

## **Hamletmachine: A Visual Interpretation**

Ines Ortner's MFA design thesis project, *Hamletmachine*, based on the Heiner Müller play, creates a visual world that compels the spectator to re-imagine notions of beauty and horror. These ideas are presented in shifting forms of images presenting the complex body on stage, a process that reflects the political and social context of Müller's play with similarly uncomfortable tableaux. Ortner mediates the theatrical presentation of horror through a mechanistic lens that reveals the beauty in the unfamiliar and grotesque.

Müller suggests that theatrical beauty is found "[e]ven when you represent horror or atrocities" (Weber 226) and that this desire for beauty comes not only from the interpretation of the theatre artist, but from the spectators as well. However, Müller provokes the spectators' desire for beauty by creating a play that demands exploration into the dark and unfamiliar, a place where society uses technological progress to improve its ability to torture and destroy itself. Haunted by the social and political state of Germany in the 1970's, the postmodern critique of an elite hierarchy in literary origins and most compelling – the notion of technological progress improving society, Müller's text refuses to liberate or validate our understanding of humanity as beings with purpose. Ortner's adaptation creates versions of Hamlet and Ophelia that are doomed to behave as those before them, like cogs in a machine, moving not forward, but continuously in repetition. Theatre, caught in the continual reiteration of horror, cannot open new paths of understanding or create a cathartic resolution.

Marvin Carlson asserts that "[t]he simultaneous attraction to and fear of the dead, the need continually to rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past, is nowhere more specifically expressed in human culture than in theatrical performance" (167). Müller has expressed that "continuous need" graphically as his Hamlet states how "FLESH LIKES TO KEEP THE COMPANY OF FLESH" (53). Müller's text operates as an invitation to the theatre artist to envision humanity's repeated desires for beauty and death in "flesh". Ortner responds to Müller's exhortation that the artist

needs the “pressures which push you to enter the unfamiliar, the darkness, without a torchlight” (Weber 229) with innovative staging that integrates unique costume design to present the organic body as machine.

The performance of reiteration, as humanity continues to repeat its fascination with the combination of war and technological progress, is where the horror exists and the spectator is presented with an opportunity to understand their place as a complicit and desiring witness. As society repeatedly integrates technological advances into our everyday life, Müller, and by extension Ortner, insist on our understanding how our desire for scientific improvement supports the cycle of our own destruction. And that this desire for “new technologies” that Müller suggests, with a nod to historical imperialism, has “always been tested and implemented against minorities” (Weber 150) also creates an open site for the theatre artist to envision onstage. Ortner has “appropriated” Müller’s play, resisted any “hidden key” to understanding the text and through her own vision of finding beauty out of the horror of mechanised repetition, has as Tony Kushner suggests, invented her own “historically informed, politically engaged” staging (Weber xvi).

Ortner’s design concept of *Hamletmachine* presents society’s fetishization of technological advances, particularly when applied to the human body. Technological progress continues society’s disfigurement repeatedly until there is nothing left that is organically recognisable, only the mechanised repetition.

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