Elfriede Jelinek, winner of the 2004 Nobel Prize for Literature, said she prayed that her compatriot Peter Handke would receive it instead and that he deserved it. Seeing plays by both of Austria’s most respected if controversial living playwrights a few days apart after their 2007 Berlin premieres, I could not help but compare them and wonder whether Jelinek was right. At least superficially, one can understand Jelinek’s gracious and self-effacing remarks about the relative worthiness of her writing compared to Handke’s. Throughout his career, Handke has diligently and obstinately pursued a rigorously theoretical and intellectual form of writing for the theatre. Jelinek’s texts, although somewhat obtuse, have a more obvious political agenda, and because of their overt sexual content provide the satisfaction of pornography. She celebrates the cheap joke or the clever pun as part of her style.

Jelinek’s latest play starts on such a sweet and enticing note that one could forget momentarily the identity of the author and the political concerns that drive her work. Über Tiere (Concerning Animals) in the Kammerspiele at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, begins with the entry of a handsome, thoughtful-looking young man (Sebastian Rudolph) who shyly takes a seat at a desk and receives a letter that he tells us is from Jelinek. The contents of the letter, which he begins to read aloud, seem perhaps to have something to do with an affair, an acidic billet doux, and soon the young man is joined by a young woman who might be taken for the aggrieved lover and, likewise seated at a desk, reads on. The role of the woman opens up or, rather, is duplicated by other women, seated at desks, reading, as the play literally unfolds like origami, revealing more facets, expanding in dimensions, gaining a kind of universality by the duplication of gendered representations.

As in much of her work, Jelinek is here concerned with the inescapable oppression of women. Her early groundbreak-
Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte (What Happened After Nora Left Her Husband), imagined what might have ensued after Nora left Ibsen's doll house. Jelinek's post-liberation Nora, trapped in the infantilized role of seductress and lacking professional skills (except that of dominatrix) or the imaginative capacity to establish herself independently, returns in the end to her husband.

Similarly, economics and the historical patrimony of power along with the delusion of love subjugate the women of Jelinek's Über Tiere, confining them to a set of demeaning roles and narrative paths. The unfolding of the play beyond the opening tableau pushes the women explicitly into the role of prostitutes and their madam. This is of course a translation by Jelinek of the love relationship that begins the play and conveys her cold-eyed look at the meaning of love and its effects on women. The men, including the gentle, sensitive young man who opens the play, are transformed into clients in a bordello. On the way to their roles as clients, however, the production takes the men on a detour in gender identity. One of the two male actors is introduced first in garish drag and the young man of the opening undergoes an onstage makeover into a woman. The women are also given their turn to play at being men. This distribution and redistribution of speaking parts and gender roles further desentimentalizes the brutal text.

Gender identities resettle, though, and the men are themselves inhumanly animalistic in the way that they treat the women. The evening descends into a drunken, brawling orgy and concludes with the anomalous tableau of a middle-aged woman at home.

The Deutsches Theater production, under the confident and imaginative direction of Nicolas Stemann who has directed three other Jelinek's plays who has directed three other Jelinek's plays, never fails to dazzle the eye and utilize the stage space to great effect. The production opens up the stage space progressively: after the initial monologue, conducted before a walled-off proscenium, the wall is pulled away to reveal the additional women. A trap door functions as a sort of gateway to a fantastical underworld. The bordello occupies an elevated area at the rear of the stage. At the conclusion, the wall is restored; the cast comes forward intimately toward the audience. The costumes are often fanciful enough to be entertaining by themselves, which is fitting since Jelinek in her work and public persona has cultivated an ironic fascination with fashion. Video projections of a luscious mouth and the cavorting whores and johns whip up the frenzy toward the end. The cast from the outstanding ensemble of the Deutsches Theater is unfailingly brilliant and game for whatever humiliations the play demands of them.

The dynamism and surefootedness of the performance that Stemann has achieved are especially remarkable given the nature of the text, which is an undifferentiated mass of words without the assignment of roles. It is extremely fragmentary and often driven by word association or various kinds of frequently sexual puns. For example, a frequent and rather sinister joke is the phrase “mit Ohne”
or, literally “with without,” like a menu item (e.g., with onions), except that here the “without” means without a condom, that the prostitutes will have sex, for an additional fee, without prophylaxis. The repeated phrase “ficken ficken ficken” or “fucking fucking fucking” evokes the life of the prostitutes and the repetitious demands of their customers. Über Tiere arises in part from the story of an underage prostitute held as a sex slave and compelled to service clients even as she is sick and taking antibiotics to combat sexually transmitted diseases. She kills herself by bashing her face in.

Consistent with most of Jelinek’s other work (e.g., the monologue cycle called The Princess Plays), the play dispenses entirely with character and plot, and we are treated to the voyeuristic enjoyment of the sexual exploitation of women even as the author seems to condemn such behavior. In the performance and narrative components of the text, the men remain the dominant and dominating figures, the women confined dramatically and ideologically to inferior positions throughout. In this respect, Über Tiere shares the lusty entertaining political nihilism of, for example, Jelinek’s earlier Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen (Sickness or Modern Women), which features dominant, though clueless male figures and abused women, who are vampires.

Since Western culture is so fully dominated by sex, Jelinek’s dramaturgy is a risky business. Although didactically critical, it entertains by virtue of the same graphic images that sell in the popular culture. As she has modestly acknowledged, her writing does not rise to the same level of eloquently mordant venom as the recently deceased contemporary Austrian playwright and novelist Thomas Bernhard. Jelinek’s defense seems to be that, like her characters, it is impossible for her to escape within the framework of language and theatre from the dominance of men. All she can do is demonstrate this invariable structure and poke at it humorously.

In this abdication, she may not be far from Peter Handke’s position as illustrated in the Berliner Ensemble’s recent premiere of his 2006 play Spuren der Verirrten (Traces of the Lost). Like Über Tiere, Spuren also begins on a deceptively familiar and comforting note. Obviously invoking the tradition of German fairy tales, a man and a woman leave traces behind them as they walk through a forest. They are followed by a numbingly large number of other pairs who also mark their path. In each case, the traces are blown away by a strong wind. The message is clear: we will not find our way home and we don’t know where we’re going. The structure of Spuren is reminiscent of Handke’s 1992 The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other, a play without dialogue in which isolated figures and sometimes small groups pass across the stage fleetingly. It also incorporates the audience: at the end the stage instructions, which constitute the entirety of the play, indicate that one by one members of the audience join the characters/actors on stage.

Compared to Jelinek’s, Handke’s work, dating back to his 1965 Offending the Audience, has a rather more delicately self-conscious use of theatre and its modalities as a way of testing the limits and purpose of theatre itself, an almost purely abstract and cerebral inquiry. Indeed, Offending the Audience is entirely devoted to categorically eliminating
Top: Spuren der Verirrten (Traces of the Lost) by Peter Handke, directed by Claus Peyman, Berliner Ensemble, Berlin. Photo: Courtesy Berliner Ensemble;
any claim to representation of any sort. Handke’s 1970 The Ride Across Lake Constance is likewise a formal metatheatrical, plotless, and objectless exercise; the text is almost like a novel in the present tense, describing a series of physical actions and occasionally bits of dialogue that take place upon a stage.

These earlier works laid the groundwork for the Gnostic vision of the playwright in Spuren, an absent god who will not authorize, who will not decide on the characteristics of a character, who will not create a hero, who will not or cannot describe what is happening on the stage. These themes are explicitly discussed and further developed in Spuren. Toward the end, the text meditates openly on the impossibility of tragedy and of the tragic hero, leaving the audience with shadow figures of postmodernism, ghosts without magic or suspense. The play is in many ways a piece of nostalgia for the ideas of time, narrative, language, and theatre. One of the characters displays an enormous book at which he points with exaggeratedly long fingers, though nothing is there for us to read and nothing is said or clarified, as if to drive home the point that literature and playwriting are empty gestures without referents. As the play dissolves into itself, the characters argue around these ideas and eventually sing a choral finale with the refrain, “Das waren noch Zeiten, das war die Zeit,” (“those were the days, that was [the] time.”)

This nostalgia for the loss of time and the play’s almost total abnegation of storytelling evoke the philosophical theme of the end of history, which had already surfaced as a theme in Handke’s 1999 Die Fahrt im Einbaum (The Voyage in the Dugout Canoe) concerning the civil war in former Yugoslavia. There the character of the “Historian” stated that there was no history and had never been; that history had been a falsification, a false religion of reason. Indeed, Spuren seems almost a diluted repetition of Die Fahrt; the structure, style and arguments are virtually the same. The difference is that Spuren takes place in a nameless, perhaps mythical non-place, while Die Fahrt occurs specifically in the former Yugoslavia. One might understand the subtraction of geographic specificity in the context of the public whipping Handke took for his Serbian sympathies. At the time of the Berlin premiere of Spuren, Handke was embroiled in controversy over his pro-Serbian stance as the city of Duesseldorf was considering retracting its award to him of its Heinrich Heine prize, until the playwright himself withdrew from the offer and Berlin awarded Handke its own Heine prize. Handke promptly donated the Berlin prize money to Serbian causes.

In Spuren, a train of couples tramps through and then reappears in increasingly haggard and brutalized form. The loving couple is fighting; the elderly are desperate; the travelers look like refugees from a war zone. Trading in heavy-handed symbolism, a cross is carried across the stage and a condemned man is led to his death; the play refers to the one who is returning to Ithaca. Eventually, the wanderers are made to follow a rope, a representation of both increased social tyranny and diminished physical and mental capacity to act independently. Their stories are worn away and no longer available to them or us to be read. We cannot recall the past except as disordered fragments with elusive and useless meanings.
The repetition of the series of couples suggests the twentieth century’s demolition of the ideals of German Romanticism in which fairy tales were collected as part of the creation of Germanic identity in language and literature. The wandering figures on the stage also suggest that Handke has himself lost his way, becoming unable to utilize language or theatrical forms to any productive effect. This latter train of thought is directly represented by Handke’s proxy, a figure seated like a prompter in a cutout at the front of the stage and at the level of the audience. Eventually, the characters confront the prompter, and the dialogue conveys what we have already seen and what unfortunately seems also true of the play itself. Handke has nothing left to say. In Spuren der Verirrten, he makes little effort to experiment with form and, once he has established the basic traffic pattern of the couples crossing the stage, he seems content to repeat the pattern without expanding its impact. This made for a rather long evening for a short play.

In its final redundancy and almost its only break into storytelling, a character talks of a bird trapped in a house that has left its traces everywhere in its frantic effort to escape; traces of shit, broken mirrors, crooked pictures; “powerful traces of the lost.” Then the characters ruminate on how a trapped bird or bee flies once it’s freed.

Claus Peyman, who has directed Handke’s plays for over forty years, was not able to breathe life into this stultifying form. Peyman is the trapped bird, banging around in Handke’s play without fresh air or freedom, pathetically failing to escape. The text of Handke’s play consists largely of stage directions, describing at length the appearances and movements of his nameless characters as they troop across the stage. Occasionally, Handke indicates an exchange of words that might, or might not, take place. The text of Spuren is constructed as the telling of a theatrical event, or rather, a telling of a theatrical event as it occurs in the mind of an unreliable writer/observer, an “I” included in the narrative who explains what “I” see or how “I” perceive something. The text indicates that certain things take place, and then that they might not have, or that the action is taking place in one geographic location or perhaps somewhere else.

The play is paradigmatically opposed to the model of classical tragedy with its central plot and hero; here Handke instead offers the crowd a dispersion of interest and repeatedly the indication that he’s uncertain even how many people are on the stage or whether they’re the same ones as before. Peyman has been given the unenviable task of interpreting this transient phenomenology of the theatre, which makes for a much more interesting read than its staged incarnation at the Berliner Ensemble. Despite the play’s theme of the absent author, Handke seems to have functioned for Peyman as a sort of closet dictator, prescribing each movement, which Peyman slavishly reproduced on the stage. He evidently felt no freedom to enhance or open up the piece through his own imagination. The actors seemed to be hitting their marks with the weary obedience of commercial television players. The meager set design by Karl-Ernst Herrmann, principally a few pieces of painted plywood at the back of the stage, did nothing to enliven the proceedings.
Both Handke and Jelinek are pursuing the paradox of playwrights who believe that they cannot overcome the conventions of language and theatre and are unable to affect the course of events or create a new or different space for human understanding to unfold. Jelinek, despite her position as, crudely spoken, an ardent feminist, is in a way simply mirroring a patriarchal world in which women are powerless and sexually abused. Handke positions himself as witness to possibly meaningless, possibly indiscernible, possibly tragic historical events, retreating ever further—in his drama—from taking a point of view, except on the purely abstract qualities of theatre, and even there his only statement is as the town crier of the end time.

The qualitative question then becomes: Which form of emptiness do we prefer? Based on what I saw in Berlin, I would take Jelinek’s raucous pornography over Handke’s redundant stylization.

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