Es lebe die Revolution?1 *Danton’s Tod* on Stage in the Twenty-First Century

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**Abstract**

In Act ii, Scene 2 of *Danton’s Tod* the Zweiter Herr urges his companion: ‘Aber gehn Sie ins Theater, ich rat es Ihnen!’2 I take this as my starting point for this chapter. One hundred and eighty years after his death, Büchner lives on – vibrantly, politically, chaotically, joyfully and despondently – because of the theatre. It is his plays in production which allow us to respond with a contemporary sensibility to Büchner’s works, and for them, also, to work on us, as individuals and as members of society, in ways that the text alone on the page cannot do. In this context *Danton’s Tod* has, since its first production in 1902, occupied a special role in the German-speaking theatre, particularly in relation to the ways in which contemporary revolution and other political action are perceived and portrayed. In the following chapter I will focus on two recent productions of the play and what they tell us about Büchner and revolution today.

For more than two hundred years there has been a strong connection between the theatre and the state in Germany. In 1784 Schiller even proposed that one would follow from the other, pronouncing: ‘[w]enn wir es erlebten, eine Nationalbühne zu haben, so würden wir auch eine Nation.’3 The stage, then, has long been a place where issues of national interest could be presented and debated. Indeed, some have argued that the stage became perhaps the *only* arena in Germany where political resistance and revolution could take place. As I have detailed elsewhere, *Danton’s Tod*, with its ambivalent revolutionary theme, offers particularly rich possibilities for German theatre-makers.4 But can we still say ‘es lebe die Revolution’? While the earlier production history

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1 ‘Long live the Revolution’. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.
2 *MA*, p. 95, *TMW*, p. 38: ‘But go to the theatre – take my advice’.
3 Friedrich Schiller, *Werke*, Nationalausgabe, 43 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1943–2006), vol. 20, p. 99. ‘If we could have a national theatre, then we would also have a nation.’
of *Danton’s Tod* might be considered as one in which theatre and ‘the political’ went hand in hand, it is arguable that both theatre and politics have changed irrevocably in a post-1989 world.

In her book, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Claire Bishop traces the rise, from the 1990s, of what she describes as ‘an artistic orientation to the social’ and in ‘participatory art’. Characteristic of this has been a ‘shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between art object, the artist and the audience’. That is, rather than just being spectators, audience members have become co-producers or participants. They have become, then – at least in this genre of performance – the ‘emancipated spectators’ that Jacques Rancière desires, who are not simply recipients of the master’s (the director’s) transmission. Bishop further notes that this ‘social turn’ ‘can be contextualized by two previous historical moments, both synonymous with political upheaval and movements for social change: the historic avant-garde in Europe circa 1917, and the so-called “neo” avant-garde leading to 1968’. She posits that the fall of Communism in 1989 was ‘the third point of transformation’ and that ‘triangulated, these three dates form a narrative of the triumph, heroic last stand and collapse of a collectivist vision of society.’ Elsewhere, she remarks that it is ‘tempting to date the rise in visibility of these [participatory art] practices to the early 1990s, when the fall of Communism deprived the Left of the last vestiges of the revolution that had once linked political and aesthetic radicalism’.

Bishop is writing about community-based, collaborative performance and other art practices, and these might seem to be very distant from the kinds of theatres and artists that regularly produce Büchner’s canonical play (though they do intersect with the strategies of postdramatic theatre, which I will discuss further below). And yet the two strands of her argument – the connection between aesthetic and political circumstances in the twentieth century, and a resulting reconfiguration of the relationship to the spectator – can also be mapped onto the production history of Büchner’s play. Doing so allows us to see a pattern of an evolution of audience behaviour against the wider political/