

Jones's use of cultural theory is insightful, and serves to expose and undercut "normalized" concepts about Mormons that continue to pervade in American culture.

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The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy. By Martin Puchner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; pp. ix + 254. \$29.95 cloth.

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In the study of theatre history, Plato has the dubious distinction of being the first and preeminent figure in a long line of antitheatrical authors. Yet this is odd, if you stop and think about it, since Plato himself wrote dialogues—that is, plays—with characters, settings, ideas, and actions. Of course, the reason for his ill-fated status as the father of antitheatrical prejudice is Socrates' condemnation of the theatre and the poets who wrote for it in Plato's most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, but few have noted that this pronouncement is made by a character speaking to other characters in a sort of play.

In his new book, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy*, Martin Puchner attempts—with great success—to reverse this misconception. Puchner sees Plato as himself a great playwright who sought not to abolish the theatre but to reform it, and as the progenitor of an important form of theatre and philosophy Puchner calls dramatic Platonism.

The book is divided into five chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1, "The Poetics of the Platonic Dialogue," is, as the title announces, a sort of *Poetics* of Plato to stand alongside the *Poetics* of Aristotle. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book, and not only sets up the foundation of Puchner's argument, but also provides an enormous service by reframing Plato and overturning a prejudice that was always a gross oversimplification. Plato's problem was not with theatre as such, but with Athenian popular theatre as it was then structured. Plato's attack on the theatre was rooted in the same impulse, and was part of the same project, that sought to reform the entire foundation of Athenian politics and education. It should never be forgotten that Plato was an antiestablishment figure whose great mentor was murdered at the hands of the state. Plato was in competition with establishment forms of theatre, and attempted to create a new form of dramaturgy: he wrote in prose instead of verse; he eliminated the chorus; he mixed genres; and his plots were open-ended, allowing his small audiences or readers to make up their own minds about the significance of what they saw or read.

Puchner uses as examples Plato's most tragic and most comic plays, the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*. In the *Phaedo* we see Socrates discoursing on the immortality of the soul and its imprisonment within the body, even as he awaits his own imminent death in his Athenian prison cell. This is Socrates the great philosopher speaking, so clearly he is not *simply* trying to console himself as he faces his fast-approaching demise, but his situation automatically influences how we, as

readers or audience members, experience the scene. It also affects how other characters experience it, and it inevitably influences the course of their discussion—for naturally it would be in very poor taste to argue against the immortality of the soul while your friend awaits his death.

A similar situation obtains in the *Symposium*, where at the height of Socrates' recital of Diotima's discourse on the higher stages of love, a drunken Alcibiades bursts into the scene full of amorous desire. Plato consistently juxtaposes ideas against bodies in the material world; in the same way, he upsets traditional genre expectations. The *Symposium* is a comic dialogue, but we never forget the tragic fate of Socrates, who is himself not a typical tragic hero: he is ugly, disheveled, barefoot, middle-class, and he speaks in prose. Likewise in the *Phaedo* we witness Socrates face death with good humor, gently reprimanding his auditors for giving way to unseemly tragic emotions.

In Chapter 2, "A Brief History of the Socrates Play," Puchner traces the long and varied history of the Socrates play, which as his appendix illustrates has extended from Lucien's *Dialogues of the Dead* in CE 167 to Steve Hatzai's *The Last Days of Socrates* in 2008. But most of these plays were written under the formidable influence of Aristotle's *Poetics* and have little in common with the work of the inventor of dramatic Platonism. Chapter 3, "The Drama of Ideas," surveys the explosive creativity of the non-Aristotelian drama that arose in the twentieth century, and suggests that Plato's influence on modern drama is prodigious. Puchner examines the plays and dialogues of Strindberg, Kaiser, Wilde, Shaw, Pirandello, Brecht, and Stoppard that are most related to the dramatic Platonism he sets out in his first chapter.

The last two chapters examine what "might be called, with some hesitation, the 'dramatic turn' or 'theatrical turn' of philosophy" (122). Puchner states that his hesitancy stems from the continued prejudice toward theatre in the field of philosophy. Nonetheless, he sees works such as Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as examples of displaced Socratic dialogue. Both philosophers were fascinated with the theatre, although—like Plato—they were also deeply ambivalent about it; both employed the dramaturgical techniques of character, interaction, and setting in their philosophical writings. Puchner also discusses twentieth century philosophers who not only used dramaturgical techniques in their philosophical works but also wrote plays as well, such as Sartre, Camus, Badiou, and Iris Murdoch.

The Drama of Ideas is an important corrective to some of the stale clichés that have gathered around Plato. Besides placing him at the head of a long line of dramatic Platonists, Puchner contextualizes Plato historically, noting that his idealistic philosophy of Forms was strategically constructed as a much-needed antidote to the linguistic, moral, and epistemological relativism of the Sophists, a relativism that had come to serve power in dangerous ways. As such, Puchner concludes that it is time to "revive Plato—not the discredited Plato of idealism, but a different one" (198). Perhaps then we can escape some of the traps that 130 years of anti-Platonist thought has set for us.

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