier of *The Task* in 1989 and of *Germania 3 Ghosts at Dead Man* in 2002—most of them directed by Newman, who was Castillo's artistic director from 1989 until his retirement in December 2005.

Over the course of this work, Castillo and Müller built a relationship. In 1989, Müller visited Castillo and met with Newman; that same year, Castillo artists, including Brenner, visited him in Berlin. Thereafter, Castillo sent videos of its Müller productions to the playwright. For Castillo's 1992 production of *Explosion* (this one under Newman's direction) Müller contributed a video of himself reading the text in English from a Berlin rooftop. He was scheduled to lead a two-week workshop with Castillo's actors in February 1996, but passed away before that was possible. His protégé, Stephan Suschke, came in his stead in 1996 to see Newman's all-female production of *Hamletmachine* and returned the following year to direct *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts* at Castillo.

In the late 1990s we decided that producing Müller at Castillo was not enough. We came to feel his work was so significant—all the more so in the post-communist world—that we wanted to play an active role in generating dialogue about Müller and encouraging others to produce his work. Castillo's efforts in this regard have included organizing public dialogues about Müller between Newman and others who had directed and/or studied his work. Participants in these forums over the years have included: Sylvère Lotringer, editor of *Germania*, an invaluable collection of Müller interviews (cited often by contributors to this volume); Jonathan Kalb, author of *The Theater of Heiner Müller*; Stephan Suschke, who had worked as Müller's dramaturg and assistant director, first at the Deutsches Theater and later at the Berliner Ensemble; and a number of other innovative Müller directors from around the U.S. The largest of these discussions was between Newman and Robert Wilson in February 2002. It took place before a full house of 600 theater artists, students and community organizers at John Jay College of the City University of New York.¹ Castillo also publishes a journal, *Müller in America*, to promote the study of Müller and his work.² In April of 2005, Castillo organized a conference on "The Cultural Politics of Heiner Müller," at the Castillo Theatre's then new facility on 42nd Street near Times Square in New York City.³

The articles in this collection grow out of that conference. The gathering attracted artists and scholars from across the United States, Canada and France. In addition to the papers delivered (versions of which make up this book), artists in attendance came from Castillo as well as from the DNA Theatre in Toronto and Scènes théâtre cinéma in Lyons, France (the only theatre in the world that, according to Carl Weber, has produced more Müller than Castillo). Regular Castillo theater-goers attended as well, many of them having spent over a decade wrestling, as we did, with the work of Müller.

In fact, the conference's opening panel was entitled "An Audience for Heiner Müller." It was moderated by Castillo's managing director Diane Stiles and brought together six audience members to discuss their reactions to and thoughts about the Müller work they have experienced at Castillo. The panel put the difficulty of Müller's texts front and center, raised the issue of accessibility and created a context for the conversations that continued all weekend.

The conference began on Friday night with a reception followed by a performance of *Medeamaterial/Landscape With Argonauts* by students from Mount Allison University (New Brunswick, Canada) under the direction of Cordula Quint. On Saturday night, many conference participants attended the Castillo production of *Revising Germany* by Newman under the direction of Gabrielle L. Kurlander, a play that includes both Brecht and Müller as characters. Both Castillo and Scènes théâtre cinéma gave reports, which included video segments, on their theatres' Müller production histories, and Philippe Vincent, Scènes artistic director, performed the entire "Man in the Elevator" speech from *The Task* in French.

Each chapter of this book, while based on a paper delivered at the conference, has gone through substantial expansion and deepening. Not everyone who presented at the conference is included; some could not subsequently be located and a few opted out of the project. At the same time, I have included contributions from three artist-scholars—Eva Brenner, Aleksander Sasha Lukac, and Carl Weber—who were unable to attend the conference, but were eager to contribute to the project. I felt passionately that they each had important things to say about the cultural politics of Heiner Müller.

This book is, therefore, not, strictly speaking, a transcript of the conference. It is at once an outgrowth, a further development, and an extension of the initial gathering, an event that, thanks to Cambridge Scholars Publishing, will now reach a far wider audience than those who came together to talk about Heiner Müller on that April weekend.

2.

Who Heiner Müller is and the cultural and political significance of his work will be discussed in some detail in the pages that follow. For those meeting Müller (1929-1995) for the first time, he was a life-long Marxist and experimental playwright who spent his adult life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). He is probably the most theatrically and politically challenging playwright of our epoch.

Starting as a protégé of Bertolt Brecht, Müller evolved into one of the great innovative poets of the 20th Century, writing texts for the stage that seem to defy the limitations of the theater. Not only do his later texts have no plot, they are often devoid of specific characters and even dialogue. “Only when a text cannot be done in the theatre as it is now,” Müller remarked in 1975, “can it be productive for the theatre, or interesting.” (Müller, 1975: 120) Müller considered his texts simply starting points for creation. “What bores me in the productions [of my plays] is that they [the directors] simply illustrate what is already in the text, instead of using it as association material, as a kind of supernova which inspires directors with ideas.” (Müller, 1990: 211)

Müller is also the most politically sophisticated and provocative of Europe’s post-World War II playwrights. He was a communist whose work was banned for years by the Communist government of the GDR. Müller offended the bureaucrats and political thugs who ran East Germany with his brutal, beautiful and honest dissection of the culture and politics of Eastern Europe. At the same time, Müller infuriated (or at least annoyed) the anti-communists and liberals of the West because he refused to leave the GDR or become a “dissident.” As deformed as it was, the communist experiment—“the petrification of a hope,” as he called it in his play *Hamletmachine* (Müller, 1984: 56)—was, for Müller, the only chance for a better world that history offered in the 20th Century.

Because he came out on the losing side of the Cold War, Müller has been dismissed by some as an historical and political anachronism. For others, his challenges to theatrical convention and the ideological assumptions inherent in those conventions, as well the content of his theater texts—that wrestle with, among many other things, issues of women’s oppression, terrorism and the inherent power of the impoverished peoples of the South—point toward the future. Whatever political and/or aesthetic judgment one brings to Müller’s work, it is clear that in many ways he is a transitional figure, artistically bridging modernism and postmodernism, and politically linking the East-West divisions of the Cold War with the North-South confrontations that have

come to the fore in the post-communist world. Müller is also the only major artist produced by the 20th Century communist movement to live through its collapse and to examine the implications of its demise, including the subsequent rise of international terrorism. Like his mentor Brecht, Müller's dramaturgy and politics are inextricably interwoven.

All of this makes him a figure of increasing interest not only to theater artists and scholars, but also to students of literature and politics, to historians, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists—and all those concerned with the intersection of culture and politics, an intersection that has become increasingly congested in our post-communist, post-modern, post-9/11 world. Hence our title: “Cultural Politics.” While not a precise term, cultural politics has the advantage of implying/generating an exploration of what is *cultural* about politics and what is *political* about culture. It is the working assumption of the contributors to this collection that the cultural and political are inseparable when examining Müller's work and influence.

3.

The topics explored in this collection are very narrow and very broad. Narrow in the sense that they are all about Heiner Müller and his work in the theatre. Broad in that Heiner Müller's life and work assimilated/embodied/played with/transformed the legacy of German and European theatre and literature, German and international communist history, Western philosophy and political thought. His erudition was vast—a deep well from which he drew continually. A single page of text in his play *Hamletmachine*, for example, includes dozens of allusions, quotations, paraphrases and literary and historical references. However, for our authors, the extent of Müller's knowledge is not the point. What he did with this legacy—to build on it, to create anew with it—is.

While each of the chapters in this book focuses on a specific aspect of Müller's cultural politics, they share a number of overlapping concerns. Virtually all of them look at Müller in relation to German, communist and world history, and most of them see an organic link between that history and the content and form of his work. Many of the chapters touch on Müller's political and cultural relationship with his mentor Bertolt Brecht, although they don't always agree on the nature of that relationship. A third thread running through the essays is an exploration of Müller's relationship to and role in shaping postmodernism in the theater. Obviously, that exploration is related to his relationship with Brecht, but it goes beyond the specifics of that bond to Müller's attitude(s) toward the

modernist ideology of Marxism, or perhaps more to the point, to ideology itself as a modernist construct and concern. While our authors come at this question from different angles, many see in Müller's radical re-visioning of dramatic structure a challenge to the ideological assumptions of modernism.

Despite these overlapping concerns, I have chosen to organize the essays into three sections, each focusing on what I see as a distinct area of Müller's cultural politics. The first section, "The Frozen Storm: Müller and the Realpolitik of the Cold War," contains essays exploring Müller's political attitudes and practices within the specific context of the Cold War in which he lived much of his creative life. The second, "Digging Up the Dead: Müller's Use and Transformation of the Western Tradition," looks at how and why Müller built on the forms, images, characters and plays of the Western cultural tradition in an attempt to re-create and reshape it. The third section, "Waiting for History: Müller and the Dynamics of Culture and Politics in the 21st Century," looks, from a number of (sometimes conflicting) perspectives, at the implications of Müller's work for the unfolding political and cultural dynamics of the new century. These categories will, I hope, prove to be of some value to the reader. I have attempted to explain (rationalize?) that value in a brief introduction to each section.

This slim volume, like the modest conference that gave it birth, makes no claim to completeness. What I think it does offer are some very interesting and provocative essays that I hope will lead to further interest in and discussion of Heiner Müller and his work.

Dan Friedman
Castillo Theatre
New York City
September 2007

Notes

¹ The transcript of that conversation, "Robert Wilson and Fred Newman: A Dialogue on Politics and Therapy, Stillness and Vaudeville" moderated by Richard Schechner was published in *The Drama Review* in the Fall of 2003, T179: 113-128. A video of the dialogue can be ordered from the Castillo Theatre, boxoffice@allstars.org.

² Volume 1 of *Müller in America* is a collection articles by American and Canadian directors about their productions of Müller texts. It includes a Foreword by Carl Weber and articles by: Sue-Ellen Case, Jeff Burke, Charles Duncombe, Steve Earnest and Joel Elis, Babak Ebrahimi, Keith Fowler, Nick Fracaro, Aleksandar

Sahsa Lukac, Scott Magelssen and John Troyer, Joe Martin, Fred Newman, Cordula Quint, James Slowiak, Stephan Sushke, and Robert Wilson.

³ A report on the conference can be found in: Friedman, Dan. "Heiner Müller on 42nd Street," *The Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, Review*, Vol. 15, Issue 2 (Spring/Summer 2005): 7-8.

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PART I

THE FROZEN STORM: MÜLLER AND THE REALPOLITIK OF THE COLD WAR

I, my grave his face, I: the woman with the wound at her throat, right and left in her hands the split bird, blood on the mouth, I: the bird who with the script of his beak shows the murderer the way into the night, I: the frozen storm.

—Heiner Müller, 1984

INTRODUCTION

Heiner Müller, like us all, was a product of his time and place. The chapters in section one look at Müller and the art he created in the context of that time and place and examine the ways in which his life and theatre responded to and impacted on the history he was a part of. Time and place are expansive words that can be approached from many angles and which yield many shades of meaning.

Carl Weber, Müller's major English translator, provides us with a brief political biography of the playwright. Having been a close colleague and friend of Müller's and having developed as an artist in the same cultural and political milieu, Weber is particularly well situated to provide this overview. Slightly older than Müller, Weber joined the Berliner Ensemble in 1952 as an actor, dramaturg and assistant director to Bertolt Brecht, with whom he worked on the productions of *Katzgraben*, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *Galileo*. After Brecht's death in 1956, Weber became one of the company's directors, staging *Mother Courage and Fear and Misery in the Third Reich*, and acting in eight other Ensemble productions. Since leaving the East in 1961, he has directed in numerous theatres in Western Europe and the United States. In 1966 he was a founding member of the faculty of the now world-renowned New York University Tisch School of the Arts. Since 1984, he has been professor of dramaturgy and directing at Stanford; it is from Stanford that he has translated the bulk of Müller's dramatic work into English.

In "From Determination to Detachment—Heiner Müller's Assessment of Culture and Politics in a Lifetime of Profound Historical Change," Weber traces Müller's political evolution from the social democratic politics of his father (which resulted in his father's internment in a Nazi concentration camp) through the playwright's response to the collapse of the Soviet model of socialism six years before his death. It is a journey, Weber, points out, that "never ceased to be marked by the visceral experience of German fascism." By tracing the specifics of Müller's "straddling" of the twists and turns of the Cold War, Weber makes clear that Müller was *the* political dramatist of that period of political and ideological stalemate and stagnation, the "frozen storm" referred to in *Explosion of a Memory/ Description of a Picture*.

Aleksandar Sasha Lukac, a generation younger than Müller and Weber, brings to “The Dissident’s Dilemma: Müller’s Choice to Stay in East Germany,” not a friendship with the playwright, but a set of somewhat parallel experiences and concerns. Lukac, the former artistic director of the National Theatre in Belgrade and the independent political theatre Plexus Boris Piljnjak, has been living in Toronto, Canada for some 15 years. Like Müller, he grew to artistic maturity facing the painful contradictions of a progressive artist working within the repressive, yet nominally socialist Eastern Bloc. While making clear and important distinctions between the political cultures of the former Yugoslavia and the German Democratic Republic, Lukac none-the-less draws on his own experiences to explore not only why Müller chose to stay in the GDR, but why that decision was essential to the theatre that he created.

Eva Brenner, who contributes the third chapter to this section, is a pioneer of Müller scholarship. (That her 1993 dissertation, “HAMLETMACHINE Onstage: A Critical Analysis of Heiner Müller’s Play in Production,” is cited by half our contributors is evidence of her influence.) In her essay, “A Cancer Walk Through German History,” Brenner broadens the lens considerably on Müller’s time and place. She considers Müller in the context of German history stretching back to the 17th Century and looks at Germany not primarily as a geographical location but as the epicenter of 20th Century history. Building on Walter Benjamin’s non-schematic and open-ended concept of history, she looks at Müller’s work as a response to the failures of German history, in particular to the failure of the aborted German Communist Revolution of 1919. In so doing, she not only (or even primarily) sheds new light on Müller’s relationship to/treatment of German history, but also makes a persuasive case for locating Müller’s universal appeal in his German-ness.

Each of the contributors to this section has taken a different approach to examining Müller’s engagement with the real politics of his time and place and with the impact of that engagement on his work. They have hardly exhausted the subject, but taken together these chapters function as a helpful springboard into the rest of our book.

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CHAPTER ONE

FROM DETERMINATION TO DETACHMENT— HEINER MÜLLER’S ASSESSMENT OF CULTURE AND POLITICS IN A LIFETIME OF PROFOUND HISTORICAL CHANGE

CARL WEBER

It might be perceived as not too difficult to construe a somewhat coherent, if at times conflicted, progress of the cultural politics or, perhaps more accurately, the cultural and political positions, Heiner Müller espoused during his career as a writer and also, eventually, a sought-after popular commentator. However, it turns out to be a complicated endeavor, since Müller’s view of cultural (and other) politics kept changing, often drastically changing, throughout his life. Sometimes these changes evolved in a slow and considered manner. Every so often they were a spontaneous response to the historical moment and its implications—as well to personal experiences connected to, but not necessarily elicited by, historical incident.

Heiner Müller moved during his lifetime from a firmly committed ideological position to a rather distanced view of ideologies and history, “the view of an archaeologist of history,” as his friend, the scholar Hans Thies Lehmann has noted (Lehmann/Primavesi: 12). In fact, reviewing the numerous statements Müller formulated during a life that kept “straddling,” as he liked to call it, the divide which marked world culture during half a century of Cold Warfare, one recognizes an often conflicted, yet nevertheless distinct, passage from the narrowly defined positions he adopted in the 1950s, i.e. in his twenties, to a much broader and decidedly more pessimistic view of the cultural and political currents he discerned in the past and future of the human race. However, throughout his life he fundamentally concurred with a Marxist interpretation of history and the concomitant hope for the ultimate establishment of a society that would

abolish the vast gap between the haves and the have-nots which has characterized all of human history or, as he preferred to label it, (following Marx) prehistory (Müller/Weber 1989b, 106).

Müller's worldview and writings never ceased to be marked by the visceral experience of German fascism. In the period of the Nazis' rise to power his father was a functionary of the Socialist Workers Party, a political group that had split from the Social Democrats and moved closer to the Communist Party; it was one among several left parties active during the later years of the Weimar Republic. He was arrested and sent to a concentration camp shortly after Hitler was appointed chancellor in January of 1933. Although his father was eventually released, the family suffered much hardship throughout the twelve years of Nazi rule, which he wrote about directly in the prose piece "The Father" (1958).

After the war, Müller's father became a functionary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), which had been created by merging the Communist and Social-Democratic parties after the war in the Russian occupied east of Germany. The SED became the ruling party when, in 1949, the (East) German Democratic Republic (GDR) was established. Having been elected mayor of a small town in Saxony, Müller's father soon got into trouble with his party and was expelled from it as a so-called "Titoist." This was a label invented by the Soviets to designate a follower of Josip Bronz Tito, the leader of the Yugoslavian Communist Party, which without the direct aid of either the Soviet Union or its western allies, drove the Nazis out of the Balkans. Much could be said about "Titoism," however, all we need to know for our purposes, is that Tito held that communism needed to be built based on conditions in each particular country rather than by strictly following the model established by the Soviet Union.

When his parents defected to the (West) German Federal Republic, in early 1951, the young Müller decided to stay in the GDR. He was fully committed to the young state's socialist agenda, which presented itself as a complete break with the fascist ideology of the past and offered the promise of a society free of the privileges and injustices of Germany's traditional class system. This decision set the course of Müller's life and established the context for the development of his plays and his cultural politics.

Müller moved to the GDR's capital, Berlin, where he tried hard to establish himself as a journalist, a poet and, eventually, playwright. The writings from those years reveal his firm belief in the future of socialism and the GDR, the only country that represented its German manifestation. He craved recognition by the cultural and intellectual elite of the young

East German state at a time, the 1950s, when its authorities labored to strictly circumscribe its ideological parameters. These were precarious years for any independent thinking or artistic experimentation since the government and the ruling party saw themselves imperiled as much from within as from their West German rival state. As the strikes and popular uprising in June 1953 clearly demonstrated, these fears were not misplaced. Müller applied several times between 1951 and 1954 to be accepted as a “master pupil of the Academy of the Arts” with Brecht, but was rejected each time.

During most of the 1950s, he struggled to make a living as a journalist and literary critic. Writing on issues of the day, he more or less adhered to what he understood to be the cultural/political views proscribed by the SED. Occasionally he blundered in his assessment of a repeatedly changing party line or unwittingly offended rival cultural factions, lapses that were not ignored, or forgotten, by the political and cultural authorities.

He had some early success with his first three plays—*Ten Days that Shook the World*, co-authored with Hagen Stahl (Müller, 2000: 65-108), *The Scab* (Müller/Weber 1989a: 23-56), and *The Correction* (Müller/Weber 2001: 30-42) all of which premiered in 1957 and 1958. The latter two conformed to the model of “Production Play,” works that described problems as well as achievements of the young socialist industry, a cultural project strongly promoted through the party’s cultural line. Stylistically they were reminiscent of Brecht. The two plays earned him and his then wife and collaborator, Inge Schwenkner, the coveted literary Heinrich Mann Prize. But soon he encountered serious setbacks.

In the autumn of 1961, shortly after the Berlin Wall had been established, Müller was facing accusations of being “a counterrevolutionary” who was trying to subvert the GDR’s socialist system with his new play, *The Resettled Woman* (Müller 2000: 181-287). The text portrayed life in the East German countryside and the problems villagers had to cope with after the “land reform” of late 1945, when the large estates of the former Prussian aristocracy and other big landowners were carved up and distributed to farm workers, small farmers, and persons from the former German provinces east of the post-war Polish border. The play’s title referred to the many ethnic Germans, who had been expelled from the newly annexed Polish territories and then resettled in small towns and villages of the two post-war German states. Müller believed that he had created a realistic yet positive representation of contemporary GDR village life and its various social conflicts. The authorities of party and state couldn’t agree less, and the production was cancelled after one preview.

The consequence was Müller's expulsion from the Writers Association and a ban of all publications and stage performances of his work. (It wasn't until 1988, a year before the GDR's final implosion, that he was re-invited into the Association.) Though he delivered a somewhat groveling self-critique before his fellow writers at a special session of the Association, they none-the-less voted for his exclusion. Müller later explained that he had learned from Eisenstein, the early Soviet filmmaker, "who always volunteered to submit self-critiques. It enabled him to survive as an artist. [...] Being able to write was more important to me than my morals" (Müller 2005, Vol. 2: 140). Yet, for several years he was barely making a living by writing for East German radio and TV, mostly under an assumed pen-name.

His early texts indicate that Müller embraced the notion that any cultural production ought to advance the progress of the new socialist society, and that he felt this would require an honest depiction of the intricate dialectics that were complicating the development of socialist agriculture and industry. The authorities apparently felt threatened by such honesty. He later commented, "It was a continuous experience that everything I meant seriously, or considered to be good, was rejected" (Müller 2005, Vol. 2: 86). When the party eventually proclaimed that the GDR represented "the advanced form of existing Socialism," in 1967, the sixth year after the East German state had closed its borders, Müller saw this as, "the canonization of wretchedness, the birth of a travesty" (Müller 2005, Vol. 2: 157). Yet he preferred to continue living and working in the GDR, the socialist state that still held for him the promise of a better future, notwithstanding its dismal contemporary condition.

Until the mid-1960s his plays portrayed events, partly historical, partly fictional, from the past and present of socialism. They were written in a prose that has to be called "realistic" though the language often was poetic and rich in what Brecht called "gestus." Beginning with *The Resettled Woman*, he increasingly began to use free verse forms though still retaining segments of prose dialogue. He further explored this style in *The Construction Site* (Müller 2000: 329-396), another play about the difficulties that accompanied the building of a socialist industry in the GDR. It was the first major work he had been able to publish, three years after the *The Resettled Woman* affair. However, the text soon was denounced for its "lack of historical perspective" by Erich Honecker (who was to become the head of party and state six years later) during the 11th Plenum of the Party's Central Committee, in 1965, and the play's rehearsals had to be cancelled (Müller 2005, Vol.2: 156-57).

Thus discouraged from writing directly about contemporary issues, for a number of years Müller applied himself to revising narratives appropriated from classic Greek theater and mythology. Through these plays—*Philoctetes*; (Müller 2000: 289-327), *Oedipus Tyrant* (Müller 2004, Vol.1: 7-54), *Herakles 5* (Müller/Weber 1989a: 85-98), and *Prometheus* (Müller, 2001: 7-45)—Müller perfected his mastery of versified language and began to experiment with possibilities of a non-realistic treatment of fable and character. Except for two minor works, he never went back to the dramaturgy of his early plays that had emulated the model of Brecht's Epic Theater.

When, in the early 1970s, Müller returned to topics from the past and present of socialism, he took a far more critical view than during the 1950s and juxtaposed 20th Century events with earlier European and German history and mythology. His plays now clearly indicated a distanced position vis-à-vis the "advanced Socialism" that Honecker's GDR claimed to embody. The 1971 play *Germania Death in Berlin* (Müller/Weber, 1989b: 39-87) includes many scenes he had originally scripted during the 1950s, and it unfolds an ironic survey of German history from the end of World War I to the June of 1953 strikes in the GDR and the resultant popular uprising. The text comments on 20th Century history with scenes from the Niebelung myth and Frederick the Second's 18th Century Prussia. It could not be performed in East Germany until 1989, because its portrayal of the June 1953 events contradicted the official party narrative.

Nonetheless, Müller defended in interviews and on numerous other occasions his commitment to the GDR and published aggressive anti-Western statements. His continued adherence to the long-term goals of the communist experiment in the East, at this point, seems certain. At the same time, such proclamations of loyalty may also have helped to protect the travel privileges he had begun to enjoy after he had become an internationally acclaimed author during the 1970s. Starting with *Philoctetes*, at the Munich State Theatre in 1968, his plays were increasingly staged in the West, and not only in the Federal Republic but also in Switzerland and France. A first edition of his collected works was published in West Berlin in 1974, at a time when only few of his writings had been accepted for publication in the GDR. This, at the time, rather surprising success in the West was mainly due to the undeniable poetic quality of his texts and their often startling and perceptive views of past and present history, which seemed to resonate with western leftists.

Müller rejected the Lessing-Prize stipend he had been awarded by the Senate of the West German city state of Hamburg in 1971, arguing that he didn't want to share the prize with the fellow recipient, Max Horkheimer

of the Frankfurt School, who, he said, is “separated from me not merely by a border between [the two German] states.” This was, as he later admitted, a public maneuver at a time when he badly needed permission to travel to Bulgaria to marry his third wife, Ginka Cholakova (Müller 2005, Vol. 2: 280-281). At the same time, such public political statements, were often responses to West German propaganda directed against the GDR in the prevailing Cold War climate.

It is no surprise that Müller's loyalty to the GDR was frequently labeled as rank opportunism by Western critics, since most of his royalties were derived from publications and performances in the West while he was holding positions as a playwright-in-residence with theaters in East Berlin, such as the Berliner Ensemble (1970-76) and the Volksbühne (1976-82). He responded that he was “living in the material he was writing about,” namely the city divided by the Berlin Wall. He liked to characterize the Wall as the cemented metaphor for a world that the Cold War had frozen into mutually hostile camps:

The GDR is important for me since all the lines of separation in our world traverse that country. That is the real situation of [today's] world, and it is quite concretely evidenced by the Berlin Wall. In the GDR there exists a much harsher pressure of experience than here [West Germany, at the time of the quoted interview] and...the pressure of experience is the prerequisite for [my] writing.
(Müller 1986: 135).

In the 1970s and 80s, his stage texts moved further and further away from addressing the specific culture and politics he had to live with in the “advanced socialist” society of the GDR. Increasingly, they focus on the complicated dialectics that are driving the motion of history, embodied for Müller by the image of the “hapless angel” as he described him in a prose-poem of 1958. The angel is being buried under the debris of the past tumbling down in his back, while the wind from the future is choking him with his own breath and exploding his eyeballs. He is buried “waiting for history in the petrification of flight vision breath. Until the renewed whirring of powerful wings will move in waves through the stone and signify his flight” (Müller/Weber 2001: 79). The image was borrowed (if greatly rephrased) from Walter Benjamin's comment on a drawing by Paul Klee. It articulated Müller's belief that humanity's progress was increasingly stifled in his own time and that there might be a long hiatus before it would become possible to revive history's revolutionary mission.

It has been argued that Müller's first visit to the United States was critical in changing his perception of the ideological discourse of the time.

In particular, his American sojourn (1975/76) reinforced views that had become conspicuous in his writings since the early 1960s. The militant feminism he encountered in the U.S. reinforced analogous views he had articulated in several of his plays including *The Construction Site* and *Cement* (1973). He was considering at the time an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* that, judging from the few completed fragments (Weber 2005: 117) anticipated the aggressive feminist vision which later informed the Ophelia segments of *Hamletmachine*, a stage text he conceived after his return from America. In a conversation we had the year after his first visit to the U.S., Müller emphasized that an American production of the text should center on Ophelia rather than Hamlet, since it would relate much more directly to the contemporaneous social context of the U.S. A number of feminist intellectuals considered his writings as misogynistic since they resented the violence, and often brutality, his plays assign to many of their female characters as, for instance, Ophelia and Medea. Yet, "He [Müller] always insisted on showing conflicts unsparingly and resisted to offer harmonious solutions," as Janine Ludwig, the German Müller scholar, has argued (Lehmann/Primavesi 2005: 75). In a culture that embraces compromise and "feel-good" politics, as U.S. society usually tends to do, Müller's uncompromising positions couldn't but provoke disapproval.

The monumental landscapes he encountered while traveling in the U.S. provided "the fundamental experience" of his sojourn, as he later stated in his autobiography: "Everywhere there is landscape that isn't yet occupied [...] landscapes which won't be domesticated" (Müller 2005, Vol. 2: 223). The experience made him realize that geography had a pervasive impact on human history, an impact at least as important as the shifts in the political and economic environment that he previously had privileged in his writings, living, as he did, within the narrow confines of a small country in Central Europe. His new insights became immediately tangible in the text he worked on during his visit and completed after his return from America.

Gundling's Life Frederick of Prussia Lessing's Sleep Dream Scream (Müller/Weber 1984: 59-78) examined the position of intellectuals and their concomitant abuse in Prussian history. Müller's "Prussia" might well have been perceived at the time as a stand-in for the GDR. The play also commented on the Enlightenment's ascendance and eventual failure, as exemplified by the socio-political systems (both capitalist and socialist) that proclaimed their dedication to Enlightenment/modernist precepts. Müller began here to use specific landscapes as metaphoric images in his critique of the Enlightenment and its misuse when it was invoked to justify

the atrocities inflicted in its name during the last centuries of human “pre-history.”

While his subsequent work, *Hamletmachine* (Müller/Weber 1984: 49-58), was mainly concerned with the history of post World War II Europe, and especially of Central Europe, it clearly reflected, as I have indicated, the American experience as well. The text marked a turning point in Müller's oeuvre. At first, critics were hesitant to even perceive it as a play, but it was soon recognized as a new beginning, portent of Müller's emancipation from his previous dramaturgic model—Brecht's—as much as from the ideological positions he hitherto had shared with Brecht. *Hamletmachine* presented a direly detached perspective of the Cold War world of the time, a position that was equally critical of the socialist and the capitalist versions of contemporary society. As a performance text it represented a complete break with familiar modes of Western theater, venturing much further than the previous texts that he had labeled “synthetic fragments” to mark their deliberate disregard of linear narrative and formal consistency. *Hamletmachine's* bitter assessment of the quandaries that afflicted both sides of a Europe divided by the Berlin Wall, begins with the sentence uttered by the protagonist claiming, “I was Hamlet” (meaning actually Heiner Müller, as several critics immediately proposed?) who is talking to the sea while he has turned his back on the “ruins of Europe.” This opening sentence seemed to hint at Müller's resolve to move his focus away from European topics. And though the text is for the most part concerned with the history of a Europe that has been torn apart by the Cold War, it frequently returns to topics of American consumer society.

Müller's ensuing play, *The Task* (Müller/Weber 1984: 81-101), is his first (and only) text situated explicitly outside of Europe, in colonial Jamaica. Its complex non-linear narrative involves three emissaries of revolutionary France who find themselves stranded after Napoleon's rise to power and his repudiation of the idea of a world-wide revolution, a quite obvious parallel to Stalin's dismissal of Trotsky's concept of world revolution during the 1920s. The protagonist is the intellectual Debuissou, a former colonialist slaveholder who joined the French Revolution in protest against slavery and the privileges his family derived from it. In the end, he returns to the family, disgusted with the excesses and eventual failure of the revolution and dismissing the idea of sacrifice in the name of the revolution's humanistic project.

As in *Gundling's Life...* and *Hamletmachine*, Müller interrogates and judges, quite harshly, the intentions and choices of intellectuals who enter into a complex and often self-delusional interaction with politics and state

power, a theme that appears in many of his texts written during the '70s, '80s and '90s. It probably is no accident that the topic of the intellectuals' relationship to their contemporaneous political rulers appeared in Müller's writings at a time when he had to cope with the increasing attention of the "Stasi" (short for Ministerium für Staatsicherheit/Ministry for State Security, East Germany's equivalent of the FBI and the CIA combined). He was invited to collaborate with the security apparatus and, knowing refusal would deprive him of the right to travel and lead to his constant observation by the Stasi, Müller agreed to do so. Yet, as the now accessible files of the former Stasi have revealed, he never denounced any person but rather tried to use these contacts to influence the cultural politics of the GDR and also to protect friends and young writers who had become suspect to the authorities (Müller 2005, Vol. 2: 390-407).

Starting in 1980, Müller began increasingly to direct and, like Brecht in his final years after his return to Germany from exile, channeled much of his creative energy into the staging of his plays, mainly at the Volksbühne and Deutsches Theater in East Berlin. By this time, it had become possible to present the criticism of the GDR implied in his texts with little intervention from the cultural authorities. They had become more tolerant in many respects, partly due, it seems, to the ascendance of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union but also, as Müller has argued, to their awareness that the GDR was heading towards its demise. Thus he could stage a production of *Hamlet*, in his own translation, combined with *Hamletmachine*, which had finally been published in the GDR in 1988. He created an eight-hour performance at Deutsches Theater. Rehearsals started in November of 1989 when the ruling SED was still in control of the government. The production premiered after the destruction of the Wall and the party's resultant loss of power, in March 1990. In October the GDR was absorbed by the (West) German Federal Republic. The production demonstrated, as he phrased it, that "the Old will be the New for a long time to come."

To Müller's mind/politic, the unification of Germany was not a desirable achievement. "From one servitude to another, from Stalin to Deutsche Bank," as he put it (Müller 1994: 87). He took a decidedly skeptical view of the concept and contemporaneous implementation of what those in the West called democracy: "There is no such thing as democracy. That is merely a fiction. It is, as always, an oligarchy, and democracy never has functioned in any other way. There are [always] a few who are living at the expense of the many... And that is today's situation. I cannot be ecstatic about freedom and democracy" (Müller, 2005, Vol. 2: 402-403).

The texts written in the few remaining years of his life express his profound disappointment with socialism's self-inflicted collapse and an innate disgust with capitalism's global conquest, as *Mommsen's Block* and *Ajax for Instance* make evident (Müller/Weber 2001: 122-129; 154-160).

Nonetheless, those final years were a period of unprecedented popular success for Müller. He received many prestigious German and European literary awards, and the 1990 Experimenta theater festival in Frankfurt was dedicated to his lifetime achievement, presenting more than twenty productions of his plays from several European countries. He was elected President of the East German Academy of the Arts and mediated successfully the contested merger with its Western counterpart. In 1993, he directed Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* at the Bayreuth Festival, to remarkable acclaim. After having staged several of his own plays while being a member of a collective of directors at the Berliner Ensemble since 1992, he was appointed artistic director of the company in 1995, attaining the mantle of his erstwhile model Brecht. His last directorial achievement was the staging of Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, a resounding success that was still in the repertory of the Berliner Ensemble, eleven years after Müller's death. He also became a public personality, much sought after for interviews and televised debates as, for instance, his 1993 discussion with West German writer and filmmaker Alexander Kluge, *The Death of Seneca*, so named because at the end Müller reads his poem of the same name (Müller/Weber 2001: 161-169).

Müller certainly didn't devote his life to achieving such a public career. As he stated during the last of his many published conversations, ten weeks before he died of cancer, "Art lives of insecurity, includes risks; otherwise it is of no interest." He also emphasized: "Theater won't be interesting at all unless you do what you cannot do. That is the only way something new can be created" (Müller/Weber, 2001: 229). He always had regarded theater as a laboratory where the collective imagination of a society is/becomes productive. And rejecting the frequent claims that the theatre is in a "crisis" he posited: "Theatre *is* crisis. It is the definition of crisis—or should be. It can only function as crisis and in a crisis, or it has no relation whatsoever to the society outside the theater walls" (Müller/Weber 2001: 232).

An intrinsic consequence of such notions was Müller's attitude regarding productions of his plays by other directors. Quite in contrast, for instance, to Beckett and Brecht, who both insisted that their works should be staged close to the way they themselves directed them or had prescribed their staging, Müller granted unfettered liberties to the directors of future productions. He firmly held that any text, when being staged, had to be

read anew and performed in a manner that responds to the historical moment and would challenge the audience to consider and possibly reexamine their own societal/historical context.

Müller often affirmed that in his theater the spectators are invited to “work,” i.e. are being pushed into the role of co-creators of the performance they are watching. The theater—addressing rather small groups, compared with other performance media—should create a free space where audiences are encouraged to exercise their imagination. That is, of course, a proposition originally associated with Brecht’s concept of theater. However, Brecht did not anticipate the dominance the technological media would have achieved by the end of his century. Müller, having witnessed the encompassing triumph of film and television, concluded that theater ought to contest “the imperialist occupation and liquidation of the human imagination through the pre-fabricated clichés and standards of the media [...] That is a primary political task, even if the [media’s] content is not at all concerned with political issues” (Müller 1982: 177).

Observing the mass media of the early 21st century, one would hardly disagree with his claim that, “Forgetting is counter-revolutionary since all technology is geared towards the extinction of memory” (Müller/Weber 2001: 135). The emergence of generations whose minds were washed clean of any awareness of history, of populations who are living only in the here and now, clearly troubled Müller: “More and more reality is eliminated by virtual reality [...] the arts have to resist that” (Müller 1994: 215). For Müller an awareness and engagement of history was essential for continued human development, and that, more than any specific political attitude or ideological stance, was his cultural politic.

This is but a brief summary of what Hans-Thies Lehmann has called Müller’s “zig-zag movement between the ideological camps of his time,” (Lehmann/Primavesi 2005: 12). In a period of ideological confusion and the apparent discrediting of the Enlightenment and the ideologies it engendered, Müller has been celebrated as a postmodernist playwright and thinker who rejects the precepts of the Enlightenment. Yet, I would argue that a close reading of his writings, in all their diversity, will reveal that he never completely rejected the modernist project that embraced the Enlightenment’s intentions, notwithstanding all his criticism of the abuses and flawed efforts that claimed, or were accused of, having implemented the Enlightenment’s vision.

When I began an interview with Müller, in the early 1980s, with the question of what he would consider as postmodern drama, Müller replied, referring to an Expressionist German dramatist who was killed in 1915 in

World War I: "The only postmodernist I know of was August Stramm, a modernist who worked in a post office" (Müller/Weber 1984: 137). His tongue-in-cheek remark indicates Müller's disdain of any label that is trying to confine him to trendy fashions, be they of ideology, literature, or critical theory.

In 1986, Müller penned a brief Haiku-like poem for Bonnie Marranca, the publisher of his writings in America:

Without hope
Without despair
For the next half century.
(Marranca 1988: 20)

It succinctly expresses his view during the decade that ended with what has been regarded as socialism's ultimate failure. Twenty years later, he probably would be less optimistic. I am wondering what future time span he might be citing today.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE DISSIDENT'S DILEMMA: MÜLLER'S CHOICE TO STAY IN EAST GERMANY

ALEKSANDAR SASHA LUKAC

While I have directed works by Heiner Müller both in my native Yugoslavia where I served as artistic director at the National Theatre in Belgrade, Theatre Zoran Radmilovic and the independent political theatre, Plexus Boris Piljnjak, as well as in my adopted home of Canada, and have been teaching and researching theatre and related subjects for fifteen years at York University in Toronto and McMaster University in Hamilton, my connection to the great German playwright is more political and personal than scholarly or aesthetic. We both came to maturity as theatre artists in the old “communist” bloc of Eastern Europe. We each remained, at least in our own estimations, politically progressive. We each faced the question of whether to stay within our nominally socialist homelands or to defect to the West. We both stayed until those countries, as we knew them, ceased to exist—the German Democratic Republic (GDR) absorbed into a greater Germany, and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia fractured into many pieces. I did eventually decide to leave my country during the worst times of political upheaval in the early nineties to settle in the refreshingly subtle political and cultural contexts of Canada. Thus, this essay is colored by the very real experience of a political artist in exile. It is from the vantage point of some 15 years of exile that I will attempt to look at the complex and sometimes contradictory evidence used to contextualize Müller's refusal to leave East Germany.

Müller's choice not to leave his homeland gains in ethical, philosophical and political weight in view of the many examples of well-known artists who donned the dissident identity and left for the West during the Cold War. The short history of East Germany provides an abundance of examples illustrating the trend towards exile, not only