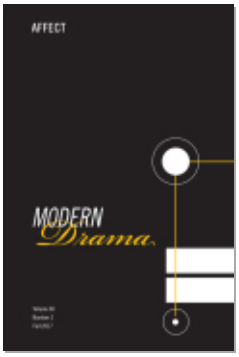
# *The Birth of Theater from the Spirit of Philosophy: Nietzsche and the Modern Drama* by David Kornhaber (review)

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DAVID KORNHABER. *The Birth of Theater from the Spirit of Philosophy: Nietzsche and the Modern Drama*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016. Pp. 256. $34.95 (Pb).

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David Kornhaber's book is neatly structured and clearly focused, lending itself to concise summary. Part One: Nietzsche was more of a theatre theorist than you might think, and here's the evidence from his life and works. Part Two: Nietzsche directly influenced three major modern dramatists – Strindberg, Shaw, and O'Neill – and here's the evidence from their life and works (both literary and theoretical). In Kornhaber's words, the aim is to "place the theater back into the history of Nietzsche's thought and to place Nietzsche back into the history of the theater" (11).

Part One is divided into three chapters. The first traces major influences on Nietzsche, with a notable though not exclusive emphasis on the eighteenth-century theatre theories of Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller. Kornhaber asks us to see Nietzsche responding to and engaging with these accounts of theatre and not merely praising Wagner or hurling Schopenhauer onto the ruins of the ancient stage. The second presents a reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* itself, in which Nietzsche offers his best-defined account of the potential power of theatre, moving the focus from traditional concerns toward theatre's transformative social role. "Today we might call him a performance theorist" (50), writes Kornhaber. (Fair enough.) The third chapter treats the aftermath of *The Birth of Tragedy*, with an emphasis on Nietzsche's late book *The Case of Wagner*, in

which Wagner is excoriated as a man of the theatre – that is, not a *real* artist. Here, Kornhaber's line is that Nietzsche gives up on real theatre as the locus for his hopes as he tries instead to write a kind of artistic philosophy, a process exemplified by *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which Nietzsche originally intended to write as a drama but became a work of prose.

Part Two is also divided into three chapters, corresponding successively to Strindberg, Shaw, and O'Neill. In each case, Kornhaber chooses a major play – *Miss Julie*, *Major Barbara*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night* – and subjects it to a close, Nietzschean analysis, based on the playwright's (and Kornhaber's own) understanding of Nietzsche and in light of each dramatist's own theoretical writings. But in addition to their significance, and the significance of Nietzsche for them, Kornhaber also suggests that these early readers of Nietzsche saw him for the theatre theorist that he really was, before we all allowed ourselves to be convinced that he was something else (11).

To read Kornhaber's introduction, one would imagine that there has been a grand conspiracy to prevent everyone from seeing the obvious truth: that Nietzsche was a theorist of the theatre. There is something to that: Nietzsche kept up an interest in theatre and does reference it throughout his writing, yet a great deal of contemporary critical discussion of Nietzsche is written by philosophers who aren't particularly concerned with theatre as such. On the other hand, there is evidence of Kornhaber overstating the case: it is true, for example, that Nietzsche wrote that "the problem of the actor has troubled me for a very long time" – a line that is quoted in support of Kornhaber's thesis (5). But if you read what Nietzsche *says* about that problem in Section 361 of *The Gay Science*, it is hard to see it as evidence that we are dealing with a *theatre* theorist, since the focus is on the analysis of social groups (artists, yes, but also women and Jews). More generally, while Nietzsche mentions theatre quite regularly, it is hard to deny that there are other things he mentions more. Doubtless it might have ruined the admirable clarity of Kornhaber's approach if he had muddied the waters by talking about how to measure a writer's interests or what counts as theorizing the theatre as such. But I wonder if the latter in particular would ultimately have helped make his case clearer and more convincing. I don't really know what counts as "theatre" in Kornhaber's view, so I don't have a sense of the limits of Nietzsche's purported attention to it. If theatre turns out to be a "metaphysical activity" for Nietzsche (63), then might it not be the case that metaphysics, *not* theatre, is Nietzsche's central interest? And is calling for a "tragic *age*" the same thing as calling for a return to "tragic *performance*" (88; emphasis added)? (In other words: Is Nietzsche interested in *theatre* in such a passage?) Finally, we might ask what to make of the fact that Nietzsche

continued to write poems: where do these fit into the theatre/philosophy relation?

Kornhaber is broadly convincing in his readings of the dramatists who are presented in the book's second part, and readers with an interest in his chosen three will want to consult the chapters devoted to them. It is helpful to read how writers of this stature interpreted and responded to Nietzsche; the connections with Nietzsche in their plays are mostly strong and well grounded. But the promise – if this is Kornhaber's intention – that they give a *better* insight into Nietzsche is not always delivered upon. To take one theme: Kornhaber tends to divide Apollo and Dionysus (from *The Birth of Tragedy*) into dramatist and performer respectively, which enables him to analyse his chosen playwrights in terms of their views on each one, mapping them onto Nietzsche in that way. But acting in *The Birth of Tragedy* already has elements of Apollo within it. And as Nietzsche's analysis of lyric suggests, writing the poetry that accompanies performance does not isolate one from Dionysiac experience. So if Shaw thought he was following Nietzsche by accepting a "strict delineation of the dramatist's and the actor's artistries" (124), then I'm not sure he was getting Nietzsche right. And if Shaw indeed thought he was developing Nietzsche's Apollonian ideal when he wrote that the dramatist must make "the audience believe that real things are happening to real people" (122), then he was simply wrong: on the contrary, Apollo offers the dream that one *knows* is a dream.

In sum, this is a valuable book that makes a strong, careful case for a Nietzsche of the theatre and for a Nietzsche who influenced modern drama, but it does not, in itself, establish the bolder theses: that ignoring Nietzsche's interest in theatre has substantially damaged our understanding of him or that the dramatists' Nietzsche is somehow closer to the real thing.