

A Conversation with Azadeh Sharifi by Ruba Totah and Jonas Tinius

Ruba: How do you describe contemporary European theatre from the perspective of inclusion, diversity, and openness? What are the achievements and failures when discussed from perspective of theatre?

Azadeh: I would like to start from a German perspective and then move on to contemporary European theatre. In Germany, there is the idea that theatre – and all other art institutions – is accessible to everyone. The old cultural policy credo “Kultur für alle” (culture for everyone) goes back to the 1980s, and Hilmar Hoffmann suggests that it’s a matter of education and mediation so that different social groups and social classes can enjoy the programme of these institutions. And since most of the German institutions are funded by state and city governments and the funding comes from taxes, all people in Germany fund the state and city theatres, and all should have access. The relatively cheap tickets, at least compared to other European countries, underline this claim that no structural barriers could exclude people. That is far from reality. These institutions are elitist, bourgeois, and exclusive. German theatre has a long history of being embedded in an idea of German nationhood and ethnic and national unity, but also in a feudalistic system where the artistic leader has unlimited power. White cis-men mostly lead German theatres; the programmes and repertoire are still oriented towards a white German middle-class audience with plays that are mostly written by men and directed by men with mostly white cismen as the leading characters. To sum it up, the German theatre is neither diverse nor has any big changes for becoming so in the near future. And I would think the same goes for many other Western European countries.

I would even go further and say that when we, as a society, talk about diversity, it is to cover up the racist and colonial structures that are hidden underneath. Because diversity, at least within neoliberal contexts, always suggests that there is a norm and a core of society and the rest, in terms of class, gender, race, sexuality and ability, are deviations from this norm. And I don’t want to undo the amazing work, the fight and the struggle of BIPOCs and other marginalised groups. However, I am becoming

more and more hesitant to use this term (diversity) and rather emphasise the white colonial structure of the institution.

German society and its cultural institutions have changed dramatically, at least if we look into how German society looked like after WWII. Still, this moment in time has always been exceptional due to the Holocaust. Since at least 1955, German society has changed through migrant labour workers, refugees (and here I am not talking about the wave of people in the past ten years, but at least the past 40–50 years from Vietnam, Chile, Iran, Sri Lanka and many other regions of the planet), German minorities like Sinto/Sintize, German Jews, and Black Germans and other minoritised groups who have ‘resurfaced’ in Germany.

What has changed after over 65 years of labour agreements and many different struggles and fights of racialised groups is that the second and following generations of former migrants and non-white Germans are claiming space within German society. They are fed up with the experience of exclusion, discrimination, and the image of Germany as a solely white, Christian nation. The term postmigrant society has been coined from the postmigrant theatre movement precisely for that reason, suggesting that Germany is in a constant transformation and that migration is one of its principal driving forces. But other movements and communities (ADEFRA, ISD, Kanak Attack, etc.) also deeply impacted how change, or at least partial change, was achieved.

Ruba: This intergenerational aspect of migration is crucial, I agree, also for the concepts we develop to understand change and transformation. How would you consider the relationship between intergenerational experiences of migration, and the development of the concept of post-migrant society?

Azadeh: I think it is necessary to be very precise regarding the history of art/theatre productions by and with marginalised communities and subjects. I feel that there is a myth or a claim that “migrants” (that is, non-white descendants of former migrants) became artists through postmigrant theatre. While it is true that post-migrant theatre, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse as the theatrical space and artists like Shermin Langhoff and Tuncay Kulaoglu have opened a door for many artists who came afterwards. From 2008 onwards, when Ballhaus Naunynstrasse re-opened, postmigrant was declared a label by artistic director Shermin Langhoff; The idea was that a white German majority could and should no longer claim that racialised and minoritised communities and subjects were “voiceless”, they would lack talent, artistic quality or all in all, culture. These, by the way, are statements that have been asserted by politicians, cultural policymakers, and leaders in the artistic field over the years when they justified why racialised and minoritised communities remained underfunded, excluded or simply not even considered. Shermin Langhoff, now one of the most powerful artistic directors in the German theatre, stated that

“Who has the right to say ‘That is art’? And ‘that is not art’? How art should be or not be. Or what is part of art and what is not part of it. There is a power of labelling that is outside of our reach, a power of interpretation that is (ironically) not completely in our own hands.” (Freitext 2013:9; my own translation)

Ruba: You discussed the term “post-migrant” by proposing it as a movement pushing forward an intervention in the theatre scene. Listening to you brings me to our very own PostHeimat network of which Jonas and I are part as researchers, but which also includes artists, activists, and theatre groups who already have been working or had worked with artists from different backgrounds. Within the network, we are introducing another term, and the post-migrant term is infiltrating it in one way or another, and that is the idea of PostHeimat. The network also builds on the concept of “dehumanisation” developed by Bilgin Ayata. Across our different encounters, we have thus been discussing what is the relation between post-migrant theatre and a PostHeimat vision?

Azadeh: I think it is interesting to think through concepts that come from cultural (or even community) practice and theoretical or academic discourses. It makes sense to appropriate labels, concepts and even derogatory terms to make them your own or something else. It’s a resistance strategy that has been used over and over by marginalised groups and subjects. If Horst Seehofer can create a *Heimatministerium*, why can’t those who are excluded from the initial idea re-imagine what this idea of “Heimat” would mean? I myself am highly suspicious of the term. It is always conceptualised with some idea of nationhood, language, ethnicity, belonging in mind. And I would rather stick to a form of strategic essentialism, as with “post-migrant”, that stays suspicious and very aware of why there is a need for these identity politics. Maybe it’s because I myself am a refugee child who never belonged neither there nor here. How is this place, these people, this nation my Heimat when I should have better died on the way to claim my own story?

Jonas: The concept of “post-Heimat”, as you already alluded to with reference to Seehofer, was a director response at a particular moment in time in German society and politics. More than anything else, we were perhaps interested with the term to problematise precisely these binaries of belonging and not belonging, because as you rightly point out, too many cultural narratives are rooted, quite literally, in the idea of fixed identities.

Azadeh: I stay alert with certain terms like *Heimat*, which can be repurposed or used deliberately to include new meanings – and we have this discussion around a lot of these terms where there is controversy as to whether the violent, exclusive, or derogatory meaning and history of it can be erased, rewritten or at least given new meanings. Maybe for some communities, this might be possible, but this will never be the case for someone like me who even gets censored for speaking her mother

tongue in public. My experience, like many others, doesn't fit into the concept of *Heimat* because I would rather use a Farsi word, which would be so much closer to a feeling of belonging that I have. I am not suggesting that I am in any way fluent in Farsi, nor do I feel connected to Iran or Iranian society. Still, my experience as a person who fled Iran with her family to come to Germany with the feeling of diaspora is multifaceted when it comes to language. Farsi is my secret and beloved mother tongue for private family conversations and very intimate and nostalgic feelings. At the same time, the German language and Germany are always the spaces where I had to find myself, place myself, and alienate myself. I am drawing from my very personal experience to make a bigger point. If we, in the truest sense of the word, want to decolonise our institutions, and I speak about the decolonisation of German academia and German art institutions, because they are deeply rooted in colonial epistemology, we can't operate in the same old terms or insert new meanings to them. Audre Lorde's wise words always and still ring true: We can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. And I think, in many ways, we are still trying to fit in, to make the system work for us, while we know that the neoliberal system has already swallowed us.

We might now have more and more BIPOCs in leading artistic positions, and they are doing an amazing job, still fighting and struggling to keep the doors open for others and the next generation while simultaneously being constantly evaluated or criticised by state funding agencies, the media, and a white majority "audience". But if we don't keep a radical position, acknowledging that, for example, we want to be part of the German art institutions or academia, which means making a bigger compromise, to make decolonisation rather a metaphor than radical action, we also become the problem. I think this goes for us, BIPOCs who are "inside" the system, as well as our white allies.

Jonas: You already alluded to the entanglement of the academic and artistic production of knowledge. How do you conceptualise the relation between the two in terms of the relation between epistemological, aesthetic, and social change across the fields of theatre and academia?

Azadeh: I think, frankly, that the change in art institutions is a little bit further than the change and discussions in academia. People are still more comfortable talking about racism and colonialism when they concern places far away, for instance on the African continent or in the US, and choose to speak rather about "integration" and "inclusion" of migrants, about "diversity", which in the end still always means the Other, instead of questioning the paradigms of their fields and disciplines. But some changes are inevitable and unstoppable. And the changes are, at least in the university and art colleges, demanded by (BIPOC and white) students. I experience much gratitude from students who tell me that they have hardly had any BIPOC professors or teachers, and that they see it as a big loss. I have been teaching at many

different universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, just to name the countries that also concern the PostHeimat network. Many of the students are active and call themselves activists. They are interested in being artists, art scholars, or scholars and work actively towards dismantling the colonial, patriarchal, and neoliberal systems that keep so many of us and them out. The Black Lives Matter movement and regional, local BIPOC anti-racist work inspire them. This is true for students in Bern as well as for UdK students here in Berlin, and I hope that true change is coming.

But in general, German theatre studies are almost unaffected by the development and changes, not really able to react to the demands and also far away from discussions that are currently happening on an international level. Sruti Bala's article on decolonising theatre and performance studies has been one of the main impacts for, at least European, discourses and departments, and international institutions like PSi have pledged towards an antiracist and anticolonial practice not only to show solidarity to the Black Lives Matter Movement, but also to acknowledge and dismantle the complicities of their own positions.

The frustration is very real. Together with other German theatre scholars, who are all German, but not all based in Germany, we have started a (small) network. We are creating a platform for the conversations currently missing from German theatre studies.

Jonas: One of the biggest issues we dealt with in the PostHeimat network, but which is crucial also beyond our activities, is how institutions sustainably deal with criticality. How do you remain critical, maintain a spirit of doubt and questioning, of calling into question norms and power, without having an initially critical practice or idea become the norm and thereby hegemonical again? We see this in the dissolution of so many of the groups, who simply didn't receive funding anymore, because "migration" was struck off the list for relevant cultural funding policies, and got replaced by the next big thing: digitality, AI, which will then be replaced by another one in ten years again.

Azadeh: I am not surprised. These systems are never made to include "diversity" and implement it, like many other terms before. I am thinking of Sara Ahmed, who once said that commitments to diversity or to diversify are, in fact, "non-performatives" that do not bring about what they name. Can we trust these institutions, even if they are led by someone who comes from a marginalised community? No, we can't. We can't build our careers on diversifying these systems while we actually are complicit in exploiting people and their lives for the entertainment of a (white majority) audience. I don't believe that any of the projects where refugees were put on stage to tell their story to a white audience have made these audiences more "understanding" of the circumstances of the actors. These projects were targeting a white audience because a non-white audience is very familiar with the experience of violence, not belonging, migration, and loss.

The question is, rather, how can we build networks, relationships, and connections that are sustainable, acknowledge the needs of those who are in precarious circumstances, and enable us to create other ways of engagement? I really like how Elisa Liepsch, Nadine Jessen, and Ewelina Benbenek have tried to think about the art institution of solidarity. It is one attempt to think and engage. But then again, I am suspicious if these are possible within the walls of these art institutions.

Ruba: I do not want to end our conversation with a pessimistic view will pose a question about the positive that we could take forward. What do you see in theatre and academic practice that makes you hopeful?

Azadeh: I do believe in the power and magic of art, especially theatre and performance! But I remain pessimistic towards the institution itself when it comes to accessibility and decolonization. And it might stem from my experience and my current desire to let go. Letting go of the idea that the processes can be done within these institutions. If we acknowledge that they are deeply rooted in a colonial and imperial tradition, why do we want to change them? Why not burn them down?

In one of my seminars, one of my students, her name is Zelal, called us all out and said „Das Kind ist in den Brunnen gefallen“ (the child has fallen in the well), meaning there is nothing to change. And I do understand her more than ever. I think as long as we don't change the rotten system from its core, burn it down, and build something that is truly built for the majority and not an elitist group, we are only putting a bandage over dead flesh.

But who am I to throw the first stone? I fought for so long to be in the system, and I now rely, like other tokens, on holding this space very close because it is clear to me that it will be taken away if I become undesirable. And this is something that has happened to all of us tokens in these institutions.

Jonas: Whether we want to be optimist or pessimist, we are grappling with these issues. Perhaps the worst that could happen is that we either blindly believe in progress, or give up like a nihilist. We are in neither of the two states and I think that is a good thing. But who knows?

Azadeh: I agree with you on this point. As I see all these amazing students and some dear colleagues who are willing to do the work within academia and art institutions. They will be holding the people in power accountable. And they are doing it right now. Many current changes would not have been possible without the so-called prior generation, and now I am putting my hope also in the so-called next generation. That is a beacon of hope that I have for Germany and its art institutions (and hopefully also its academic institutions). BIPOC and marginalised communities are no longer willing to be put down. They are fighting, questioning, challenging, and

hopefully building something that unsettles the colonial patriarchal, and neoliberal structures.

