

## Review

# *Gertrude Steins skuespil*

**Laura Luise Schultz**

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*An additional volume is a translation  
of Gertrude Stein's plays into Danish,  
GERTRUDE STEIN. Stykker til at spille.*

*Lene Asp Frederiksen, Solveig Daugaard, Maja Elverkilde, Laura Luise Schultz, Oskar Sjøgren, Gritt Uldall-Jessen og Tania Ørum*

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Laura Schultz has written a book about Gertrude Stein's plays based on previous articles and her 2009 PhD dissertation. The Danish word she uses for play is skuespil, corresponding to the German word Schauspiel. On the front page one can read Schultz' assertion that: "Words can play, and when they play they change their own meaning and thus [change] the way we perceive the world around us" (my translation). This statement takes us straight into the logic of how Laura Schultz perceives Gertrude Stein and her skuespil, which I will refer to as play texts. English does not have this differentiation of terms like German-Scandinavian Drama-Schauspiel-Skuespil, and the only way to translate it into English would be drama or play, so play text in my opinion would be an adequate way of speaking about Stein's dramatic texts in an avant-garde perspective. An alternative might be scores or descriptions of what happens in a performative action.

Schultz fills in a hole in our understanding of how Stein's play texts were staged and also gives an outline of and discusses how these texts could be situated in a performative textual tradition. This raises the question of how play texts can be seen as deviating from the classical norm of logic of action and

character. The critical idioms that are used to describe these play texts and their performative potentials are landscape dramaturgy (Fuchs and Chauduri, *Land/Scape/Theatre*, Ann Arbor 2002) and postdramatic as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann (*Postdramatic theatre*, London 2006, originally published as *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt am Main 1999).

Gertrude Stein's skuespil gives an analysis of how the play text can be perceived of as a landscape expressed in words and music, and by the artistic staging itself as a deconstructionist practice. Schultz gives an outline of important productions of Stein's plays, like Richard Foreman's staging of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* at The Freie Volksbühne in West-Berlin in 1982, or, to mention one of the Danish productions, *What happened?* in a staging by Gritt Uldall-Jessen and Joachim Hamou with the theatre company Får 302 in 2009. All of these productions used the play texts as scores for theatrical productions in a performative direction. Thus, Schultz gives an outline of how avantgarde play texts were staged, and not only with regard to continental European or American productions, but also her mentioning of a variety of Danish stagings in the 2000s (Last chapter: Gertrude Stein i Danmark).

Schultz also argues for the significance of Stein's play texts for the American postmodern theatre or The Theatre of Images (as described by Bonnie Marranca, Baltimore 1996), which is the case from Robert Wilson to Richard Foreman – both use disassociation as dramatic technique. What Schultz does, however, is situate Stein in a postmodern European context, referring to Frank Castorf and René Pollesch (Schultz 113). Their practices in the deconstruction of the dramatic figure can be exemplified in auteur-based theatrical productions in an auteur-based theatre. Schultz could furthermore have added an auteur-director as Falk Richter as an example, and one could have spoken about Peter Handke and Elfriede Jelinek in the same way.

Schultz generalizes when speaking about Stein's play texts in the perspective of the postdramatic, which could have been discussed instead of presupposing that Stein is to be seen as postdramatic. There is no doubt that Stein has inspired what Hans-Thies Lehmann later has come to define as the postdramatic. However, Schultz presupposes Stein's dramaturgy as postdramatic and, at the same time, as a postdramatic landscape dramaturgy (Schultz 122). In English, it would indicate that Stein's dramaturgy is postdramatic in the way it is marked by means of expression put on an equal footing on the one hand (in Danish *ligestillet*, in German *gleichgestellt*), and on the other hand simultaneously being a sort of landscape dramaturgy. This is problematic because *ligestillet* can be read as a fusion of all the means of expression, whereas in Lehmann's postdramatic perspective, the relationship between the means of expression are spoken of as paratactic and being in their own right, which in Danish consequently would be *sidestillet* and in German *gleichberechtigt*, rather than *ligestillet*.

Furthermore, Schultz indicates that Stein's play texts are scenarios to be merged into a performative setting and, I would add, that by becoming *ligestillet* they lose their position as texts in their own right or as becoming *lige berettiget* (German: *gleichberechtigt*). In this transition we are in-between a literary and

a performative way of understanding the dramatic text in its role as material for production as a score. Then the text loses its autonomy with regard to the other means of expression. This is one of the paradoxes of the postdramatic as a critical concept in a performative context. However, it is Schultz's main concern that Stein's play texts can be understood as both situated in the text as well as in the production as part of the same composition.

In Schultz's description of Stein's play text, *The Curtain Raiser*, which is described as "a very verbal performance" (Schultz, 33), she rightly includes the perspective of the variety theatre, circus and onomatopoetic ways of fusing sounds and words. Thus, Laura Schultz challenges the split between text and production, which is – as it is directly referred to Gertrude Stein – "a combination and not a contradiction" (Schultz, 33). This indicates a fusion between text and production which is likewise to be found in the scores of dadaism as well as in Fluxus as in any postdramatic theatre, as also could be seen in Scandinavian Bauhaus-Situationism working on the concept of Co-ritus as a way to relate the production and the spectator. As a conclusion, Schultz describes the unification of the performer and the spectator/director as a kind of direction of radical relationism in-between the text and the reader (Schultz, 124). I presume Schultz would agree with speaking about the play text as a score, but in the case of Gertrude Stein, it is of a very verbal kind. It is a strength that Schultz introduces a performative understanding of the play text in the direction of the postmodern deconstruction of drama, which can be seen in deconstructionist stagings of the classics.

What I am missing in the book is the discussion of the deeper roots in Stein's aesthetics in popular traditions like pantomime gags and scenarios, back to e.g. Alice in Wonderland and the childish playing with repetition and naivism, as well as her relation to surrealism as such. In commenting on Stein's *A Circular Play. A Play in Circles* (Schultz, 35-37), I miss a mentioning of the circular understood as ritual and repetition, which can also be found in shamanistic practices. The Danish dramaturg Ulla Ryum (born 1937) developed this in the concept of a spiral dramaturgy, and it has also been addressed in some of the work of the Danish Billedstofteater and Hotel Pro Forma, which I presume have given some important aesthetic premises for how Stein was produced in Denmark in the 2000s.

So, does this book keep what it promises? Yes, more or less. It is very good in explaining the dramatic technique of play text writing in an avantgarde perspective, but I think some perspectives and discussions are missing, like the questions of the historical roots of naivism and circular dramaturgy. The main conclusion, however, is that it serves as an introduction to Gertrude Stein as a playwright, and to the production history of Stein's works, not the least in Denmark. It is a minor mistake when Schultz says that Richard Foreman staged *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* at the Volksbühne in Berlin in 1982 (Schultz 83). This theatre was situated in East Berlin and is confused with the Freie Volksbühne in West Berlin. Nevertheless, the book is a valuable contribution to researching into a complex field of dramaturgy.