

Berliner Theatertreffen: Mirroring an Unusual Year

Irina Wolf

For the second year in a row, the pandemic led to the Berliner Theatertreffen taking place online. The festival, now at its 58th edition, scheduled an extensive program over twelve days (from May 13 to 24). The Stückemarkt (Market of Plays) presented scenic readings and performances of six new authors from Great Britain, Canada and the USA. In addition, there were discussions and the authors held also online several workshops with appealing titles such as "Drama is Conflict: What Does It Mean, and How Can We Fuck It Up?" or "A Woman Walks into a Bar: Ouch".

For the third time in a row, the Theatertreffen focused on gender equality and abuse of power in the theatre scene. Additionally, the discussion series "What are we waiting for?", initiated with the Performing Arts Festival Berlin, dealt with the situation in the performing arts during and after the pandemic. Finally, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Berliner Festspiele, the Theatertreffen devoted a focus to the famous company The Living Theatre based in New York.

Theatre in the Digital Sphere

Among the festival's novelties of this year was the showcase "Stages Unboxed". Four digital theatre formats were conceived in cooperation with the Academy for Theater and Digitality and Digital Dramaturgy. *UNDER PRESSURE* proved to be an interactive game show in which the performers of the Henrike Iglesias group competed against each other, with the audience deciding via app who is the best. The performance *The HOUSE – ReInventing the Real* was an interactive guided tour. The team of "minus.eins" invited us firstly in the city centre of Dortmund where we strolled from one "space" to the other, assisted a music show and all kind of weird events. And then there was the rumour that someone has been building an exact replica of the cathedral of Notre Dame on stage, in the midst of which we finally arrived thanks to our guides.

The company Teatro en Red presented a Zoom-conference which proved to be a documentary theatre show on the topic of migration. *Las Travesias (The Crossings)* is based on the lives of five performers from Venezuela who at present live in various South American and European cities. The fourth format belonged to Arne Vogelgesang and Marina Dessau (aka the group "internil"). They showed a live reenactment of a video recording that Vogelgesang created several years ago. *It is too late* questions the efficacy of theatre in the face of the climate catastrophe. As far as the theatre experience is

concerned, there is still noticeable room for improvement. But such projects are only at the beginning. The courage for innovation lets us overlook some weaknesses.

Women quota and "active stage sets"

As always, ten "remarkable productions" selected by an independent jury of critics formed the core of the festival. These provided a tableau of the German-speaking theatre landscape, showing its resilience and diversity in content and form. The selection offered a wide diversity, the performances ranging from an independent scene debut production in which only two performers attempt a utopia of unconditional devotion and acceptance (*Scores That Shaped Our Friendship*) to the prominent world premiere of Rainald Goetz's *Realm of Death* at the Hamburger Schauspielhaus, in which director Karin Beier recalls the cynicism and moral depravity of the US government after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Big ensemble events benefitted of set designs which played an active part in the staging. Judith Oswald built a giant, Corona-compatible case for Anne Lenk's *Maria Stuart* production at the Deutsches Theater Berlin. Friedrich Schiller's characters, Maria and Elisabeth, are dressed in modern clothes, but flee behind masks, making their male entourage look ridiculous. On the other hand, the actors in Stefan Bachmann's *Count Öderland* from Theater Basel stumble and fall through Olaf Altmann's giant funnel. The characters of Max Frisch's drama seem to be arising from silent movies or from the legacy of Grand Guignol. All of them have lost their hold in society's middle class, foremost public prosecutor Martin. He turns out to be the mythical "Count Öderland with an axe in his hand". But alas, at the end, the leader of an illustrious liberation movement has to realize that his struggle only qualifies him even better for the system which he wanted to escape from. This enigmatic parable from the 1950s becomes a timeless nightmare of civilization.

For the second time, the quota for women directors that the Theatertreffen has been stipulating since 2020 has been met with ease: six females to four males. There was the rediscovery of Jewish author Anna Gmeyner. Her witty piece *Automatic Buffet*, directed by Barbara Frey at the Burgtheater Vienna, focuses on surprisingly tough female figures (Hystrio 1-2021). Such characters can also be found in *NAME HER. A Search for Women+* by young director Marie Schleef (a cooperation between Ballhaus Ost, Münchner Kammerspiele and Kosmos Theater Vienna). The performance features a sole, very versatile actress (Anne Tismer) who grooves randomly through all cultures. In a four times ninety minute show she brings to light unjustly forgotten feminine astrophysicists,

architects and painters, but also a murderess and a jerk who gave her daughter a page long name.

Corona's influence

Many of the 285 performances were watched by the jury only as recordings. Smaller theatres and cities benefited less from this possibility. Thus, the selection reflects this unusual year in which productions brought into focus existential uncertainties rather than major political issues. Formally, only "Scores" and "Öderland" were created before Corona and the distancing rules that have been in effect since then. *Scores That Shaped Our Friendship* is a unique touching experience with Polish queer dancer Pawel Dudus enhancing the movements of actress Lucy Wilke, who was born with spinal muscular atrophy. He assists her with much tenderness. On the other hand, Lucy also supports Pawel from her wheelchair, for example when he is dancing oversexed in a butterfly string body. Another small cast production was Leonie Böhm's *Medea*. The modern monologue of Maja Beckmann takes place in a small-sized apartment shared with musician Johannes Rieder.

But the best piece of our times is Gob Squad's *Show Me A Good Time*. The well-known group of artists from UK and Germany search for the lost community while trying to structure one for the viewers. During the twelve (!) hour show, a performer is always in the empty theatre hall of HAU Berlin, keeping in touch with the others. They appear in different places of the city: in the Haus der Berliner Festspiele, on the streets, in their cars or in their apartments. But they remain at all times interconnected via technology, thus keeping always in touch on screen with each other and with the viewers. "Is this the future of touch?", ask Sharon Smith and Bastian Trost, their hands outstretched to the virtual image of their counterpart. This attempt to build bridges in real time is often mucked around in all too private or esoteric moments, but does not leave out big themes like loneliness, dying, social inequality and the theatre.

The deserted auditorium also comes into view in Sebastian Hartmann's livestream production of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* which focuses on the apocalyptic mood in a lung sanatorium. The existential philosophical questions about space, time, body and war are optimally portrayed by actors dressed in flabby fat suits, lots of artificial snow, ambitious camera perspective changes and cross-fades. Last but not least, Christopher Rüping's *It's Only the End of the World* staging of Jean-Luc Lagarce's play featured the empty hall as well. Who is the biggest asshole in the family in the province to which the

gay son is returning to bid farewell after twenty years of total silence? This question remains unanswered. As the chameleon among German-speaking directors, Rüping confronts us with everyday life and with a lot of feelings of pride and prejudice. Together with the great ensemble of the Schauspielhaus Zürich, the director has found a playful, delicate theatrical form that addresses urgent social issues, the divide between urban and rural regions, homophobia and the question of what exactly we owe to our family.