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# Elsa Bernstein's Appeal to Contemporary Theater Audiences

*Maria Arndt* in Chicago 2002

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## Why Revive an Unknown Play?

The question of why a major theater company in Chicago would perform a play written by a virtually unknown writer born a century and a half ago in Germany has a complex answer. It reveals transnational interlinking on a historical and geographical basis. I shall attempt to sketch out the various facets that led to the performance of *Maria Arndt* (1908) by Elsa Bernstein (1866–1949) at the Stepwolf Theatre in 2002 and contributed to the success of the play in postmodern times. What does a text from the past offer us today? In an essay in the anthology *Feminisms at a Millennium* (2000) the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz explains:

In studying history, [ . . . ] we are not unearthing “facts” from the past, like little nuggets of gold that have their own intrinsic value. [ . . . ] [T]he past contains the resources to much more than the present. Rather, it is only the interests of the present that serve to vivify or reinvigorate the past. The past is always propelled, in virtual form, in a state of compression or contraction, to futures beyond the present. (Grosz 28)

Grosz further insists that the future is the domain of “what endures.” “The past endures not in itself, but in its capacity to become something other” (Grosz 29–30). Readers of eighteenth-century German writer Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) will be struck by Grosz’s redefinition of a Goethean thought, *Dauer im Wechsel* (“permanence through change”),<sup>1</sup> that she transforms

to fit in a contemporary framework. Both in Grosz's theory and in Bernstein's play there are elements from the past that we can consider vital for the future. However, when is endurance likely and when not? If the author of a historical document significant for our own time is not an established author like Goethe but a forgotten dramatist like Elsa Bernstein we may remain oblivious of its value. Endurance depends on historical circumstances rather than an intrinsic quality.

We now may ask what a play written around the turn of the twentieth century has to offer American theater-goers of the turn of the twenty-first century. In the not too distant past traditional scholarship had a secure and definitive answer about the staying power of a work of art: "universal values." Evidence of such values was a sure indication of excellence guaranteeing it a place in the canon. Apparently Elsa Bernstein's play did not measure up and was duly forgotten. Contemporary scholars argue that universal values or "neutral principles"—to cite literary theorist Stanley Fish—cannot be established, and we realize that in the past such values and principles served specialized interests or power structures.<sup>2</sup> The writings of Michel Foucault have increased the awareness of the presence and influence of unrecognized power relations.<sup>3</sup> Looking at marginal aspects of past history rather than at battles and rulers, hidden power structures and their impact can be revealed and are of vital interest to our contemporary society. It has become clear that criticism based on the assumption of universal values usually fails to recognize the validity of women's experiences and dismisses their often provocative artistic works. Martin Esslin's assertion that all drama is a political event in that it either confirms or undermines a society's code of conduct is especially true for women's drama, which is one of the reasons why time and again women writers have been ignored.<sup>4</sup>

Long before any of the scholars just mentioned, Elsa Bernstein expressed her opposition to "eternal values" in a line spoken by the central character of her play *Maria Arndt*: "Eternal truths [ . . . ] can become everyday lies" (1996: 104).<sup>5</sup> Starting in the 1970s postmodern theorists developed an approach that included feminist thought and paved the way for the revival of plays such as Bernstein's. Steven Greenblatt notes in his analysis of Shakespeare's plays (*Shakespearean Negotiations*) that subliminal discourses and unresolved conflicts festering in society are part of artistic production, past and present. Greenblatt recognizes in certain cultural representations a social energy that is capable of subverting dominant discourses and is carried forward into the future. Especially in drama this energy can be reenacted and relived by future audiences again and again as vividly as the particular historical time period and the skill of the theater director allow. Later generations may recognize early stages in the development of current social processes (*Dauer im Wechsel*).

Thus, a cultural product may well circulate through history or different geographic regions, where it could conceivably be made popular or stripped of its popularity, or gain the seal of critical approval or lose it, depending on how it relates to current issues and on who promotes it or who condemns it. As contemporary scholars reject established fixed values, they are also rethinking traditional concepts that distinguish between high and low art. Not much would be achieved by “discovering” *Maria Arndt*, and then either canonizing it as an example of high art or dismissing it as popular entertainment. Instead, the revival of Elsa Bernstein’s *Maria Arndt* can be seen as a viable infusion into the gender discourse of our time. Written by a woman and concerned with women’s issues, some critics could categorize the play as a melodrama. Upon closer examination, however, it is a much richer work than this devalued category implies. *Maria Arndt* can be named together with other rediscovered and highly valued German plays such as Else Lasker-Schüler’s *Die Wupper* (*The Dark River*, 1909) or Marieluise Fleisser’s *Fegefeuer in Ingolstadt* (*Purgatory in Ingolstadt*, 1923). *Maria Arndt* exudes a social energy that pertains to gender relations that still affect us, and—as we learned from the Chicago performance—the play strikes a chord outside its original time and culture (Germany circa 1910). Set before the First World War and women’s suffrage, the core of the play revolves around the issue of the identities and the potential of women as free human beings.

Bernstein created an explosive story about radical female demands long before European society was ready for it. Social and cultural forces throughout the twentieth century suppressed what was called *die Frauenfrage* (the woman question) that had been raised so aggressively in order to promote equal rights at the turn of the last century, and which Bernstein addresses so seriously.<sup>6</sup>

### **Historical Circumstances Surrounding the Play**

In this section I retrace the play’s history and outline the reasons for its fate. After its publication under the pen name Ernst Rosmer and a few performances between 1908 and 1917, *Maria Arndt* disappeared from public memory. No revivals on stage, no other editions or reissues appeared in Germany, which could be attributed partially to the rising Nazi mentality. Bernstein’s plays were briefly mentioned in the 1911 and 1917 editions of Soergel’s *Dichtung und Dichter* (Writings and Writers). In Curt Hohoff’s reissue of the book in 1964, Bernstein’s works are no longer listed. Today German scholars of literature barely know Elsa Bernstein’s name or her pseudonym Ernst Rosmer. In fact, Bernstein’s work is more readily found in US libraries than in German ones because women authors were routinely excluded there from catalogued scholarly collections in the past, especially if they were Jewish, such as Elsa Bernstein herself,

Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945), Gertrud Kolmar (1894–1943), and Veza Canetti (1897–1963). In the United States, however, the Modern Language Association, for instance, published a teacher's edition of Bernstein's play *Dämmerung* in 2003 and in the same year an English version with the title *Twilight*, translated by Susanne Kord. As far as Germany is concerned, several recent urgent suggestions to the Fischer-Verlag—where Bernstein published originally—to republish her plays were ignored.

I would like to address the question of why *Maria Arndt* is still ignored in Germany. In certain sectors of German society, andocentric attitudes prevailed for a much longer time than in the United States, especially in theater and academia.<sup>7</sup> Women's artistic and scientific work continued to be dismissed as trivial. Thus the work of women academics—the few that there were—was slow in receiving recognition, especially the attempts to explore gender issues, the reappraisal of forgotten women writers, and the critical questioning of the canon or feminist approaches to literature. Even now there is anecdotal evidence that doctoral students are dissuaded from researching these subjects in some of the more conservative German university departments. It is not surprising that the percentage of women holding professorships is small as compared to the US. In 2003 female professors in Germany at all ranks constituted a mere 12.6% of the faculty, while already in 1991 the percentage of associate professors in the United States amounted to 27.7% and that of assistant professors to 39.7% of the faculty. Only 5.9% of German female professors in 1998 were on the faculty in equivalent positions as full professors in the US, while in the US already 14.7% was counted in 1997.<sup>8</sup> The significant number of publications on women dramatists in the US and in Great Britain made an impact on the larger public in the Anglo-American sphere already in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Yet, there were virtually no publications pertaining to female dramatists from scholars living in Germany even in the 1990s. According to popular myth women had published no plays.

American scholars found otherwise through archival research. They discovered that, on the contrary, a huge number of plays were written by women authors in German-speaking countries.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it comes as no surprise that the first scholarly publications on and re-editions of plays by German women dramatists (with minor exceptions)<sup>11</sup> came from American experts in the field. Aside from numerous articles, I counted at least seven comprehensive monographs and critical anthologies on German women dramatists that were published between 1990 and 1996 by American scholars in Germanic Studies.<sup>12</sup> As more female professors were hired and gender studies programs established at German universities, there have been more publications by German scholars on the topic of women authors since the late 1990s. Yet, while in the US gender

studies programs are too numerous to be counted, a German publication in 2000, *Gender Studien: Eine Einführung* (Gender Studies: An Introduction), showed that the number of women and gender studies programs at German universities added up to a total of merely seventeen, a quarter of which was established as late as in the year 2000 (Von Braun and Stephan 347–50).<sup>13</sup> Women have not made great inroads in German theater either, although there are a number of exceptions often serving as alibis. Suffice it to quote the Austrian dramatist and Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2004 Elfriede Jelinek in an interview in 1998: “The theater has never been a place for women. At the most they were accepted as actresses. For women to write for the theater is a monstrous challenge, a transgression of borders” (*Überschreitungen*).

After these general remarks, I will now trace the English translation of the text that made the performance in 2002 possible. The initial impetus came from the German literature scholar, Susanne Kord, who taught for many years at universities in the United States and recognized the significance of the play. She translated it to be included in *Modern Drama by Women 1880s–1930s. An International Anthology* (1996).<sup>14</sup> This English version of the play was discovered by the theater director Tina Landau, Tony Award winner of 2003, as she searched for a play suitable for staging at the Steppenwolf Theatre. The Company decided to present *Maria Arndt* on its main stage after Tina Landau and Curt Columbus, the company’s Artistic Associate, reworked Kord’s scholarly translation, adding their idiom and flair attuned to their production.

In examining the play’s belated success, I consider it useful to take a closer look at the kind of theater in the US that would stage such a play.

### **The Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago: Low Public Support—High Artistic Risk**

Steppenwolf is one of the foremost theater companies in Chicago. The success of the Bernstein performance in Chicago cannot be understood without analyzing the statistics and background of this company and its financial support. The play was shown to a sold-out house four times a week for an entire season (February 7 to March 31, 2002) on the Mainstage Theatre, which accommodates up to 515 spectators. The German-sounding name Steppenwolf is coincidental. It is neither a theater for German plays nor for the German-speaking population of Chicago. The founding of the theater goes back thirty years to 1976. Its name could be linked to Hermann Hesse’s novel *Der Steppenwolf* from 1927, which experienced a surprising revival in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s (the book still sells in the US). At that time rebellious students and hippies studied Hesse’s alternative ideas that were originally intended for an alien-

ated population in Germany in the 1920s, a time of economic breakdown and alienation at the end of the Weimar Republic. Due to the Vietnam War, the United States of the 1960s was in crisis as well. An additional source of the name for the founders was the popular and successful rock band Steppenwolf that was founded by John Kay in 1967. His band expressed the social, political, and philosophical restlessness of young people in America.<sup>15</sup> Likewise new and adventurous were the concepts of a new theater. At first the Steppenwolf Theatre performed plays in the basement of a church in the suburb of Highland Park. Their continued success was doubtlessly due to the talent and ambition of a group of young people who later became world famous as actors, such as John Malcovich and Gary Sinise.<sup>16</sup>

The era of the hippies passed, but the company's theatrical principles continued to be based on ensemble collaboration and taking artistic risks. The intention still is, as the Steppenwolf website proclaims, to promote vitality and cultural variety in the American theater. In recognition of its achievements Steppenwolf received countless national and international prizes, most notably the "Medal of Arts" awarded in 1998 personally by President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton at a White House ceremony. The Theatre Company stays close to its original concept of theater, although at times it has made compromises for the sake of commercial success.<sup>17</sup> Through the years the scope of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company expanded considerably from its humble beginnings. The now-famous actors and founders drew the support of generous sponsors, and the large office building holds approximately 120 administrative employees. Thirty-three actors, artists, directors, and authors are permanently employed. The company owns a second theater with 300 seats (Studio Theatre), and a theater with 60 seats for experimental plays (The Garage at Steppenwolf). Besides running the Steppenwolf School for Actors, the company undertakes interdisciplinary ventures such as the Arts Exchange in Chicago.

### ***Maria Arndt* and Women's Issues in the United States**

Nowadays, the old-fashioned *Frauenfrage* that was hotly debated in Elsa Bernstein's time in Germany remains unresolved even as women have made inroads as players in society. Critics in the United States continue to be concerned with it, notably with the mother-daughter issue that is at the heart of the Bernstein play.<sup>18</sup> Reviving plays and literature from the nineteenth and early-twentieth century for screen and stage has been en vogue for a while in the US. In a published conversation, Molly Regan, who played Maria Arndt in the 2002 production of the Steppenwolf Theatre tells the director, Tina Landau, "I'm a big fan

of Edith Wharton<sup>19</sup>, and there is something about this play that struck me in the same way as her work. There's something about that era and those women at the time. I don't have a political agenda; the issues with this play do strike me emotionally."<sup>20</sup> The fact that personal and emotional issues are addressed by Bernstein makes the play accessible to audiences at a time when the idea of a woman's right to personal and professional development has entered the popular consciousness in the United States. Especially very young women often believe that they can live freely without gender role restrictions and discrimination. Consequently, a strong feminist political agenda has fallen into disfavor, although, as women get older, they encounter a multitude of hindrances due to their gender.<sup>21</sup>

Bernstein's play softens the hard edges of feminism somewhat but drives home the message nevertheless. Although it does not aggressively set forth feminist goals that many young women nowadays perceive as negative, the play causes young women to think as they mobilize increasingly certain traditional female gender aspects for profit. They are investing their femininity as "materials girls," as modeled, for instance, by the singer Madonna.<sup>22</sup> These more recent female identity constructions helped younger women adjust to a society that continues to uphold patriarchal attitudes. Such a model promises the achievement of private and professional happiness. Yet, women also sense that deep within them resides a type of Maria Arndt. After all, the play is concerned with an emancipated woman trying to achieve happiness in an intimate relationship. It exposes a gender construction that could lead to failure for the young women of our times. By placing importance on establishing a relationship with a desired partner, the play subversively demonstrates the need, as well as the shortcomings, of some feminist viewpoints. Although Bernstein only hints at the future career of the girl Gemma, we can anticipate her dismal fate if she looks for equal opportunities in patriarchal society. Even today, especially when trying to build a high level career, women are putting off bosses if they assume a feminist stance and insist in their equal share of the professional spoils. Instead, traditional feminine demeanor and appearance often work better to get more than a foot in the door in business or public service. In private life, most women desire to find an intimate relationship as do Maria and Gemma, and like them they often are confronted with partners who have not shed the traditional macho identity. The daughter Gemma struggles with this problem. She rejects the young man from next door who stood in the way of her exploration of the world because he wanted her to be his exclusive love object—just as Gemma's father had requested her mother to be. Many mothers nowadays have re-educated their daughters as is the case with Maria Arndt and Gemma, but few parents have re-educated young sons to be equal partners to such women. In

fact, it is very hard to find help for a woman desiring to raise children and pursue a career.<sup>23</sup> Yet, most women, single or married, have to work outside the home to make ends meet. The responsibility for the children mainly falls upon them. The politicized term “traditional family values” is still pervading the leading discourses in the US, and although young women start planning for children and a career, they most often must choose. Men do not. Good childcare is only available to a small affluent section of society. To strengthen my argument regarding the topicality of *Maria Arndt*, one can look at the arts and the public media at the beginning of the new millennium to see how a woman’s position was represented in the US. Some modern melodramas—for instance the novels and television plays by Danielle Steel—fantasize about the ease with which women achieve professional success, and they usually only problematize the personal love aspects of women’s lives.

For instance, in Steel’s TV play *Full Circle*, the stereotypes presented ring hollow. Rather than registering women’s difficulties in traditionally male professions, a fantasy world opens up. The problems in the life of the heroine are unrelated to her struggle to be professionally successful and to balance occupational and private life. She has no difficulty combining the two, as the final scene assures the viewer. It pictures the heroine as a successful judge in an idyllic picture frame with her loving husband and two little children, suggesting to the viewers that she has it all. Questions as to who will raise the children and how the family is kept together are not addressed. Will the judge now stay home? Many women in the US are growing tired of their struggle in a complicated life and move back into their traditional roles. In Germany a similar trend has been observed. In 2001 the German magazine *Der Spiegel* featured various title stories on the exodus of women from the workforce back to *Kinder und Küche*, (“children and kitchen”). Somewhat later, in 2002, the same issues became featured stories in US magazines like *Time*, where for instance Nancy Gibbs published an article “Making Time for a Baby” (48–54). The problem had escalated in 2004, when a *Time* title story has a more resigning tone: “The Case for Staying Home. Why More Young Moms Are Opting Out of the Rat Race,” written by Claudia Wallis (50–59).<sup>24</sup>

### **Women’s Body: Sex Object or Location of Personal Desire?**

The partner problems experienced by Danielle Steel’s above-mentioned heroine are connected to the issue of rape that the TV show exploits and trivializes. Here, a rape is the dark secret dating back to the early life of the protagonist. The abuse has caused her problems with men. Yet, the lingering fear of any commitment stemming from this trauma is easily resolved when Mr. Right ap-



pears like a *deus ex machina*. Rape is also addressed in Elsa Bernstein's play, however in a strikingly radical manner. To mention the word rape in public was considered almost unheard of and daring at Bernstein's time. Contrary to the Steppenwolf translation in which the word rape is circumscribed, in Bernstein's original text Maria Arndt uses it directly, *vergewaltigt* (1908: 92). Moreover, the writer even speaks of marital rape to describe the sexual enslavement of a woman who has to submit to her husband out of wifely duty but without desire. Yet, despite the prudishness of the Wilhelminian era, Bernstein affirms sexual passion both for mother and daughter on their own terms. As a practical measure the daughter learns from her mother to put off and ignore her bodily yearning until she would find a partner she can respect and love and who would also respect her self-determined lifestyle. The mother, after fleeing "marital rape" succumbs to her passion and becomes pregnant by a friend of the family, Claussner. At the turn of the twentieth century, an illegitimate child and its mother were shunned by society. If Maria were to give birth to such a child she would undo the lesson she had taught her daughter and rob her of any future chances.

Bernstein's concern with sexuality and the body parallels a similar concern in contemporary American culture, where the unresolved subliminal aspects of the larger social discourse of which Greenblatt speaks are taken up in the play. Rape, apparently, is not a word even the Steppenwolf could use in the context of marriage. Moreover, even though Bernstein intends to free the female body from Wilhelminian constraints, she replaces the latter with new ones. The just-say-no advice Gemma accepts is also part of a movement in the United States that developed in the conservative camp and opposes the approach of liberal groups. These call for sexual freedom and teach young people prevention and protection. Besides dealing with sexuality and power, Bernstein thematizes other concerns of the body. For example, she advocates the need for girls to practice sports for their physical and mental well-being at a time when public schools reserved such activities for boys. Bernstein was probably inspired by health movements, such as the growing "*Freikörperkultur*" ("nudist movement"), and other groups that promoted sports for everyone. In the twentieth century American girls have made great strides in sports through the Title IX support for schools, but many of them still prefer being cheerleaders to playing soccer in order to be more popular. For Bernstein clothes enter into the argument, and she presents the inconsistencies of the fashions of her time on stage. Visually the play argues against restricting the body by confining "proper" clothes as they are worn by the minor figures in the play. In contrast she puts her heroines per stage direction into comfortable flowing dresses as a sign of emancipation. Maria and her daughter express their individualism by designing their own

dresses. Yet, the dresses which the actresses wore for the Steppenwolf production appeared more alluring than practical. Fashion in the turn-of-the-millennium US is full of inconsistencies and paradoxes. On the one hand, women wear sneakers, comfortable slacks, and sweaters similar to those of men; on the other hand the stores also offer spike-heeled shoes, mini-dresses, and halter tops emphasizing feminine sex appeal.<sup>25</sup> Even relatively progressive organizations counsel women to dress conservatively. In the academic field, the Modern Language Association (MLA) suggests in a published guide that job candidates applying should wear skirts during interviews (144).<sup>26</sup> The popular media reinforce the multi-faceted images of women. Some TV shows and films reveal the problematic side of women's life in the early twenty-first century. The popular television poster-woman Ally McBeal wants to be taken seriously as a professional lawyer. Yet, she builds love relations in traditional ways: in a mini-skirt and through girlish behavior.<sup>27</sup>

### **The New Woman, Naturalism, and Ibsen**

In Bernstein's play, as for many "New Women" at the turn of the twentieth century, women's emancipation was not merely a self-involved process but associated with the betterment of mankind in general.<sup>28</sup> Bernstein follows here one branch of the women's movement at that time that was organized by middle-class women. The performance of the play in Chicago also reaches middle-class people with gender trouble. The global concern of the women in the play matches an idealistic tendency not only within the present American women's movement—for instance ecological feminism, which is concerned with the exploitation of the environment and women's socialized association with "mother nature"—but also within American culture as a whole. Most active are people with a middle income. In *Maria Arndt* the idealism is based on the wish to put the natural sciences to good use for humanity. Maria belongs to the generation that could never be active in the outside world because she is restricted to her home as a married woman. Vicariously she seeks to fulfill her dreams through her daughter Gemma. The daughter's great idol is her mother's lover, the scientist Gerhart Claussner, whom she erroneously considers a model of noble human spirit. After all, he rejects a prominent professorship that would provide him with a fixed income in order to keep his independence in his global research as only a person with money and class can do. Yet Claussner turns out to be rather cynical about his profession and his self-evaluation is strongly narcissistic. He is a footloose Indiana Jones of science roaming the world at the turn of the last century, and he initially escapes when his relationship with Maria is getting too close. As a foil to Claussner, Bernstein introduces the neighbor von

Tucher, a bureaucrat who is overwhelmed by the heavy burden and responsibility in his paid public position. Work for the good of mankind is taken very seriously and viewed enthusiastically only by the women in the play. Gemma, with her boy's education, in stark contrast to the men, opts for using her knowledge to benefit the welfare of society:

I never wanted to be a scholar and I definitely don't want to look down on anyone. I just want to learn more [ . . . ]. So many things had to struggle to exist, and then disappear before I could even come into being. I want to recognize that. Give thanks for that. And I want to give something back, or all these things—these gifts, my place in this world—it will all be wasted. (Bernstein/Kord 99)<sup>29</sup>

This sentiment reflecting an active altruism of the women of her time is not an isolated one. Just as in Bernstein's play, the voices of women of the middle classes were heard strongly through their publications (e.g. Rosa Luxemburg, Lily Braun, and Bertha von Suttner). Von Suttner was doubtlessly known to Bernstein because of her famous pacifist publication *Die Waffen nieder* (*Lay Down Your Arms*, 1889).<sup>30</sup> Suttner worked for world peace by co-founding the League of Nations, which later evolved into the United Nations. In addition she had also been active in an association combating anti-Semitism. In 1905 she received the Nobel Prize for her work. A window of opportunity had opened at the turn of the last century for women that not only allowed them to participate in artistic movements but directed their attention to their own situation as they become active in public life. At the turn of the new millennium women are still vying to put to use their socialization as caring people. In the United States, more women than men are active in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promoting the welfare of the world.<sup>31</sup> Feminist scholars argue for the inclusion of women's experiences in bringing about world peace.<sup>32</sup>

The movement of Naturalism, to which *Maria Arndt* owes much in terms of its themes, emphasized social and scientific issues. However, Bernstein was not only interested in Naturalist writings but profited from other forms of artistic expression at the turn of the twentieth century: Symbolism, Expressionism, Impressionism, as well as neo-Classicism. These styles converged in an era replete with widely diverse world views. In the late nineteenth century the Socialist movement had gained strength (Maria Arndt's neighbor von Tucher belongs to the Socialist Party), and Darwin's theories—read and represented so avidly by Maria and Gemma—offered an escape from the confines of religion, a tool keeping women in their traditional place. The new scientific discoveries that inform Bernstein's play revolutionized thinking and undermined the status quo. Rapid urbanization made for greater independence and Freud's new theories provided new impulses to ossified social patterns. Bernstein's play receives its

energy from this profusion of discoveries and inventions that peaked at the turn of the twentieth century. Another major leap could be observed at the turn of the twenty-first century when the play was re-performed. The new applications of computer science, the Internet, and controversial genetic research, as well as the return of Creationism, had a similar unsettling effect on our post-modern subjectivity as Darwinism, psychology, and physics had at the time of Bernstein. They are as confusing and just as unsettling and destabilizing as a hundred years ago to individuals, but also offer new freedoms. In the cultural sector, many trends overlap, just as they did at Bernstein's time; this is the appeal of the play.

The theater of Europe in the late nineteenth century portrays its share of "new women" and their desires. Women in Europe and the United States were in the middle of their fight for suffrage. Yet, the public sphere and the world of publishing and art were firmly in the hands of the male establishment. Even after the First World War, in 1919, when German women were allowed to vote for the first time, writers, such as Elsa Bernstein still found it advantageous to start out publishing under a male pseudonym. Thus she chose the pen name Ernst Rosmer to write about women. Men did this as well, as for instance, Henrik Ibsen. He is still often seen as a champion of women's causes especially because of his portrayal of Nora in *A Doll's House* (written in 1879), which was frequently performed in Germany during Bernstein's lifetime. She adored Ibsen. Her penname Rosmer was inspired by Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm*. Ibsen actually disavowed the women's emancipatory movement and suffrage. In my view, Ibsen's play reveals a male fantasy of women's emancipation.<sup>33</sup> By having Nora leave her children, it had to be expected that audiences see her as a heartless ogre. Many directors feared such audience reaction and Ibsen had to change the ending for the first performances in Germany. He made Nora return to her children.<sup>34</sup> To this day, Ibsen's now canonic plays are still performed—with the original ending—worldwide. A review of the Chicago Bernstein performance contrasts Bernstein with Ibsen and Strindberg noting:

[ . . . ] *Maria Arndt* is an intriguing complement to the groundbreaking dramas of Ibsen and Strindberg, succeeding where those works fall short in realizing the seemingly irresolvable complexities facing a woman caught between her loving duty to others (particularly her children) and her desire to express her own smothered passions. (*Chicago Reader*)

As the play reveals, Elsa Bernstein was considerably more attuned than her male contemporaries to the dilemma women faced in society. Which male writer of her time would think of a play where the relationship of two women was of central concern from beginning to end? In most other German plays of the eighteenth and nineteenth century mothers usually died or disappeared after

the first act, and the rest of the drama revolved around the father's relationship to the daughter. The daughter usually died to reinforce the patriarchal code.<sup>35</sup>

Maria dies for a different reason, although a modern audience has a hard time with her decision. During a discussion with the Chicago audience in 2002 after a performance, one man in the audience commented that he found Maria's suicide rather selfish. It is and is not. True, lover and daughter must live without her, but Maria Arndt's life's work of raising her daughter as a free and worthy human being would have been destroyed without her dying. Bernstein created in Gemma Maria's alter ego that might have a future. A shameful existence of being a married woman with a lover and the birth of a child out of wedlock was a mother model that would have destroyed the daughter's opportunities that Maria had struggled so hard to establish. Gemma had to go back to her father, with or without her mother, but now she was old enough and already educated enough to choose the right husband who could support her independence. If the mother wanted to give her daughter a chance to live the free and self-fulfilling life she never had, she could not continue living in a situation that robbed Gemma of all her choices. It is clearly a radical act: to die rather than to leave her child with a bad mother-model and without future. While Ibsen's mimetic productions question a number of practices in the relationship between men and women, Bernstein goes beyond it and radically demands a mimesis that guarantees full equality for women.

In 1976 the Austrian writer and Nobel Prize winner for literature Elfriede Jelinek first published her version of the Nora story. She continued Ibsen's story in a 1920s setting, beginning with Ibsen's original ending, but demonstrating why and how a woman had to miserably fail her *Selbstverwirklichung* ("self-realization") when she tried to make a life for herself after leaving her husband. Only by commercializing her female assets through which Nora could receive favors from the bosses can she survive, although at the end she had to return to her husband, a fate Maria Arndt could not accept.

After the farewell of the New Woman at the demise of the Weimar Republic, Bernstein's and other activists' concern about emancipation for the new generation of women began to go underground. Hitler stifled all further emancipatory expressions. On the one hand, the dictator paradoxically touted an ideology stipulating that women stay home to bear and raise preferably seven children for the nation, but on the other hand he pursued his actual exploitation of women outside their mother role when he called on them to temporarily take over men's jobs during the war.<sup>36</sup>

Major cultural changes are reflected in today's theaters where contrasts in styles have become quite common. We might see a stark symbolically empty stage with some chalk marks on the floor. But at the same time we find faithful

productions of forgotten period plays such as *Maria Arndt* that transport us back in painstakingly authentic detail to a bygone era, in this case a Wilhelminean living room, where we hear Naturalist dialogue and see symbolic images as we might have in the 1908 Munich production. American stages have learned from Bertolt Brecht, as has the director of Bernstein's play, Tina Landau. She refers to Brecht and his alienation effect when she says, "It's one of the basic lessons that we all learn, which is that the more specific something is, the more universal it becomes" (*Backstage* 4). She is faithful to Bernstein's text; almost nothing is left out or changed, even her stage directions and the requested stage props. Yet, the male characters all appear like caricatures because their behavior—which the Steppenwolf actors studied carefully in old books of etiquette—is totally outmoded. One could either assume that the culture in which they were bound—more so than for the women—makes them look so unreal now, or one could argue that Bernstein or Landau just can do women better than men. In any case, the Steppenwolf chose to keep the naturalistic elements of the play. After all, its audience is accustomed to it, as television and movies have familiarized modern spectators to naturalistic stage settings and ideas. In this respect Elsa Bernstein was considerably influenced by Gerhart Hauptmann (her daughter married his son), the guru of the Naturalist movement. It is less known that she is said to have influenced him more than vice versa. An adherence to certain principles of the Naturalist theater is evident in Bernstein's application of scientific knowledge to societal woes, and particularly the interest in the specifics of evolution of life and the graphic explanation of procreation. To name an example: The daughter receives an explicit sexual education on stage by her mother.

### **Romanticism and Symbolism Then and Now**

Bernstein includes symbolic and romantic elements in her play, such as the conflation of love and death: a profusion of red and white roses symbolically overwhelm the stage throughout the play. The writer's stage directions demand this, Director Tina Landau obliges. The meaning of a statue in the drawing room representing both *eros* and *thanatos*—as clarified in a dialogue—cannot be missed. Passion is understated in the elevated and restrained language of the class Maria represents; romantic symbols heighten and visualize the intensity of her feelings, and they also function as foreboding signs of the tragedy. The long silences that Bernstein requires in her stage directions are over-emphasized by Landau's production, allowing the audience time to speculate on the mental process of the protagonist.<sup>37</sup> The changing lush flowers and fall leaves, darkness and luminescence, and thunder and rain are not only decorative but exude sym-

bolic implications. Bernstein boldly includes the neo-Romanticism of her time and merged it with the cold Naturalistic argument. Landau's decision to do the same links the production to a certain Romantic revival in American society today, especially after the 9/11 events. It can be partially seen as a consequence of the sexual revolution of the sixties, which did not bring women the sexual fulfillment they envisioned but made them even more available to men as sex objects. *Eros* was reduced to *sexus*, just as in the married life of Maria. A neo-Romanticism now is spreading a balm over the harshness of gender relations, albeit in a superficial, postmodern way. A feminist backlash cannot be overlooked, especially in modern fashion design. Sex and romantic images, such as the roses—as they are printed on “sexy” low-cut dresses or on the kind of underwear by Victoria's Secret formerly worn by strippers—strike one not ironically but sarcastically as expressions of commercial profit-making.<sup>38</sup> Advertising seems to reassure present-day women of imminent success in finding a partner if they would just try to look a little bit romantic. Red roses and romantic feelings for self-involved Mr. Claussner turn out to be an illusion for Maria Arndt as well.

### What Makes Women Sick?

All is so strange and yet so familiar, as Brecht might say. His dictum that all theater must either make the strange familiar or the familiar strange is honored by the Steppenwolf staging of Bernstein's play. Period pieces have always attracted filmmakers and theater directors in the US. However, one does not always encounter a true alienation effect that makes people think. Often such period piece productions rather pull the audience into a non-thinking trance of identificatory feeling. Perhaps this is the reason why early women writers, with their provocative plays, have not received great attention until recently. Their texts unsettle the normative gender relationship and resist thoughtless immersion. However, in the last ten years interest in a women's perspective in the US, such as reflected in television plays based on the books by Edith Wharton (*The Buccaneers*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The House of Mirth*)<sup>39</sup>—the writer to whom Tina Landau is drawn—have been receiving increasing media attention. These stories about the problematic life of women from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are frequently centered on financial insecurity, which is often a concern of women dramatists, as for instance for the most successful German dramatist of the nineteenth century, Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer.<sup>40</sup> Money plays a major role in *Maria Arndt* as well. Bernstein makes it clear: without the financial support of her husband Maria has no income and no place to go. Nowadays, women watching the play will be reminded of their own lives, where financial

insecurity—their inability to earn enough money themselves—continues a vicious circle of dependency. With the usually higher paycheck of the husband women must stop promising careers to raise children, and in financial dependency they cannot live an independent life.

The impossibility of resolving all the conflicting allegiances and complex desires is taking a heavy toll on women's health, physically and mentally, just as it did in Bernstein's time. Two women in the play, Maria Arndt and the wife of the neighbor, are characterized as being ill. In Maria's case, she uses sickness and the need for a better climate to get away from her husband: illness as a means of flight. The neighboring mother has been housebound for years with a severe case of "the nerves." A combination of Freud's description of hysteria and melancholia—illnesses produced by cultural circumstances—can be applied in both cases. A recent interpretation of such Freudian categories helps our examination of the anatomy of the play. In his article "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century" David Eng writes, "Like hysteria at the turn of the last century, melancholia at the turn of this one has come largely to define how we think about our subjectivities." For Freud, melancholia is unresolved grief and a consequence of unspeakable loss as well as inexorable suffering through which the ego is constituted. He refers mainly to the Oedipus complex and male identity (Eng 265). By expanding this notion, Judith Butler sees the formation of gendered identity as a product of the melancholic framework as well. She notes that women, homosexuals, people of color, and postcolonials seem to be at greatest risk for melancholia and depression in contemporary society, and they bear the greatest burden of unresolved grief (133–50). Eng analyzes the reason as follows: "The melancholic's psychic ambivalence toward the lost object [can] [ . . . ] be thought of as a direct effect of social conflict between the melancholic's desire to preserve a lost object that dominant society refuses to support or recognize" (268). Butler observes that "the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that rage is publicly proscribed, the melancholic effects of such proposition can achieve suicidal proportions" (148). Such modern theoretical explanations fit Bernstein's play exactly. Maria Arndt lives a life of loss. As she has lived in poor health in a depressive state for so many years due to her position in society as it was prescribed, she turns to rage when she recognizes the impossibility of change and of having to face the prospect of losing even more. She turns the rage against herself. Bernstein's demands are radical and she insists on them although they seem hopeless at her time. Although in her play Maria dies, the old patriarchal order is not quite restored. Here a dramatic heroine no longer dies for patriarchal society but to advance a new societal order in which women have an independent place. At the end the daughter, who is already one step further than the mother, remains. She stands for future generations, embodying the promise of a continued struggle. When viewing the play in 2002 at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago it



strikes us how far we have come and how far we still have to go. It would be a step forward if the play were performed in Germany also as a needed encouragement for the daughters in the country for which the play was originally written.

## Notes

1. From Goethe's poem "Dauer im Wechsel."
2. See Fish.
3. See Foucault's *Discipline & Punish* or *The History of Sexuality*.
4. See especially Esslin.
5. "Ewige Wahrheiten [ . . . ] können tägliche Lügen werden." See Rosmer [Hilsa Bernstein] 108.
6. See especially Braun's and Mayreder's contemporary remarks on the subject.
7. See Kraft 59.
8. See *Feminist Majority Foundation* and *Gender Report*.
9. Two examples from the 1970s in the US are Fauver and Horning Zastrow.
10. For instance, Pataky lists over 100 women dramatists, and Gross lists 47 women dramatists for the eighteenth century and 90 women dramatists for the nineteenth century before 1880.
11. The one early monograph is by Von Hoff.
12. See the books by Wurst; Kord; Case; Sieg; Judin; Cocalis and Ferrel; and Kraft. It is safe to say that a number of these German Studies scholars are German natives who did not find employment in Germany due to their research interests.
13. In the whole 1980s only five programs were established; between 1990 and 1994 the list shows two new programs; an increase can be noted from 1995 to 1999 (six new programs were added); in 2000 there are four new programs.
14. See Kelly.
15. Kay knew German since he came originally from East Prussia and was born as Fritz Krauledat. "Born to be Wild" and "Magic Carpet Ride" are songs recorded on the *Steppenwolf Life* album of 1970.
16. John Maltovich films include *Shadow of the Vampire*, *Being John Malkovich*, and *The Killing Fields*. Gary Sinise films include *Forrest Gump*, *The Green Mile*, and *Of Mice and Men*.
17. The program also included "safe" dramas such as *Hedda Gabler*, *David Copperfield*, or *The Glassmenagery*.
18. Dozens of mother-daughter help books are still in bookstores. See also psychologist Caplan's recently published book.
19. Many novels of Edith Wharton (1862–1937) were adapted for film and television around the turn of the millennium. Examples are *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Reef* (1912), and *The Age of Innocence* (1938).
20. Published in the program notes, *Backstage*, for the performance February–March 2002: "Lost Classic Comes to Life. A Conversation Between the Leading Lady and the Director of *Maria Arndt*."
21. See Smeal.
22. Madonna's website starts off with the statement "If you want it, you can now get it." Then a photo of Madonna dressed in a sexually appealing way shows one aspect of women's power to get what they want. At the same time she reveals clenched fists, indicating that she is ready to fight.
23. See Bacchi, Schlessinger, and Zappert on the ongoing debate.

24. The April 15, 2002 issue of *TimeMagazine* features the title story "Babies vs. Career;" in an issue of *Time* from March 22, 2004, a featured article reports that when women are "caught between the pressures of the workplace and the demands of being a mom, more women are sticking with the kids" (Wallis 51). In Germany the same phenomenon could be observed a little earlier. See *Der Spiegel* issues with title stories "Zurück zur Familie" (April 9, 2001, 100–116) and "Der neue Mutterstolz. Kinder statt Karriere" (July 16, 2001, 66–79).
25. On contemporary women's clothes, beauty, and feminism, see Scott and Wolf.
26. See Figler, et al.
27. *Ally McBeal* is a television series from the Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation that ran from 1997 to 2002 and was seen in reruns on Fox affiliated networks.
28. See Nave-Herz on the history of the women's movement.
29. "Ich will nicht gelehrt werden und herabsehen schon gar nicht. Weiter kommen möchte ich, immer weiter [ . . . ]. Es hat so Vieles werden und vergehen müssen, bis ich hab' werden können—dafür möchte ich auch mein Teil beitragen—ich möchte meinen Platz in der Welt nicht umsonst bekommen haben" (Rosmer 83).
30. See Von Suttner.
31. There is, for instance, the organization Inclusive Security: Women Waging Peace that supports "the efforts of women as they work for peace in conflict areas around the world" (*The Initiative for Inclusive Security*. 8 Aug. 2005 <<http://www.women.wagingpeace.net/content/aboutus.asp>>).
32. See Ruddick.
33. Roman Woerner describes Nora's departure as "[S]ehr rasch, zu rasch wird Noras Empfinden in Erkenntnis umgesetzt, und zu sehr im Ton und Stil eines Sachwalters wird diese Erkenntnis dann von ihr vorgetragen" (88). ("Very quickly, too quickly Nora's feelings are changed into recognitions, and presented too much in the tone and style of an administrator") [Translation HK]. See also Tufts.
34. "Die letzte Szene in *Ein Puppenheim* hielten einige deutsche Theaterdirektoren für zu radikal. Sie forderten einen anderen, 'glücklichen' Ausgang. [ . . . ] Für die Erstaufführung in Deutschland, in Kiel am 6. Februar 1880, wurde diese alternative Version verwendet" (Hanssen). ("The last scenes of *A Doll's House* were considered too radical by a few German theater directors. They demanded another, 'happy' ending. [ . . . ] For the premiere in Kiel, Germany, on February 6, 1880, such alternative version was used.")
35. See Hebbel, Lenz, Lessing, and *Faust* by Goethe. For an analysis of the disappearance of the mother, see Wallach. or Walsoe-Engel.
36. See Koonz or Kaplan.
37. Silences are of special interest to other contemporary writers. For instance, Elfriede Jelinek's play in progress on Ulrike Meinhof and Schiller's *Maria Stuart* circles around silences, as she notes in the article "Sprech-Wut (ein Vorhaben)" (*Literaturen Special*, Insert to *Literaturen*, January/February 2004).
38. See the upcoming book by Ariel Levy *Female Chauvinist Pigs* reviewed by Jennifer Egan in the *New York Times*. The reviewer says, "Our popular culture [ . . . ] has embraced a model of female sexuality that comes straight from pornography and strip clubs, in which the women's job is to excite and titillate—to perform for men." The website called Promgirl.net writes under "Prom dresses of 2005": "Prom fashion trends for the upcoming year [|] [ . . . ] flowers and romantic light colors will be big factors for the prom."
39. See Gerard.
40. See the chapter on Birch-Pfeiffer in Kraft.

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*Maria Arndt Scene*  
*(Courtesy of Michael Brosilav, Chicago)*