

Article

Between Postdramatic Text and Dramatic Drama: Recent German-Language Playwriting by Lukas Bärfuss and Katja Brunner

Richard McClelland

Department of German, School of Modern Languages, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1TE, UK

Abstract: Since 2000 there has been a boom in playwriting in the German-speaking world. This is shaped by a creative tension between two forms of theatre-texts. On the one hand the postdramatic text that exists in a theatre marked by a parataxis of all theatrical elements, as outlined by Hans-Thies Lehmann and Gerda Poschmann; on the other, the 'dramatic drama' as identified by Birgit Haas that engages with dramatic representation whilst still questioning the reality being represented on the stage. In this contribution I explore these strands of contemporary playwriting in two texts written since 2000: Lukas Bärfuss' *Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern* (2003) and Katja Brunner's *von den beinen zu kurz* (2012). My analysis examines how both playwrights question dramatic conventions of form and character and the implications this has for audience efforts to discern meaning in the plays.

Keywords: Lukas Bärfuss; Katja Brunner; drama; postdramatic theatre; German-language playwriting

1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen a boom in playwriting in the German-speaking world. This forms part of a broader resurgence of writing in the language since the late 1990s (Virant 2014), with 2003 marking a break-through year for new writing for the stage (Haas 2007, p. 178). Though this resurgence was initially inspired by playwriting developments in Britain by dramatists including Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill (Barnett 2008, p. 306), the impetus to write new texts for the theatre has come increasingly from within the German theatrical landscape itself (ibid). This has been influenced by two processes. First, the resurgence of playwriting has been institutionally driven. Andreas Enghart (2013, p. 115) describes a support network for new writing that consists of dramatist festivals, the promotion of writing at Stückmärkte, grants and scholarships, and courses in dramatic writing.¹ Second, a cultural shift has taken place that was intensified by the recession of the early 2000s and the September 11 attacks in 2001. For Enghart (ibid, p. 92) this marked both the zenith of postmodern aesthetics and the demise of the 'anything-goes' attitude that had dominated postmodern cultural expression in the 1990s; as Jürs-Munby et al. (2013, p. 2) highlight, this gave way to an increase in socially and politically engaged playwriting. In turn, this cultural shift led to a re-evaluation of the role of the theatre as a representational art form that rests on the understanding of how real, lived experience can be and is represented on the stage.

¹ The Stückmarkt (lit. 'play-market') is a showcase of un-performed pieces and emerging dramatic and theatrical talent. Though different institutions and festivals take different approaches, in general writers submit their pieces to be judged by a jury, and a shortlist is presented to the public and industry representatives. One may then be voted the year's best new drama/performance.

In broad terms, playwrights have responded to this development in two ways. On the one hand, they continue to engage with postmodern and anti-realistic aesthetic structures as manifest in postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 1999; Poschmann 1997). On the other hand, there has been a movement towards more realistic forms of representation in what Birgit Haas (2007, 2008) identifies as “dramatic drama”. The postdramatic and ‘dramatic drama’ are not necessarily exclusive categories, however. Indeed, contemporary playwrights engage with both aesthetic forms in their texts. In this contribution I explore the convergence of postdramatic and dramatic drama as manifest in two play-texts written since 2000: Lukas Bärfuss’ *Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern* (‘The Sexual Neuroses of our Parents’ 2003) and Katja Brunner’s *von den beinen zu kurz* (‘about little short legs’ 2012). In the discussion below, I examine how each engages with contemporary forms of postdramatic and dramatic drama, with a focus on the role of form, characterization and how both texts place demands on the audience with regard to discerning potential meaning encoded within them. Here, I take my lead from recent volumes on postdramatic theatre and form (Boyle et al. 2019, p. 2), and postdramatic theatre and the political (Jürs-Munby et al. 2013, p. 4), which highlight these as some of the key differentiating markers between traditional dramatic and contemporary postdramatic theatre. In keeping with the emphasis of this special volume on German-language literature written since 2000, my analysis focuses on the written play-text rather than on live performance practices. Contemporary playwrights engage with postdramatic practices at a textual level, not least by disturbing and destabilizing the legacy of Aristotelian drama. As Carlson (2015, p. 379) states: “The emancipation of the performance from the literary text is arguably the most central concern of the postdramatic, but that emancipation involves other breaks as well.” He singles out the specifically literary features of Aristotelian drama, including a “unified narrative”, “cause and effect relationships” and an “over-arching teleology”, as the key points of rupture between ‘traditional’ and postdramatic playwriting. Whilst this approach shifts emphasis away from those performance realities (including space, sound, light and the body) that mark postdramatic experimentation most strongly and which Lehmann re-centres in his influential study, I do not deny their existence and the vital role they play in scholarly and dramaturgical discussions of the contemporary theatrical landscape.

As I demonstrate, Bärfuss presents a more realist-dramatic depiction of psychologically motivated characters interacting within a more-or-less recognizable world. What is more, the dramatic arc of the play, despite threatening to disintegrate at key moments, is maintained throughout: the plot has a clear linear development. This allows Bärfuss, through the marginalization of the main character Dora, to interrogate and ultimately lambast bourgeois moral conventions. In contrast, Brunner’s text is a non-realist, postdramatic exploration of the psychologically fractured individual: across twenty-four ‘scenes’ that do not adhere to a clear linear chronology, the overarching story of the text is interrupted by fairy-tales, temporal shifts in perspective and the repetition of key events in multiple and contradictory forms. What is more, the entire play is cast as the expression of a singular female subject; the disturbances generated by ruptures in form therefore parallel and give expression to the disintegration of this subject’s inner world. In what follows, I offer a detailed introduction to the development of and relationship between the dramatic and the postdramatic in contemporary German-language playwriting before exploring how this manifests in the Bärfuss and Brunner texts under discussion.

2. The (Post)Dramatic in Contemporary Theatre Texts

In the Western cultural tradition, drama represents a central genre of literature alongside the lyric and the epic. What differentiates it, however, is dialogue: in drama events are not recalled by a narrator or a lyrical subject but unfold through the statements of the *dramatis personae*. In this understanding, drama has long been considered in terms of text. This logocentric tradition can be traced back to Aristotle, who defines (tragic) drama in his *Poetics* (Aristotle 2013, p. 23) as consisting of an “action of a superior kind—grand, and complete in itself—presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in differing parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity

and fear, the purification of such emotions". [Lehmann \(2006, p. 40\)](#) highlights this Aristotelian legacy by emphasizing the totalizing essence of drama that rests on the logos of the text: "The 'whole' of the plot, a theoretical fiction, founds the logos of a totality, in which beauty is intrinsically conceived of as mastery of the temporal process. Drama means a flow of time, controlled and surveyable." The ordering of time is listed by [Barnett \(2008, p. 14f\)](#) as one of the two key defining processes of drama; the second, which again draws on Aristotle, is the mimesis of action as embodied in the characters, props and locations that feature in it.

This understanding of drama can be traced through Western theatre history to the neoclassicism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and on to the Realism, Naturalism and the well-made play of the nineteenth. The Modernist crises of language at the close of the nineteenth century, however, led to a questioning of the 'truth' supposedly encoded in language. This precipitated a challenge to drama: as language came to be seen as an inadequate means of communication, so too did the representation of real life through drama. As [Pavis \(1998, p. 385\)](#) states, this gave rise to the "beginning of the reversal" of the logocentrism that had defined the theatre. In turn, a range of new theatrical practices developed that sought to move away from the supposedly defunct dramatic model ([Pavis 1998, p. 120](#); [Brauneck and Schneilin 1992, p. 279](#)). It is these developments, which respond to what he classifies as "crises" of modern drama, that [Szondi \(1963\)](#) outlines as culminating in Brecht's epic theatre, which he sees as a new, non-dramatic theatrical form. Despite the developments that epic theatre represents (not least its epic emphasis on narration), it is still recognizably part of a longer dramatic tradition. As Lehmann highlights, epic theatre is beholden to the logocentrism of the drama in and through the emphasis on the Fabel (the analysis of the plot of a play to bring out the social relationships that are embedded within it), which is stated to be "sine qua non" for Brechtian theatre ([Lehmann 2006, p. 33](#)).

Even in the Brechtian theatre, then, representation was still determined by the dramatic text. As Lehmann outlines, this continued to ensure the production of a "fictive cosmos" ([Lehmann 2006, p. 31](#); emphasis original) on the stage that encoded reality and reproduced it mimetically. In his examination of theatrical practices since the 1960s and 1970s, however, Lehmann explores a "post-Brechtian theatre" (2006, p. 33) that sought to move away from the logocentric representational structures of the dramatic tradition. This is tied directly to the representational crises that were precipitated by the catastrophic history of the twentieth century and the subsequent emergence of postmodernism. As Karen [Jürs-Munby \(2006, p. 13\)](#) discusses, twentieth-century history led to an "eschew[ing]" of the dramatic form by practitioners who felt that the unity encoded within the dramatic cosmos was increasingly at odds with the reality that it supposedly represented. As such, theatre practitioners sought to develop a new aesthetic that engaged with their understanding and experience of contemporary reality. It is this development that Lehmann terms 'postdramatic theatre'. Though this marks a new theatrical *modus operandi*, one must to bear in mind that the postdramatic does not represent a clean break with dramatic theatre. Indeed, as [Jürs-Munby \(2006, p. 2\)](#) states: "'post' here is to be understood neither as an epochal category, nor simply as a chronological 'after' drama, a 'forgetting' of the dramatic 'past', but rather as a rupture and a beyond that continue to entertain relationships with drama and are in many ways an analysis and 'anamnesis' to drama."

The shift towards the postdramatic has major implications for the interrelated systems of representation and meaning-making that occur in the theatre. This rests on the conceptual shifts that took place concurrent with the emergence of postmodernity. In postmodern thought, individuals do not experience the world around them in a direct way, but rather as mediated through what Jean [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#) defines as the simulacrum. In this understanding, reality is not experienced as a singular, fixed and knowable force, but rather as a simulation, in which multiple signs that are increasingly distant from their referent converge to form an image of what reality might be. As [Barnett \(2006, p. 379\)](#) outlines, the unfixed, multi-perspectival nature of contemporary reality means that simple, straight-forward dramatic representation is impossible. In postdramatic theatre, this manifests in what Lehmann terms a "parataxis" of theatrical elements (2006, p. 86), in which the "harmony and comprehensibility" of a traditionally ordered, dramatic reality are replaced by the simultaneous

presentation of multiple signs that are not linked together in an unambiguous way (a reality that is most prominent in performance). In turn, this results in a shift in the role of the audience ([Lehmann 1999](#), p. 148). As [Jürs-Munby et al. \(2013, p. 4\)](#) state, this effect can either be direct, through the deliberate involvement of the audience in the theatre event, or indirect, through the “indeterminacy of meaning” that marks both text and performance. The latter shifts the locus of meaning-making away from the absent dramatist (who nevertheless determines the (re)presentation of the world on the stage through the pre-formed and performed text in dramatic theatre) onto the audience, who must determine where meaning may lie in and through the polyvalent presentation taking place before them ([Barnett 2006](#), p. 383).

In an earlier study, Gerda Poschmann explores the impact of such shifts on the theatre-text ([Poschmann 1997](#)). Like Lehmann, she identifies drama as an historical moment that is no longer seen as an adequate representational framework by contemporary playwrights (1997, p. 38). Crucially, this has not led to the banishment of the theatre text from the stage, but rather a reconfiguration of its role and possibilities. As such, new textual forms developed that demonstrate an increasing self-awareness of their position in the theatre (1997, p. 37). [Jürs-Munby \(2006, p. 6\)](#) also touches on the role of the text in postdramatic theatre and describes how postdramatic texts, much like postdramatic performances, shift the site of meaning-making onto the spectator. She describes the work of playwrights such as Martin Crimp, Elfriede Jelinek, Heiner Müller and Sarah Kane as “open” or ‘writerly’ texts [: : :] in the sense that they require the spectators to become active co-writers of the (performance) text. The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning.” As I demonstrate in my analysis below, this holds true for Brunner’s text, in which meaning is nebulous and spectators and readers alike are confronted with an unknowable representation of reality that underscores the fragmentation of subjecthood and the crisis of psychology that mark contemporary experience.

The postdramatic, as outlined by Lehmann and Poschmann, forms one of the key strands of contemporary playwriting in the German-speaking world. As outlined in my introduction, however, since 2000, members of the younger generation(s) of playwrights have re-engaged with elements of the dramatic in playwriting. [Englhart \(2013, p. 93\)](#) links this development to the “rediscovery” of reality in this period. That is, in postdramatic and postmodern theatre, the multi-perspectival nature of the theatrical event means that productions essentially produce an image of a fractured contemporary reality as informed by mass media and new technologies. In the new wave of dramatic writing, however, a question mark is placed over the simulation itself: whilst simulation and hyperreality still feature as themes within plays, playwrights increasingly use realist strategies to present materials in a way that emphasizes the presence of ‘reality’ as a discrete category that exists independent of simulation ([Haas 2007](#), p. 216). As [Englhart \(2013, p. 93\)](#) continues, the rediscovery of reality was accompanied by the emergence of a new “substantiality” in playwriting that sought to engage with reality in an empirical way. This renewed emphasis on the empirical qualities of theatre means that playwrights and directors have turned to real and observable experiences of reality in their work, rather than emphasizing the non-existence of such reality itself within the postmodern simulacrum.

In her analysis of the younger generation of playwrights, [Haas \(2007, 2008\)](#) terms this new wave of writing “dramatic drama”. As she emphasizes, however, this is a rejection of neither postdramatic theatre nor the postmodern age, which continues to function as the “subject, or the underlying theme” of new dramatic writing ([Haas 2008](#), p. 83). Haas continues: “The postmodern is taken up as a theme, yet it is no longer the aesthetic basis for the creation of theatre. In other words; in dramatic drama the postmodern dissolution of text, author and message is replaced by a structured, hierarchical and mimetic dramatic text.” This manifests in two ways ([Haas 2007](#), p. 12; [2008](#), p. 100). First, the playwright reasserts the position of the subject at the centre of dramatic representation. Second, these texts engage with postmodern and modernist legacies by combining a quasi-realist exploration of lived experience with a postmodern distrust of reality as a singular entity. In Bärffuss, this figures in what Haas terms an

“open and skilful handle on realism at the level of both structure and language” (Haas 2007, p. 211). I explore how this is manifest in *Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern* in more detail below. Given the shifts in audience role precipitated by the emergence of postdramatic theatre, it is unsurprising that ‘dramatic drama’ has also led to a further movement of the location of meaning-making in the theatre. Indeed, because it blurs the line between the postdramatic and dramatic, in ‘dramatic drama’ meaning is assigned by both the dramatic text and the spectator (Haas 2008, p. 93).

3. Bärffuss and Brunner: Exploring the (Post)Dramatic Text

Born in Thun in 1971, Lukas Bärffuss is perhaps the closest Switzerland has to a public intellectual today, not least because of his polemical examinations of contemporary Swiss society and politics in his journalistic, literary and dramatic writing. In recognition of his work and as a marker of his prominence in German-speaking cultural life, the German Academy for Language and Poetry (*Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung* 2019) awarded him the Georg Büchner Prize, singling out his sense of political crisis and ability to analyse society through emblematic individuals and their psychology. He has penned critically-acclaimed play-texts, including *Meienbergs Tod* (Meienberg’s Death 2001), *Der Bus* (Das Zeug einer Heiligen) (The Bus [The Makings of a Saint], 2005), *Öl* (Oil 2009) and the more recent *Zwanzigtausend Seiten* (Twenty-thousand Pages 2012) and *Frau Schmitz* (Mrs. Schmitz, 2016). His theatre texts engage with the dramatic tradition, and constantly force the audience to engage with the taboo and repressed aspects of contemporary experience. As I show below, *Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern* (Bärffuss 2005) is no exception thanks to its examination of bourgeois sexual morality. Indeed, as Philip Boehm (2010, p. 24) states, Bärffuss’ text leads the audience deep into a “labyrinth of unclear mores and uneasy morality” with the protagonist Dora’s downfall at its centre. Whilst Bärffuss’ text features a psychological examination of Dora and those around her, I demonstrate that her interactions with the wider world, her function as a foil for the other characters in the text and the dream-like settings of the play highlight the postmodern reality that underpins the piece.

Katja Brunner was born in Zurich in 1991 and is part of the youngest wave of “new writing” in German-language theatre. Her background in the theatre dates to her studies at the Schweizerisches Literaturinstitut in Biel and at the Universität der Künste in Berlin. The text analysed here, *von den beinen zu kurz* (Brunner 2012) had its German premiere at the Staatstheater Hannover in January 2013 (it premiered the previous March at the Theater Winkelwiese in Zurich). The play gained international critical traction and Brunner became the youngest recipient of the Mühlheimer Dramatikerpreis. In the same year she was named as *Nachwuchsdramatikerin des Jahres* (Young Dramatist of the Year) by Theater der Zeit. Brunner’s strongly postdramatic text engages with similar themes to Bärffuss in *Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern*: a central, vulnerable female figure falls victim to those in her immediate social circle and is sexually abused. Brunner takes a markedly different tack, however: in *von den beinen zu kurz* the female figure is a young girl whose abuse at the hands of her father takes place between her infancy and his suicide when she is on the cusp of puberty. Despite falling into the newest wave of dramatic writing temporally, Brunner’s fragmented text centres on the exploration of the inner world of the nameless subject. The non-realistic representation that this interiority demands is enhanced by the multi-perspectival reality of the text, which is related through conflicting voices and multiple iterations of a ‘true’ reality that might lie below the surface of the text in a thoroughly postdramatic way.

3.1. (Post)Dramatic Form

As outlined above, drama is a highly codified genre. It places formal demands on a playwright that range from the genesis of a plot through dialogue to how this is broken up into individual acts and scenes, each of which performs a specific function vis-à-vis formal dramatic requirements. As I have shown, postdramatic theatre represents a marked formal departure away from traditional dramatic theatre. Indeed, as Boyle et al. (2019, p. 1) state, postdramatic theatre is “concerned first and foremost with interrogating theatrical form”. This is not to say, however, that ‘dramatic drama’ does not question traditional form: though it marks a return of realist structures to theatrical representation, these

structures are interrogated in and through the text itself (Haas 2008). In the discussion below I first examine how Bärffuss' play pushes at the boundaries of dramatic form before exploring how Brunner's text, as an example of postdramatic playwriting, subverts dramatic formal expectations.

As stated above, Bärffuss' text examines the painful sexual liberation of the protagonist Dora as it impacts on her and those around her. Her potential emancipation is triggered at the start of the play when Dora's mother approaches her doctor to have the adolescent, who suffers from learning difficulties, taken on the medication that has kept her in an induced state of passivity for years (Bärffuss 2005, p. 74). When the "Vorhang aus Chemie" ("chemical veil"; Bärffuss 2005, p. 83) is lifted, Dora enters into a state of semi-autonomy that is above all sexual.² It is this exploration of her sexuality that determines the course of the thirty-five scenes that comprise the play. These follow the linear, psychological development of Dora as she interacts dialogically with a small group of characters that surround her (I examine the nature of character in the play in more detail below). Indeed, her development, and thereby the plot of the play, is pushed forward by dialogue; the text lacks the extended monologues that define classic examples of postdramatic theatre.³ Though Dora's development is interactional, however, it is stunted by the social dynamics that mark the play: despite asserting her own voice, other characters refuse to engage fully with what she has to say, and so she speaks and acts at odds with those around her. This has two effects. First, though she is undoubtedly the central protagonist of the text, Dora is pushed to the margins of its relational world by the other characters. Second, even when characters do seem to engage with Dora, she functions effectively as a foil for their deviance. Indeed, though Dora is held responsible for her actions, this is at odds with the marginalization that denies her agency and means she is kept in a semi-permanent state of minority. This forms the backbone of Bärffuss' social critique: both the stunted dialogue of the text and the marginalization that this precipitates allow Bärffuss to examine the bourgeois social structures that underpin both the society of the play and the world that this supposedly represents on the stage.

The dramatic boundaries of Bärffuss' play are further blurred by his use of settings. One can differentiate between three types of settings that are recognizable from Realist theatre: the public (the grocery stand that Dora works at outside of a busy train station; the campsite where the parents engage in casual sex), the private (the family home that Dora and her parents occupy) and the semi-private (the doctor's surgery; the *feine Herr's* hotel room). It is because Dora ignores the boundaries that are in place between these sites that she functions as a transgressive figure in the text (a point I return to below). Bärffuss subverts the tone of realism that these locations might provide, however, by framing them with dream-like descriptions that blur the line between reality and fiction:

9. IN DER PRAXIS. DIE MÜTTER RÜSTEN SCHON DAS GEMÜSE, DIE HUNGRIGEN VÄTER ERDULDEN DIE ARBEIT, DIE KINDER SITZEN IN DER SCHULE. (Bärffuss 2005, p. 87)

34. BEIM ARZT. DIE ZEIT DEHNT UND DEHNT SICH ZU LANGEN FÄDEN, BIS SIE SCHLIESSLICH REISST. (Bärffuss 2005, p. 123).

(9. IN THE SURGERY. THE MOTHERS ARE ALREADY PREPARING VEGETABLES, THE HUNGRY FATHERS ARE ENDURING WORK, THE CHILDREN ARE AT SCHOOL.

34. WITH THE DOCTOR. TIME STRETCHES AND STRETCHES INTO LONG THREADS UNTIL IT EVENTUALLY TEARS.)

As Boehm (2010, p. 74) highlights, these call to mind the slug lines of a screenplay and therefore hint at a cinematographic quality that permeates the play. This is emphasized further by the ending of the text, which concludes ambiguously at the "fin de la bobine" ("end of the reel"; Bärffuss 2005, p. 127)

² All translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

³ Here I am thinking particularly of Elfriede Jelinek's postdramatic texts.

with Dora told by the *feine Herr* to go on ahead of him to Russia, where he will meet her. As such, it lacks any true resolution and its dramatic threads remain untied. This is both a key way in which the text subverts traditional dramatic expectations, and a comment on the make-up of contemporary reality, which is shown to be frayed and lacking any true cohesion beneath an illusory veneer of consistency.

Framing the scenes in this dream-like way performs several functions in the text. First, the actions and moods described in the individual directions are drawn from the daily schedule of the bourgeoisie, and therefore highlight the societal roles and expectations that members of this social class must adhere to in order to maintain respectability. This takes on an added importance when one considers their relation to a key paratext for this play: Freud's "Dora" case ([Freud \[1905\] 2001](#)). In this famous study, Freud treated the daughter of a repressed Viennese bourgeois family for hysteria; a major focus of his analysis is her recurrent dreams, one of which features a railway station as a major motif, a symbol that Freud links to his patient's threatened virginity. As with Freud's Dora, Bärffuss' Dora does not receive the familial protection that society demands. Through her sexuality she not only becomes a foil for bourgeois sexual repression, but her body itself is transformed into a site of exploitation. This links in turn to the role that dreams play in the structure of postdramatic theatre: as [Barnett \(2008, p. 15\)](#) outlines, the dream functions as a paradigm for suspending the ordered flow of time within the postdramatic theatre event because it *di* uses meaning across the event as a whole (that is, one must think of the 'dream' in its entirety in order to grasp at any underlying meaning). In this way, the dream framework has an effect on the dramatic structure of Bärffuss' play: the dreams blur the edges of the text and place a question mark over the reality being represented and the meaning that it contains whilst also gesturing beyond the text to the real-life history of psychology. As such, there is a direct parallel between this text and the 'dramatic drama' that [Haas \(2008\)](#) explores.

Whilst Bärffuss' text pushes the boundaries of dramatic form in this way, Brunner's is decidedly postdramatic. As stated above, the play is arranged into twenty-four 'scenes' that do not adhere to a clear linear chronology. Though an overarching story follows the course of the daughter's life, it lacks teleology. Its revelation to the audience is disturbed by scenes told from the perspective of the now adult daughter, scenes that relate fairytales, and the repetition of key events in multiple and contradictory forms (most notably the father's suicide and the daughter's discovery of his body). What is more, though Brunner's text does feature scenes that contain multiple voices, this does not function as dialogue that moves the plot forward. Rather, there is a temporal gap between the events being reported and the act of reporting, emphasized through the use of the historical present tense throughout the text. Any sense that these events are being reported in a reliable manner is undermined throughout: at key points in the text questions about representation are raised by overlapping and contradictory lines of speech. When the mother discovers the father and their daughter naked in bed together, for example, her response is plagued by the duplicitous relationship between reality and conjective imagination that permeates the entire play ([Brunner 2012, p. 20](#)):

was sie sieht
 sie sieht zwei schlafende Menschen, ein kleinerer entblösst, nackt, die Decke bis zum
 Bauchnabel etwa, ein grösserer auch unter der Bettdecke schwer schnaufend im Schlaf [. .
 .] Achtung, jetzt kommts ja: Die Kleinere schläft gar nicht, schlagartig öfnet sie die Augen,
 tritt sofort in die der Mutter, hebt die eine Hand zum Gruss, winkt zärtlich die Mutter traut
 ihren Augen nicht
 doch sicher traut sie ihnen, sie ist doch klar im Kopf
 ja und dann, was will sie damit—mit dem ganzen Traum
 DIE GLAUBT die BEDEUTUNG dieses Bildes nicht
 nächster Gedanke:
 Die liegt ja in meiner Betthälfte
 [...]
 aber die Selbstgefälligkeit im Gesicht der Tochter kann sie sich nicht erklären

what she sees
she sees two people sleeping, a smaller one exposed, naked, the sheet down around their
navel, and a larger one too, asleep, beneath the sheet and snoring heavily
Watch out, it's coming. The smaller one isn't actually sleeping, she opens her eyes
suddenly and meets the mother's gaze, greets her by raising her hand and waving tenderly
the mother doesn't believe her eyes
but of course she does, she's got a clear head
yes but what's she going to do – with this whole dream
she doesn't BELIEVE THE IMPLICATION of what she's
seeing next thought:
She's lying on my side of the bed
[...]
but she can't explain away the smug look in her daughter's face.

Not only is the narration of this episode split over multiple speaking voices, but these relate a contradictory set of impressions whilst revealing that the mother cannot process what she has discovered in a rational way. In one way this is representative of her psychological reaction to the discovery of her husband and daughter in bed together in a supposedly post-coital setting. At the same time, however, it relates out to an understanding of reality as a simulation. Indeed, the rest of the scene consists of the mother attempting to comprehend what she has seen whilst leaving the flat before returning home and not revealing what she saw. Most telling is that the mother's response to her discovery is informed by film and TV: she drives aimlessly for hours, a behavioural pattern that she has learnt from film (Brunner 2012, p. 22). As such, the text blends fiction and reality at multiple levels both within the text by placing doubt over the related action, and by surmising that the mother's potential response is itself a simulation rather than a viable response to what has occurred.

Throughout the text, Brunner intersperses monologues amongst such 'dialogic' episodes. Rather than granting insight into the inner psychology of the character(s), however, these further interrupt the effort to discern meaning in the text. This is evident, for example, in the ten monologues titled "Rechtfertigung" ("Vindication"). Each deliberately antagonizes the audience by addressing societal conceptualizations of moral and immoral sexual relationships, and especially by looking at child sexuality, incest and paedophilia. At the same time, they function on a textual level to underscore the disintegration of character and voice in the play: because the audience member cannot always fix them to a specific individual they cannot process or categorize them in a regular way. The "Vindications" therefore defy meaning-making and force the spectator to hold the play in its entirety in their minds; it is only when considered alongside all other aspects of the play that their intention (i.e., a provocative questioning of norms and expectations) might be discerned.

The structure of Bärffuss's text highlights the moral and ethical shortcomings of the characters as illustrated by their relationships with Dora. The postdramatic structure of Brunner's text, however, is significant because it impacts on the moral implications that this relationship might have within its theatrical context. In a traditional drama, though the sexual relationship between a parent and child might cause outrage amongst the audience, within the 'fictive cosmos' in which the play takes place the repercussions for such transgression would (one expects) come to bear upon the individual(s) responsible. Think, for example, of Sophocles' Oedipus. The postdramatic structure of this text, however, subverts this because there is no such 'cosmos' in which an individual's actions return on them. Rather, the content of the play is projected out onto the audience, who must therefore negotiate the contradictory nature of the text to discern where moral blame and responsibility may lie as the text relates to their own experience of the world.

3.2. (Post)Dramatic Character

As stated above, character is one of the key ways by which contemporary dramatists undermine convention in both postdramatic and dramatic drama. In her influential exploration of character

in the theatre, Elinor Fuchs (1996, p. 8) emphasizes that, in traditional dramatic theatre, character is the nexus that connects the (illusory) world of the theatre and the (real) world of the spectator most strongly. This connection is enacted by the actor, whose real-life presence “stands in” for the fictional character on the stage. By the same understanding, the world of the theatre mirrors that of the audience. In Aristotelian theatre, that the character is a psychologically whole being is important insofar as this, through the connection out into the real world of the audience, implies that they, too, are psychologically whole. Likewise, the presentation of a fully-formed world on the stage is understood as a mimetic representation of reality. One strand of recent writing for the theatre, however, has seen a trend away from the individually whole, psychologically motivated character. As Lehmann (2016, p. 71) states, recent play-texts are not only marked by “more or less anonymous, typified and collective subjects”, but they also lack a major feature of dramatic texts: “characters who act”. This is a view supported by Haas (2008, p. 83), who states that “three-dimensional character” has been “shunned” in postdramatic theatre, and Barnett (2008, p. 331), who speaks of the “collapse of character”. In short, recent decades have seen an increasing shift in the function and formation of character in play texts (Fuchs 1996, p. 8).

The ‘collapse of character’ is most evident in Brunner’s text. Indeed, the disintegration of character in her play underscores the sense of confusion that is generated as the audience attempts to discern meaning in the text, as outlined above. In contrast to Bärffuss’ text (which I return to below), Brunner’s does not feature psychologically distinct individuals. Rather, in lieu of a list of characters, Brunner’s directions state (Brunner 2012, p. 3):

Ein Stück für vier oder fünf Schauspielerinnen oder 13 Männer in Bademänteln. Alle Stimmen sind einem weiblichen Ich zugehörig. Ausserdem ist die Wirklichkeit eine Interpretative Gestaltbare Gegebenheit, selbst über die eigene Wahrnehmung des Ichs hinaus.

(A play for four or five actresses or 13 men in dressing gowns. All voices belong to a female self. Furthermore reality is a Malleable Actuality, even when it concerns the perception of the ego.)

In spite of the play’s action being focalized through a singular female self, its di use characterization is heightened throughout the text. As commented upon above, in those scenes that are not monologues, changes of speaker are indicated by dashes. The number of speakers in any given scene is therefore indeterminate. What is more, when a change of speaker is indicated in the text, these often question and refute what other voices have said. This emphasizes the confusion within the female self: if the dialogue and monologues that form the text are the expression of her internal world, then any confusion rests within her and is a result of her inability to comprehend the reality of her own situation. This takes place from the start of the text itself. In the first scene, “OP” (“Operating Theatre”; Brunner 2012, p. 6), when a nurse enters the room and pours boiling water over the figure whose experience is relayed to the audience, she cannot feel the heat of the water (ostensibly because of the lingering effects of anaesthesia) but states: “Ich stelle mir die Wärme vor” (“I imagine the warmth”). This has the implication then that any insistence that reality itself is a malleable actuality is predicated on imagined experiences in the text: though perception and reality are blurred, reality itself may be a mere projection. As such, any fixed points within the text onto which the audience could pin their interpretation disintegrate. Nothing that is related can be understood as a ‘true’ image of reality and the audience is forced into negotiating di use and contradictory information in their effort to fix meaning.

The destabilization of character and meaning in this way has precedent. Indeed, Barnett (2008) touches on the similar lack of specific characterization and the division of speech via dashes in Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on her Life* (1997), noting that this use of dashes to divide speech is a feature of postdramatic texts and can be traced back to Heiner Müller and Peter Handke. It is clear that Brunner is engaging with this longer tradition here, and I would posit that Crimp’s text has been a major influence on her writing. In Barnett’s (2008, p. 18) analysis, the dashes serve an important dramaturgical function within Crimp’s text: because we cannot determine how many voices speak in any given scene (this is

only limited by the number of dashes themselves) and in what order, we must consider each scenario in any possible number of iterations. As such, meaning-making is potentially limitless and dependent on audience, performance and text. The same is true of Brunner's text.

The question of subjectivity raised in the opening directions of *beinen* permeates Brunner's play. If the entire text is the expression of a nameless, individual female subject, then the structure is representative of an individual whose selfhood is inherently fractured. In turn this relates to an extra-theatrical world that is also in a state of disintegration. Interestingly, as in Bärffuss' text (see below), subjectivity and autonomy are connected in Brunner's to speech and the voice. In the first scene, the voice relates a return to consciousness and the perception that the breath is being controlled from outside of the body (Brunner 2012, p. 5). As in *Neurosen*, however, the awakening of the individual from an induced medical state is used as a representation of psychosomatic awakening. Here, selfhood is tied to the body and its movement, over which the voice has no control. Likewise, the fact that the breath is controlled externally has an impact on the production of speech: "[M]ein Atmen ist nicht mir eigen meine Stimme nicht ich habe keine Stimmbänder [: : :] wo sind meine Stimmbänder ich denke laut" ("My breath is not my own nor my voice I have no vocal cords [: : :] where are my vocal cords I think aloud"; Brunner 2012, p. 5). Given the deliberately fractured nature of the subject throughout this play and the fact that this scene opens it, it is possible to read the entire text as a search for the voice and the self.

The linking of control over the voice and the body that is raised here continues throughout the text as Brunner explores the issue of autonomy further in relation to the subject of the play. This comes to the fore in one of the fairy-tale episodes that punctuate the text, "Märchen von den beinen zu kurz" ("The fairy tale of little short legs"; Brunner 2012, p. 13). Like all of the fairy-tale episodes in the text, this repeats and comments upon the material of the preceding scene, in this by case by layering a discussion of female autonomy and control explicitly over the preceding story of birth and unrealized domestic bliss. At the same time, the fairy-tales add a layer of commentary that is simultaneously external and internal to the female subject: though they are still a manifestation of her supposed internal world, the fairy tales function in a pseudo-intertextual way by intimating a literary world that exists beyond the play. In this fairy-tale, a king marries a woman who was previously a witch. Though she initially occupies a position that symbolizes a subversive female threat to the male order, we are told: "[Die Königin] war vor [dem König] auf die Knie gefallen, um zu beten und das wars gewesen mit der Autonomie" ("the queen fell to her knees before the king and prayed, and that was that for autonomy"). Her position denigrates further, however, when she is unable to fulfil her biological function of providing an heir. When she eventually succeeds in doing so after a series of miscarriages and stillbirths, she has a daughter. This is anathema to the king, as seen in the description of the birth itself. Not only is the mother's womb described here in negative terms as the "faulige Gedärmen der Mutter" ("foul maternal entrails"), but the audacity of the child being female and the threat she poses to the patriarchal order is highlighted by the description of her as a "Revolutzerin", a pejorative term for individuals who espouse change vociferously but who do little to achieve change in reality. Though the king comes to appreciate his daughter (though only because of her beauty), he deals with this apparent threat by placing her upon "einen speziell unsichtbaren Thron—von Alchemisten konzipiert" ("a specially-made, invisible throne—designed by alchemists"). Not only is the daughter trapped in this position (moving backwards or forwards would cause her to fall "in die Tiefe" ("into the abyss")), but its invisibility means that she cannot conceive easily of the structures that are holding her in place. This image takes on greater importance in light of the sexual abuse that the daughter experiences at the hands of her father. Like the princess in the fairytale, not only is she idolized for her beauty, but social structures and her lack of knowledge (she is an infant when the abuse begins) mean that she is trapped in her situation; her mother refuses to act upon her suspicions out of fear of what society would say about her as an individual (Brunner 2012, p. 24).

Throughout Brunner's text we encounter the fragmentary inner world of a "collapsed" singular female subject. As outlined above, however, Bärffuss' text is an example of dramatic drama and as such

the role of character differs from Brunner's play, insofar as some semblance of realistic characterization is maintained whilst interrogating this simultaneously. Indeed, whilst the characters of the play are more recognizably dramatic, they never quite gain a rounded psychology and therefore continue to represent an extra-theatrical reality that is itself disintegrating. Bärffuss' list of characters is best understood as a constellation of archetypes who oscillate around the protagonist Dora. Indeed, with the major exception of the *feine Herr*, they are all determined according to their relationship to her (Dora's mother, Dora's father etc.). In one sense, this refusal to name his characters draws to mind the archetypal characters typical of Expressionist drama.⁴ In doing so, however, Bärffuss emphasizes that all dramatic action is focused in and through Dora. At the same time, Dora is an uncanny figure who stands simultaneously inside and, because of her medical history, outside of the world of the text. Indeed, as her mother states, Dora occupies a position that is "ein Haarbrett nur neben unserer Welt, und von ihr doch unüberwindlich getrennt" ("within a hair's breadth of our world, and yet irreparably separated from it"; Bärffuss 2005, p. 74). It is precisely this aspect of Dora's character that means she functions as a destabilizing force at the centre of the relational constellations that surround her.

The non-conformist aspect of Dora's character relates to the topic of speech in the play. At the start of the text, we learn that Dora's communication skills are limited (Bärffuss 2005, p. 74). Her mother's insistence that she be taken on her medication, however, acts as a trigger for her development as a character: she not only begins to assert her own voice, but her increasing interactions with other characters pushes the dramatic arc of the play forward. At the same time, Dora offers insights into her own mind and reveals aspects of her personality that were previously hidden. For example, when her mother has just read her the usual bedtime story, Dora responds: "Ich mag keine Märchen. Hab sie noch nie gemocht" ("I don't like fairy tales. Never have"; Bärffuss 2005, p. 79). This is the first time that Dora uses the first-person pronoun in the text. That she begins to assert her agency in this way is pivotal for her subjecthood as perceived by those around her. Indeed, in an early discussion with the doctor, Dora's mother states: "Es war die richtige Entscheidung. Sie ist wieder ein Mensch" ("It was the right decision. She's a person again"; Bärffuss 2005, p. 82). These instances of Dora speaking her own mind are balanced in the play, however, by those when she mirrors the speech of the other characters. This arises from the fact that she functions primarily as a projection surface in relation to other characters: her passivity and state of naivety mean that she is spoken at and for by those around her. As her development progresses, however, it becomes clear that she has absorbed this information when she begins to reproduce it in her own speech. This has a disturbing effect on the text as it stalls and frustrates the flow of dialogue and breaks down the patterns of communication that mark exchanges between other characters in the play. What is more, it has a devastating effect on Dora herself: in reflecting back what she has taken from the world around her without a filter, Dora lays bare the repressed attitudes of society and the repercussions for her on a personal level are grave.

A telling example of this occurs when Dora falls pregnant. Her mother asks why she has stopped taking her birth control, to which Dora replies: "Diese Ärzte mit ihren Medikamenten. Jetzt machen wir Schluß damit. Keine Pillen mehr, nie wieder" ("These doctors and their medicines. We're putting a stop to it now. No more pills, never again"; Bärffuss 2005, p. 102). Though her mother dismisses this response out of hand and implies that her daughter has again failed to read the situation, this is in fact an almost verbatim echo of the mother at the start of the play: "Ach, Kind, ich bin so glücklich. Diese Ärzte mit ihren Medikamenten. Jetzt machen wir Schluß damit. Keine Pillen mehr, nie wieder. Versprochen" ("Child, I'm so happy. These doctors and their medicines. We're putting a stop to it now. No more pills, never again. I promise"; Bärffuss 2005, p. 79). The repercussions for Dora include an unwitting abortion. At other points in the play, however, the mother does notice that Dora is repeating words and phrases that she has learnt from others. In scene seventeen, for example, the mother

⁴ In other plays by Bärffuss, the connection to Expressionist and Modernist drama is even more apparent. This is most notable in *Der Bus* (2005), which adopts the form of a *Stationendrama* (a play in which a series of episodes ('Stationen') replace continuously developing action) to present a modern-day mystery play.

challenges her repeated use of the term “okay” (Bärfuss 2005, p. 103), a tick she has developed from the *feine Herr*. There is therefore a semi-recognition that Dora’s speech (and thereby her perception of and position in the world) is being shaped by those around her. However, the mother lacks the self-reflexivity to understand that it is her words, actions and viewpoints that are shaping her daughter.

4. Conclusions

As I have outlined, recent German play-writing can be understood in terms of dramatic and postdramatic drama. On the one hand, Hans-Thies Lehmann and Gerda Poschmann posit an end to the dramatic paradigm in theatre that decentres the position of the dramatic text within the stage event. In those theatre texts that adopt postdramatic practices, this reflects postmodern understandings of the world and a fractured sense of reality. On the other hand, Birgit Haas postulates that a further shift in the conceptualization of reality by the younger generation of writers since 1990 has led to a return of dramatic tendencies to play-texts that nevertheless acknowledge our postmodern condition. It is clear in my examination of Bärfuss’ *Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern* and Katja Brunner’s *von den beinen zu kurz* that contemporary playwrights engage with this dual tradition in their work. In spite of their marked differences in form and characterization, both texts revolve around an exploited female figure who has been let down repeatedly by society. In each, this female figure disturbs social relations by laying bare the presumptions and potential hypocrisies that underline the bourgeois moral framework. Where the texts differ is in how this relates to the audience. The postdramatic structure of Brunner’s text means that moral suppositions are thrown against the audience, who must decipher the implications of the text in their attempt to fix meaning to the multifarious voices that are presented to them. Brunner’s play responds to a postmodern, extra-theatrical reality that is malleable and *di* use. Likewise, the individual viewing subject’s own disintegration of selfhood is reflected on the stage. It is precisely this, however, that means Brunner’s text stands opposite to Bärfuss’. As has been demonstrated, in *Neurosen* we encounter a world that relates to our own mimetically, and in which the characters interact as partially developed and developing psychological individuals. The dramatic nature of Bärfuss’ text turns inwards and moral repercussions are directed at the characters who surround Dora, even if this is not resolved in the course of the play itself. As such, the spectator encounters individuals in whom they might recognize traits of their own self and reality as it exists outside of the text.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Aristotle. 2013. *Poetics*. Translated by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bärfuss, Lukas. 2005. *Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern*. In Lukas Bärfuss. *Meienbergs Tod—Die Sexuellen Neurosen Unserer Eltern—Der Bus*. Stücke. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, pp. 71–127.
- Barnett, David. 2006. Playwriting in Contemporary German Theatre: Representation and its discontents, 1960–2006. In *A History of German Theatre*. Edited by Simon Williams and Maik Hamburger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 305–31.
- Barnett, David. 2008. When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts. *NTQ: New Theatre Quarterly* 24: 14–23. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Shelia Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Boehm, Philip. 2010. Lukas Bärfuss, *The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents*. *Translation Review* 79: 73–76. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Boyle, Michael Shane, Matt Cornish, and Brandon Woolf. 2019. Introduction: Form and Postdramatic Theatre. In *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*. Edited by Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Brandon Woolf. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 1–19.
- Brauneck, Manfred, and Gérard Schneilin. 1992. *Theaterlexikon: Begriffe und Epochen, Bühnen und Ensembles*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag.
- Brunner, Katja. 2012. *Von den Beinen zu kurz*. Berlin: Henschel Schauspiel Theaterverlag.

- Carlson, Marvin. 2015. Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença* 5: 577–95. [CrossRef]
- Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung. 2019. Lukas Bärfuss erhält den Georg-Büchner Preis 2019. Available online: <https://www.deutscheakademie.de/de/akademie/presse/2019-07-09/lukas-baerfuss-erhaelt-den-georg-buechner-preis-2019> (accessed on 27 September 2019).
- Englhart, Andreas. 2013. *Das Theater der Gegenwart*. München: Verlag C. H. Beck.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2001. Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. Edited by James Strachey. London: Vintage, pp. 3–124. First published 1905.
- Fuchs, Elinor. 1996. *The Death of Character: Perspectives of Theater after Modernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Haas, Birgit. 2007. *Plädoyer für ein dramatisches Drama*. Wien: Passagen Verlag.
- Haas, Birgit. 2008. The Return of Dramatic Drama in Germany after 1989. In *Theatre in the Berlin Republic. German Drama since Unification*. Edited by Denise Varney. Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 81–113.
- Jürs-Munby, Karen. 2006. Introduction. In *Hans-Thies Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1–15.
- Jürs-Munby, Karen, Jerome Carroll, and Steve Giles. 2013. Introduction. *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*. In *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political. International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance*. Edited by Karen Jürs-Munby and Jerome Carroll. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 1–30.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 1999. *Postdramatisches Theater*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2016. *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pavis, Patrice. 1998. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Poschmann, Gerda. 1997. *Der Nicht Mehr Dramatische Theatertext. Aktuelle Bühnenstücke und ihre Dramaturgische Analyse*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Szondi, Peter. 1963. *Theorie des modernen Dramas. 1880–1950*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Virani, Špehar. 2014. Zur Repoetisierung der deutschsprachigen Dramatik am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts. *Virani, Špehar* 54: 11–23. [CrossRef]