

One of Germany's leading directors and his thought-provoking theatre: Falk Richter

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"I'm 43 now, and the word AWAKENING still induces a strange form of discomfiture. I still live like a teenager and am totally into parties [...]". While reading these lines from his own play *Small Town Boy*, Falk Richter starts to smile. It seems as if he would be talking about himself. Indeed he projects an impression of being still a teenager. Actually, Richter is 47. When I look at him on that balmy day in the winter of 2015 at Vienna's Schauspielhaus, he is wearing casual sports clothing, reading from his anthology *SMALL TOWN BOY and other plays* which has just appeared in the series Dialog of the Berlin renowned publishing house Theater der Zeit.

Falk Richter is considered one of the most important authors and directors of his generation. He studied at the University of Hamburg under the direction of Jürgen Flimm, Manfred Brauneck, Christof Nel, Jutta Hoffmann and Peter Sellars. Since 1996 he has been a freelance author, translator and director. For several years he has worked with Schauspielhaus Zürich, the Berlin Schaubühne, the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus and the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin.

Richter's works focus on the impact of neo-liberal economics on the lifestyle of our Western societies, with people's lives having been turned into tormented relationships. Reality loss in the age of globalization and the tragic deformation of human identity through media are recurring themes that he treats in an analytical manner. Since *God is a DJ* (Staatstheater Mainz, 1999) Richter shows a preoccupation with video surveillance and elements of individualism. "There are surveillance cameras that feed each of their movements directly to the internet", writes the author in his first successful piece named after the song of the British pop group Faithless.

Falk Richter and Anouk van Dijk

In the same year he starts a collaboration with Dutch choreographer Anouk van Dijk. Their first joint work *Nothing Hurts* (Kampnagel Hamburg, 1999) – an evening about injury, vulnerability and the numbness of a youth spent in the 90's – is invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen festival in 2000. Richter turns again and again to the subject of human disorientation in the global world. In *TRUST* (Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, 2009), van Dijk and Richter explore the fragile human condition against the background of the current

world crisis. They present an image of human beings, whose isolation has greatly intensified over the years, despite of their longing for love. "The question of identity and belonging is becoming more and more important in our Western global societies, where traditional forms of relationships and national identities are dissolving", says Richter in an interview on *Complexity of Belonging*, his first piece written in a foreign language (Melbourne Festival, Southbank Theatre Melbourne, 2014) – another daring and darkly humorous work produced together with van Dijk.

In parallel with the staging of his own plays, the artist surprises with productions of classical drama. Just to give some examples: Chekhov's *The Seagull* (Salzburger Festspiele, 2004), Richard Strauss' *Electra* (Frankfurt Opera, 2004), Oscar Wilde's *Bunbury* (Vienna Academy Theatre, 2005), Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* (Vienna Burgtheater, 2007) and *The Cherry Orchard* (Berlin Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, 2008). All testify of his adaptability and creativity. No wonder some came to consider Richter to be the most prolific director of our time.

Van Dijk's own Countertechnique system – in which dancers always keep their alignment and balance by continually giving counterdirections to each movement – has largely influenced Richter's directing style. Over the past decades he has developed a specific way of working. His productions turn to hybrids made of dance sequences, monologues, concise movements and melancholy tableaux. In her laudatio in 2013 on the occasion of the awarding to Falk Richter of the Friedrich Luft price for best mise-en-scène, German author Lucy Fricke described *For the Disconnected Child* (a co-production of Berlin Schaubühne and Staatsoper unter den Linden) as follows: "The way overstrain and isolation are visible is unique, starting from the stage design to the last movement of the dancers. We experience loneliness, sadness and despair that turns to rage, to hysteria and exhaustion; monologues which continuously force themselves up; the shouting against the other, against oneself and one's own fear. [...] Falk Richter has created a merciless image of our society and an ultra-modern genre picture".

Provocative works are causing lawsuits

Since 2013 Richter works together also with the Israeli choreographer Nir de Volff, relating together drama, dance and music. *Never Forever* (Berlin Schaubühne, 2014) and *Small Town Boy* (Maxim Gorki Theatre, 2014) are two of the ensuing productions. In the latter – whose name takes reference to the song of British pop group Bronski Beat – Falk Richter describes a young man's escape from a narrow-minded world of repression and lack of recognition to a big city. "My work questions what lies behind our social stereotypes, as

they still rule over people with an immigrant background, over homosexuals, also over women who break out of the standard norms", says the director in an interview with *Badische Zeitung*. In his *mise-en-scène*, photos of soprano Anna Netrebko and politicians Angela Merkel, Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin, are exhibited at the stage ramp, while an actor insults the Russian leader because of his homophobic policies. Obscene words are used, claiming Netrebko and the German Chancellor would favour the mistreatment of Russian gays. No wonder this provocative production caused heated discussions.

This is nothing compared to the conflict escalation induced by *FEAR* (Berlin Schaubühne, October 2015) which led to lawsuits for its polemic against the right-wing populism of AfD (Alternative for Germany) and Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West). In the two-hour collage of drama, dance, music, sound, pictures and video projections, faces withdrawn from reality are displayed as figments of zombies or living dead, amongst others Marie Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Anders Breivik and the two applicants: Hedwig von Beverfoerde, the coordinator of the Action Coalition "demo for all" and Beatrix von Storch, deputy chairman of the AfD. Shortly after the première the Schaubühne received several calls as a form of death threats and letters, calling for the removal of the piece from the theatre repertoire. It took more than two months before the Schaubühne won the trials. "We couldn't tolerate this attack on the freedom of art", said its artistic director, Thomas Ostermeier, in an interview with the weekly newspaper *Die ZEIT*. As of January 2016, the faces of von Beverfoerde and von Storch may be shown again.

Continuing his preoccupation for our contemporary society and the dangerous right-wing populism taking hold of Europe, after *FEAR*, Falk Richter has produced *Je suis Fassbinder* at the Théâtre National de Strasbourg, where he has been working as associated artist since 2015 (with Stanislas Nordey, the theatre manager playing Fassbinder's role). At present, the director is teaming up once more with choreographer Nir de Wolff and his dance company TOTAL BRUTAL for *Vatican City*, due to première in May 2016 at the Wiener Festwochen festival. The duo are creating "an experimental procedure that is based on improvisation and remains a steady work in progress, focusing on the actors' personalities, histories and aspirations and their thoughts on religion, culture and identity". It seems as if another provocative Richter production is on its way towards its birth.