

## OPEN BORDER ENSEMBLE

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*How and why were you founded, and what is the group status now that it is connected to the Post Heimat network?*

Back in 2015, the new direction of the Münchner Kammerspiele with Matthias Lilienthal wished to continue addressing diversity within the German institutional theatre on an aesthetical and a structural level. It set up a program collaborating with many non-Western directors, such as associés and German ones, to produce performances for the theatre repertoire. In line with this interest, the *Kammer4you* team with Anne Schultz was set to work on audience development and accessibility, organising topical campuses for students, focused workshops for kids, teenagers, women, and people of colour and presentations after talks and symposiums. Opening up to a broader, younger, socially and culturally more diverse audience than before, the theatre's artistic direction aimed to increase audience curiosity with artistic productions that reflected Munich's shifting demography and its culturally diverse social fabric more significantly.

In fact, in September 2015, Germany's borders were opened to welcome refugees. The city theatre felt concerned by these newcomers' massive arrival, living conditions, and new life in Munich – especially since their first stop was this city. In October 2015, it organised *The Open Border Congress* within the frame of a more comprehensive project, "Munich Welcome Theater". This congress gathered artists, scholars, activists, and "people who have come to Germany as refugees themselves or are simply interested in coping with the social challenges of worldwide migration movements". It called for a "society of the world that defends openness and diversity", a clear statement of solidarity. The theatre later continued its active involvement with the issue of migration and exile when Anne Schulz established the *Welcome Café* in April 2016. This format, away from an aesthetic positioning, leaned for more urgent social intervention. It made one of the theatre stages accessible as a cultural place for local inhabitants and newcomers to meet, share, and access practical information and participate in cultural events.

The ongoing collective commitment expressed a common need to build up alternative narratives. In December 2016, this culminated in the production of the Open Border Ensemble Festival with Arabic-speaking artists and theatre amateurs, fea-

turing lectures, stage plays, films, and concerts providing momentum to the Café initiative. After the first rush and solidarity urgency, the theatre decided out of this experience to give another configuration to The Open Border Ensemble project and develop it further. 2017 was thus a preparatory year, leading to its implementation as such. I was invited to participate in those conversations, facilitate the creation of the new group, coordinate the project and shape it artistically.

The asylum seekers' migration flow incited the theatres in Germany to work more towards inclusiveness and diversity and adopt transcultural approaches as a form of solidarity. Thinking globally, we questioned solidarity beyond the national scope yet still connected to it. Our interrogation revolved around how theatre can be in solidarity with other theater scenes, such as the Syrian one, for example, how to expand the connections beyond borders while answering the urges of the German context and which collaborative modality to trigger. Our perspective was embedded in postmigration discourses channeling the idea that the migration phenomena are a norm even though the heterogeneity they bring into society is still not reflected enough on German institutional theater stages.

After auditions in Munich and Beirut, the theatre was able to invite the Syrian performers Majd Feddah, Kinan Hmeidan and Kamel Najma — all of whom had completed their theatre studies at the High Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus, Syria—to be the permanent new members/actors of *The Open Border Ensemble*. This being said, the idea of the ensemble as a closed capsule of – in this case – male actors was challenged in each production by engaging a wide range of individuals: actresses, directors, translators, dramaturges, producers who were reshaping it into an expanding and mutant platform: May Al Hares, Lola Arias, Maja Beckman, Jessica Glause, Rabelle Ramez Erian, Ruba Totah, Ramy Al Borolosy, Dana Mikhail, Julia Zehl, Charlotte Hesse, to name a few. Looking back at this experience, I can say today that *The Open Border Ensemble*, throughout its existence, kept on redefining itself and its borders.

It was clear from the start that such a project longing to resist isolation would thrive to carve a space for discussing and questioning those issues with other groups and/or initiatives that had been created or were being implemented at that time in other cities in Germany. This was when Anna and I contacted like-minded colleagues and *Ruhrorter* to engage in further conversations and to co-organise a first encounter under the title of post-Heimat in 2018 as a working meeting in Munich, out of which the idea of an official network came to life. The group also hosted the third network encounter in 2019. In that sense, although *The Open Border Ensemble* adventure ended in 2020 with the newly appointed director and artistic team at the Münchner Kammerspiele, the group was connected to the post-Heimat network as an active founding member.

*How do you describe the aims of your group – Some groups started years ago; have there been changes in their aim?*

The Open Border Ensemble aimed to forge a new experiential, collaborative path by resisting borders and artistic isolation. The basic initial idea of the project was to encourage the theatre to regard the presence and participation of the newly coming non-German artists as an aesthetically progressive opportunity and endeavour for the theatre scene. It sought to contribute to transnational theatre, allowing different narratives from cultural and socio-political contexts to emerge, be shared, and be negotiated in German institutional theatre settings. While in the first season of 2017/2018, the Open Border Ensemble would be at the core of two theatre productions, the mid-term aim was to involve further and include its members in the operative structure of the theatre, experiment with the challenges that such an endeavour would mean, and on the long-term to establish the Open Border Ensemble artists as an integral part of the regular acting ensemble of the Münchner Kammerspiele or maybe vice-versa.

*How do you describe your strategies, priorities and work aesthetics?*

To set up such an initiative, it seemed clear at first that the theatre team needed to gather the best conditions possible for creating a welcoming and safe space, including calling for specific human resources dedicated to this project: an artistic director, a production manager, translators, etc. It also needed to face its own pre-conceptions regarding the OBE. Working constantly towards communication away from tokening the Syrian artists – in that specific context – has been a focal point, but also providing human relational support, inventing professional opportunities and triggering networking spaces. Regarding work aesthetics, the idea was to offer the artists different ways of working by participating in several projects. If their first season was based on documentary theatre aesthetics due to the overall political context, it quickly became clear that such an approach needed to evolve, include other genres and temporalities, face language problems, etc. Indeed, the project was meant to last only 8 months and eventually lasted 3 seasons, with constant learning and adaptations!

*What are the biggest challenges to your group?*

When the project was launched, the group faced many challenges, from communication to a feeling of instability, desperation, and blurriness regarding the overall Open Border Ensemble aims, their individual positions and agency in a group that they were forming but did not take part in its (hi)-story. Language issues were undoubtedly the most evident challenge at the beginning before turning them into possibilities. First on the level of professional and daily interactions, but later on an artistic level. Indeed, the focus that language gets in the German theatre tradition is central. Thus, not being able to communicate using it turned out to be frustrat-

ing with time – despite the presence of translation. How do you feel comfortable and welcomed when you do not speak the same language as the host? When do you start feeling more than a visiting guest? How do you connect organically with an already established group of artists? How do you make yourself heard as a theatre actor or actress, and by which audience in such a context? Moreover, even if you are familiar with the hosting language, the specificities of the working culture, its logic, and the production system can be hard to grasp. How does mutuality shape it in an institutional frame with well-anchored “ways of doing”? Obviously, there are more questions than answers.

*Which performances did you organise as part of PostHeimat?*

The PostHeimat network dynamics allowed the sharing of the theatrical works produced by the Münchner Kammerspiele in which the Open Border Ensemble played. In May 2018, when the first working meeting of the Post-Heimat Network meeting was held in Munich, the first project of the Open Border Ensemble, “Miunikh-Damaskus: Stories of a City” directed by Jessica Glause, with Syrian refugee and Syrian and German non-refugee cast, was part of the program and performed to the participants with an after-talk. The performance’s aim, set on a mobile stage, was an attempt to minimise stereotypes, deconstruct essentialist cultural identity prejudices and invite the audience to shift their common perspective. The PostHeimat network allowed the reinforcement of ties between some group members and others. Later in the year, Kamel Najma joined the Collective Maalouba to participate in “Days in the Sun”, directed by Mudar Alhaggi in Mülheim. It was also an opportunity for artists to show their work to the “community”. In 2019, for encounter # 3, a video projection of the performance “For The Last Time” by Kinan Hmeidan was meant to be presented. This performance installation dealt with the idea of the ongoing psychological process of destruction and construction one goes through when changing the environment and going from one place to another. For the program, Kinan Hmeidan wrote:

*“Why all this effort in striving for change and wanting to colour the images stored in our memory? Why all this strain in figuring out answers, in trying to fit and reshape spaces and memories that might vanish in one instant? I build up and destroy. I am building up to destroy. One more time. Why do all this weariness and quest for new surroundings appear to be one when, in the end, all appears to be one? Yes. One. Syria, Germany, Ghana, Afghanistan, Switzerland... (...) “I will not be where I was and where I will always be. I will hide in huge spaces, in a hole, and I will lie to myself, and I will mock myself. I am on a visit.”*