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Performing Arts

Three Plays: The Political Theater of Howard Zinn
Howard Zinn
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The late Howard Zinn was one of the few public intellectuals of our time. His fame is largely owed to his historical analysis and political theory. But Zinn was also a playwright. The latest release from Zinn's longtime publisher offers a stimulating dramatization of ideas.

It should not be said that Zinn's drama makes his scholarship more accessible. It's already accessible. *A People's History of the United States*—a lucid and resolved work of prose that has been found in the hands of more than one million readers—proves Zinn's wide appeal, no matter his genre. What can be said is that Zinn's plays are as entertaining as they are erudite.

The first two plays in this book take on political figures Emma Goldman, a feminist-anarchist, and Karl Marx. The third and final piece, *Daughter of Venus*, strays farther from the "solidity of historical fact" than the others; it is a family drama that explores the emotional circumstances of the activist life. These three plays are fused by four prefatory chapters that discuss Zinn's interest in anarchism and provide snippets of Zinn's life. The preface to *Marx in Soho*, for instance, describes Zinn's own encounter with the *Communist Manifesto* at the age of seventeen. (See *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* for a more developed Zinn biography.)

The prefatory chapters also point out the connections between the plays, revealing the cohesiveness of this anthology. One play is an outgrowth of another. An argument in *Emma* on the relative merits of Mikhail Bakunin's and Marx's ideas is recalled in *Marx in Soho* when Zinn brings Bakunin into Marx's home. Interestingly, there is no record of such a visit between Bakunin and Marx.

In a more blatant fictionalization, Zinn invents Marx's reincarnation: Marx appears in Soho in the present day to reminisce about his life in the nineteenth century. For Zinn, drama opens up the possibility of alternative histories. And Zinn's expertise makes him well-equipped to hypothesize.

Zinn is out to fill knowledge gaps. He looks for what is missing from typical analyses

and finds a different angle: “I wanted to show Marx as few people knew him,” Zinn writes, “as a family man, struggling to support his wife and children.” Zinn depicts radical figures at their most human—poking fun at themselves and deliberating. The historical facts are folded into the clay Zinn uses to sculpt these dimensional, forceful protagonists. Ovation deserved.