

stolpern

A theater production with young people

What racist stereotypes have been replicated and politically instrumentalized – and in what ways – in German society for generations? What specific lessons can be learned for today from the Nationalist Socialist period, and what does it mean to engage in resistance when the political climate swings to the right? Proceeding from the *Stolpersteine*, or small bronze memorial plaques embedded in sidewalks that commemorate the lives of people persecuted and murdered by the Nazi regime, the young participants in the *stolpern* theater education project tackled these questions. The resulting theater piece moves between the past and present, with forays into the future. The project was designed and carried out jointly by the Schaubühne Berlin and the Piccolo Theater Cottbus, with funding from the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ).

A weekend of rehearsals in October 2022 launched the project and enabled the Cottbus and Berlin group members to get to know each other in a playful theatrical setting. It focused on low-threshold engagement with various communities that have been marginalized both historically and on into the present, as well as on fundamental questions about art: For whom is art accessible? How can people in marginalized positions make art their own? Workshops led by external experts were also part of the launch.

Ewe Benbenek, an author and winner of the Mülheimer Dramatikpreis (Mülheim Theater Prize), led a practice-oriented writing workshop in which the young participants grappled with their personal experiences of discrimination and marginalization. Howard Castell led a workshop on voguing that incorporated theoretical aspects of ballroom dancing and the history of empowerment struggles by queer Black individuals who developed this form of dance for their own purposes. Using their bodies, the young people studied what it means to express resistance in art.

In the second phase of the project, we encouraged individual “field studies” in which participants interviewed people from their respective cities and communities, researched their own families, and went on research trips to the project’s other city and memorials to victims

of Nazi crimes. We restaged some of the stories behind the *Stolpersteine* in the two cities. What did it mean back then to grow up and take a stand in a society that was drifting apart socially and politically, and what does it mean today? The young people examined the impact of this drift on their lives, how it has influenced their plans and might continue to do so in the future. They undertook individual research into the causes of this development and presented real-life consequences based on examples from their cities, families and circles of friends. At one rehearsal they met with Dr. Peter Schurmann from the Sorbian Institute to find out more about the fate of the Sorbs under National Socialism. A Sorbian *Stolperstein* biography found its way into our draft production.

In January 2022 the participants travelled to Weimar and the Buchenwald concentration camp memorial. An expert on learning about history, Veronika Nahm from Berlin's Anne Frank Zentrum was a helpful guide both before and after the trip. Experiences from the trip prompted numerous discussions and were the focus of another writing workshop with Ewe Benbenek that delved more deeply into what it means to witness. The resulting texts also found their way into the draft production. After organizing and further streamlining this material, the group and its directors ultimately created the theater piece entitled *stolpern* ("to stumble").

stolpern premiered in June 2022 at the Piccolo Theater in Cottbus and the Schaubühne Berlin. It then toured Germany with a series of guest performances, accompanied by theater education personnel. A theater outreach program for teachers and influencers was offered and held at the host performance sites, including a portfolio of materials about remembrance work and a 4-hour workshop on how to prepare a stage production. Workshop participants examined key elements of developing a stage play, as well as ways of linking it to their own lived realities.

The *stolpern* production was invited to the 31st Bundestreffen Jugendclubs an Theatern (Germany-wide gathering of theater youth clubs) in Weimar in 2022, and to the 44th Theatertreffen der Jugend (youth theater gathering) for the Berliner Festspiele. Facilitated by the Goethe-Institut, a live recording of *stolpern* was shown on 23 September 2023 during the Festival Internacional de Teatro Universitario (FITU) at the prestigious Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). The *stolpern* project played its way into the hearts of everyone involved. *Erinnere dich!* – we are all called upon to remember!





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Mai-An Nguyen, theater education specialist, studied in Osnabrück. Ensemble engagement with the Neue Bühne Senftenberg and the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, co-developed the outreach program for the Maxim Gorki Theater's Exile Ensemble. Since 2020 director of the theater education department for the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin. Since 2022 conception and direction of the *stolpern* remembrance cultural youth theater project at the Piccolo Theater Cottbus and the Schaubühne Berlin.

Matthias Heine, educator and cultural manager. Since 2004 actor, theater educator and director at the Piccolo Theater Cottbus, since 2024 its artistic director. Director of the Piccolo Theater's multiple award-winning youth club. Nominations for the Theatertreffen der Jugend (Berliner Festspiele), including *stolpern* in 2023. Director and screenwriter for the films *Holger*, *Hanna und der ganze kranke Rest* and *Baden gehen*.