

# A theatre practice-based exercise in doing and undoing diversity: The Open Border Ensemble (2017–2020) experiment at the Münchner Kammerspiele

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## Introduction

My reflection on post-Heimat and theatre is undoubtedly linked to my three years of working experience at *The Münchner Kammerspiele* – Munich's city theatre – for and in the *Open Border Ensemble* project. In February 2017, I was invited to think through this project and be in charge of this ensemble, an initiative that I would consider an endeavour of diversity. The initial project involved three performers from Syria who were invited to work at the theatre. My work involved setting up and overseeing the entire ensemble season program through daily interactions with the theatre director and later liaising regularly with it and the *OBE* performers. It is there that I encountered the term post-heimat for the first time. And it seems hard for me to dissociate it from the very specific German political context and cultural history, which my relatively short experience in Germany made me only partially grasp.

My nomadic professional experience across geographies – Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, France, Germany, Greece, and Belgium – encompasses participation and immersion in projects initiated by encounters between artists from different backgrounds. While actively engaged in those projects, I consider them as live laboratories and fields of research. The narrative and analytical thoughts for this contribution follow this approach. As someone with a background in anthropology, examining the intercultural dynamics that occur during artistic and creative processes and the mechanisms that are put at stake for its emergence are some of the focuses of my research interests. The research hereby is based on a methodology ranging from ethnographic material to personal reflection, including participant observation, personal notes, online and in-print communication by the theatre, first-hand experience of situations, and informal conversations. I also acknowledge my direct implication in specific artistic decision-making processes related to the project and the limited room for manoeuvre when it came to some. If being a researcher in parallel or connection to my position within the *OBE* presents a

methodological challenge in terms of the spectrum of implication variating from familiarity to distinction with the object/subject of research – more so in the context of intercultural encounters, it is with what it gives as having “been taking in” – *pris dedans* as has shown Favret-Saada (1977), having been implicated and involved that I hope this writing can be perceptive.

I would like then to mention, following a feminist epistemological tenet (Haraway 1988), that this reflection is a situated one incorporating my own structural location and professional genealogy. It is as a non-German speaker, yet trilingual, a non-white female, yet holding at that time a certain privileged position as the *Künstlerische Leitung* that I wish to contribute to the discussion around the post-heimat topic. I find it important to voice out from where I am writing, notably because I have participated in shaping this project. Also, I want to emphasize my reflexive exercise that pertains to the question of who can speak for whom in cultural encounters where power dynamics are inherent to the process itself. I am, therefore, in this paper speaking up as a ‘halfy’ (Abu-Lughod 1991), someone whose cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration and education, from an in-between position, where belonging is more a matter of longing simply to be.

If as stated<sup>1</sup> the term *post-heimat* “stands for a heterogeneous process” and “a mode of thinking and enacting” the relation of individuals to society “with diversity as value”; I wish to shift the reader’s gaze on diversity as a more-than-a-value by focusing on the empirical practice of ‘doing diversity’ borrowing the expression to Sarah Ahmed and Ellen Sawn (2006) and how undoable sometimes it can be, taking a German institutional theatre context as a case study, from the perspective of the ‘in-between worker’ that I was. More specifically, I chose to investigate this process through the different ways the mother-tongue language of the OBE members (Arabic) was used on stage and in theatre productions. Drawing from the different works of Sarah Ahmed, I conclude with a reflexive approach to diversity of labour to generate knowledge and learnings for further discussions on the complexity of what such a practice entails for future envisioning in the field of post-heimat theatre.

## Doing diversity: a challenging practice

The Open Border Ensemble project was run by the Münchner Kammerspiele for three years, from 2017 to 2020. This project was to contribute to the politics of diversity that the newly appointed artistic team under Matthias Lilienthal’s direction started instigating, amongst others, upon their arrival two seasons earlier. An arrival coincides in 2015 with the reopening of the Austrian-German borders

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<sup>1</sup> In *Problematizing PostHeimat*, a statement drafted by the research group of the PostHeimat network during and after Encounter #04 at the Maxim Gorki Theater in March 2020.

for newcomers to reach the city of Munich. It was an artistic as well as a political decision to bring back – not to say to bring in – within German institutional theatre conversations about working conditions of refugee artists, otherness, inequalities, privileges, lack of representation and misrepresentation of non-white and non-German theatre protagonists. These debates did not come all at once; they were instilled progressively by the audience development team led by Anne Schulz. Unlike what Himan Banerjee (in Ahmed, 2012) observes regarding diversity policy (in educational institutions), it was not meant in this artistic institution for “accommodating conflicting heterogeneity” but rather for stirring them<sup>2</sup>. Diversity in this context was part of the policy expressed by the theatre that wanted “to dare to experiment, even radically, rather than endlessly repeating recipes of success<sup>3</sup>. The team was genuinely concerned about how to start activating concrete inclusivity. Punctual events such as the Open Border Congress and festival organized in 2016 and more regular ones such as the Welcome Café came as manifests of this interest. Including three performers from Syria forming the Open Border Ensemble in the theatre program, 17/18 was a step further (Totah and Khoury, 2018). In this climate, the Münchner Kammerspiele also hosted the first post-Heimat encounter co-organized in April 2018 with Mülheim-based Ruhrorter, an art and theatre collective.

On an artistic level, the idea of the *Open Border Ensemble* was conceived to acknowledge the presence and participation of newly hosted non-German artists in the theatre and as an aesthetically progressive opportunity for the German theatre scene, particularly in Munich. It sought to contribute to a transnational theatre, allowing different narratives from cultural and socio-political contexts to emerge, be shared and negotiated in the German institutional theatre setting. It aimed to forge a new experiential, collaborative path by resisting borders and artistic isolation and to invite the artists to experiment with another professional theatre experience than the one they had or were having at that time in their country.

At this point, it seems crucial to situate the Münchner Kammerpiele aspirations during Lilienthal's leadership: a prominent German theatre institution willingly foregrounding international collaborations, a theatre house open to and commissioning German and non-western European theatre makers<sup>4</sup>, a city theatre operating within a shifting global political context that was deviating towards more nationalism and isolationism. In fact, those years witnessed the rise of radicalized fascist right-wing ideologies not only in Europe but in other parts of the world

<sup>2</sup> We have received a letter from a member of the Friends Committee of the Kammerspiele addressed to the theatre direction contesting the idea of the OBE project.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to the audience by Matthias Lilienthal, Theater program Season 2017/2018.

<sup>4</sup> To name a few: Rabih Mroué, Amir Reza Koohhestani, Toshiki Okada, Lola Arias, Anestis Azas and Prodromos Tsinikoris.

while the Trumpian era was triumphing. A series of positive actions were organised in resonance or following a butterfly effect. Amongst those, workshops addressed exclusively to “people of colour”. Workshops and talks on and against racism were held in parallel to theatre productions that were tackling it<sup>5</sup>. It will not be an understatement then to say that the theatre was opening spaces to counteract those drifts using its own tools, even if this was met at times by resistance from within the theatre itself, what Ahmed (2009) would highlight as the “paradox” of diversity work, or outside of it<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, overcoming the constraints of an institutional anchored habitus is a long process that requires strenuous efforts.

It was quickly understood that for any transformation to happen within the theatre, the leading direction should be willing to engage concomitantly in a transformational process on a structural level too. The attempt here was like Fowler's (2020) notes regarding the Münchener Kammerspiele 'to enable new border crossings, tackling themes of diversity, mobility and migration not only in the artistic repertoire but also in the theatre's personnel'. With months passing, the theatre work towards diversity was shaping following a more inclusive and intersectional understanding. The KammerQueers<sup>7</sup> initiative against normative uniformity in the theatre was provided space and time, in other words, visibility and resources – even if limited. Working conditions of female workers and abusive behaviour were given space to be outspoken. Workshops aiming at activating codes of conduct and policies against sexual harassment in the theatre working spaces to which all the theatre employees were called were taking place. A 'strike' by some of the theatre woman workers was held on March 8, 2019, as an act to more acknowledgement of their labour. Theatre productions addressing climate catastrophe, whether through the youth march movements or in a more apocalyptic way, were set and many other actions were taken. The theatre was searching thoroughly for ways to give up some of its conventional institutional rationale. Yet, not to 'accompany' but to be actively part of a rather spontaneous grass-rooted, growing Western global movement of awareness and revindications towards more social justice.

It is within this ongoing entangled constellation and multi-layered ecology that the team<sup>8</sup> behind the Open Border Ensemble had to continuously move. It had to

5 Anta Helena Recke Mittelreich – the Black copy 2017, *Die Kränkungen der Menschheit* 2020, by Anta and in January 2020 *Race Me* by Myriam Ibrahim.

6 Discussions with director Myriam Ibrahim during the production period of *Race Me*.

7 KAMMERQUEERS, a queer association linked to the Kammerspiele, was formed and involved in the discussions of how art institutions should facilitate their questioning. As noted in the program of 2019/2020: "Kammerqueers, a collective of Queer people from the Kammerspiele: we are anti-racist, anti-cissexist, definitely queer, and trying to navigate and change the institution that is the Kammerspiele" trying to navigate and change the institution.

8 The team dedicated to the Open border Ensemble was constituted by two employees: one full-time OBE worker (myself) along a part-time production manager with the support of

find ways to navigate troubled waters, and keeping up with glocal considerations. It had to constantly reconsider the Open Border Ensemble's position, its function and what it simultaneously represented for the Syrian diasporic artist's community as well as for the artistic community in Syria – to which the artists from the OBE still belonged and were connected, what it represented moreover for the diasporic Arab artist's community. It also reflected on what role has the Open Border Ensemble beyond those communities in relation to policies and mechanisms of diversity, mobility, and migration within a German institutional theatre system.

From the theatre perspective, diversity in this specific case – inviting Syrian performers, which means artists who will be *seen* on stage and as regular theatre employees – was embodied. As a sub-entity to the theatre ensemble during its first season, this made it possible for the OBE to be hyper-visible and exposed in a white institution. If it could be argued that such an endeavour contributed to the whiteness of the institution being concealed, the existence of the OBE was, on the other hand, confronting the institution to its whiteness and confirming it. As Ahmed (2012) puts it:

“(...) diversity matters not as a description of such spaces (of what they are, or what they have), but as a sign of what they are not. (...) In other words, if the appeal of diversity is that it conceals inequalities, then we can expose such inequalities by exploring the terms of its appeal.”

As said, the theatre director did not want to 'repeat recipes' but rather to challenge through its ensembles' performers what those latter might represent or not in the mind of their audience. However, this matter carried a delicate equation lying in equating the diversity of individual theatre experiences with the diversity of national backgrounds. Doing diversity was part of the institution's agenda. However, this vision was not necessarily the priority for the subjects involved in its process. Even if the OBE productions of 2017 did include other performers from the theatre ensemble in their cast, still, conversations amongst the OBE performers about how they would be or were represented on stage by the theatre directors brought up a feeling of wariness linked to fears of being tokenized as the 'Syrians saved from war'.

## Behind the scenes: working with the unknown

On the other hand, critics such as why not have directly included the performers in the ensemble of the Münchner Kammerspiele were formulated. The ideal scenario in

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Anne Schulz from *Kammer4you*. The production managers of the Open Border Ensemble were consecutively: Susanne Ernst, Julia Zehl and, Charlotte Hesse.

the long term would have been to gradually ‘dissolve’ the *OBE* as a separate entity or radically and symbolically enlarge it to include all the theatre performers. However, looking at the conditions and logistical complexities of the reality on the ground that the theatre had to deal with made this an unreachable utopia. One of those complexities was the overall financial planning of the project: the first financial support ran for only eight months, after which applying for another funding was needed but not guaranteed. This conditional co-funding and limited duration enabled only vaporous possibilities of how it can be further shaped. The unknown in terms of financial sustainability had an impact on the existence of the *OBE* itself, putting it on shaky feet and achieving its long-term aims. After the second financial support was granted for the 18/19 season, the project artistically shifted in its core. The performers became part of the cast of the programmed theatre productions for the season and were even offered spaces to create their work.

While the performers were waiting for their visas and preparing to cross the borders from Damascus to Beirut to reach Munich, the team first had to gather the material conditions – mainly appropriate accommodation, which is hardly found in a city like Munich. Indeed, the artists were not ‘guest artists’ coming for one production, ‘refugees’, or ‘migrants’ since the initial contract was eight months and going back to their country was theoretically possible. Thus, the status of the *OBE* performers challenged existing habitual categories in a stimulating way. It created an unprecedented situation within the theatre system and, as such, could only be dealt with through inventing ways along the way.

The work also comprised administrative appointments, logistics regarding arrival and stay, internal and external communication about the project, a cultural program for the performers outside the rehearsals and in connection to cultural organisations in the city, optional language courses, etc. Additionally, in September 2017, when the theatre season opened, the pre-production of the first *OBE* theatre play had to start. Production schedules were fixed. Since it was conceived to happen in multiple open spaces on the outskirts of Munich, the production process was more complicated than a production taking place *in the theatre*. For instance, constructing a set that could fit in a van had to be negotiated depending on law restrictions. Scouting for locations, permits and approvals needed to be requested from different city services. Quickly enough, it appeared that more human and financial resources were needed but could not be provided. A gap between the symbolic commitment to diversity and the experience of the ones involved started to be felt. Besides, the performers were still waiting for their visas, and no one knew when they would arrive or if they would arrive. For the theatre director, whose working process was based on storytelling and content material derived from the main participants in the project, this meant growing tension as the rehearsals were regularly postponed until the arrival of the performers. For a theatre structure such as the *Münchner Kammerspiele*, where the routine of accurate scheduling and “thinking ahead” prevails – especially

on the technical, planning and communication levels, this main unknown was unsettling. However, at that point in the existence of the OBE, we had started to be acquainted with the logic of waiting and working on the short term. We were embracing this unknown as a main constitutive factor of the project.

When the performers finally arrived after a long journey in February 2018, Munich was snowy and grey. The “welcoming” dinner, which the theatre had imagined and organized for them, was cancelled as they were too tired. The clock was ticking, and the next step was to delve into the rehearsals of the first production<sup>9</sup> – without having the time to become familiar with the theatre structure or the city. The rehearsal space available was in a location far from the main theatre. Although this was due to technicalities, the distance from the main theatre created a disturbing, irreversible feeling of unintended exclusion.

### Diversity work: the invisible labour of the “outsider within”

Despite all the preparations, this unpredictable false start marked the performers and the working dynamics at stake, which needed to be constantly adjusted, adding a challenge to the process and its functioning. Indeed, the conversations often included bipolar positioning, with unequal power dynamics at play between the theatre as an entity, the actors or the employers and the employees, or the different theatre working methods in Syria and Germany.

This labour required resilience and the ability to listen, understand, explain, reformulate, communicate, and mediate. It would only be productive at that stage if the performers could express themselves using the language in which they are the most comfortable – their native language – Arabic and if it could be communicated to the theatre artistic team and reflected upon together. I was the person who fluently spoke English – the chosen working language for this international context – as well as Arabic which I related to as a mother tongue. I was also the person fully appointed to serve this project by the institution. It was, therefore, expected that I take this responsibility. Needless to point out here that more than speaking the performers’ language, it was about embodying a knowledge of the context the conversations generated.

This ongoing diversity work was highly demanding emotionally and intellectually. It required to be mindful of not reinscribing ethnocentric thinking and, by extension, white and non-white power hierarchies. It was constant, and since it was

9 For an analytical perspective on the creative process of this production, you can read: Totah R, Khoury K. Theater against Borders: ‘Miunikh–Damaskus’—A Case Study in Solidarity. *Arts*. 2018; 7(4):90.

ungraspable, it was often unremarkable or unseen and, as such, undervalued, although at the core of the project. It consisted of bridging, even though those bridges could not be identified by naming the category to which the work belonged.

Both the institution and the performers were speaking to each other through my position. This often gave it an ambiguous status in terms of belonging to the project as *an outsider within* (Hunter 2006). A positioning that was also blurred by my adapting capacity to shift from coordinator to dramaturge, to production manager, to artistic director for this project. Indeed, my labour was trans-passing due to the borderless nature of the project. The fact that it covered undefined or very broadly defined tasks surely made the labour exciting but extremely exhausting and frustrating in the long run. A fragment from my notebook dating from the beginning of the project in 2017 insightfully reads:

“We should make the best out of it, they said. Who are ‘we’? me as representing the institution, me as my own person, me as a cultural manager, me seen as a person from Lebanon? Who are ‘we’ addressing ourselves to?”

### **‘Who is the ‘we’ addressing?: on speech language**

The Münchner Kammerspiele, with its peculiar position in modern German theatre history, is well-known for being a leading German-speaking theatre. By adopting a politics of internationalization and inviting non-western European theatre makers to work with its performers, the problems of the theatrical speech language were brought on stage. As one of the many significant components of the semiotics of theatre (Fischer-Lichte 1992), the speech-language affects the processes of meaning-making and reception. Hence, for the main stage of the theatre – *Kammer 1*, permanent technical equipment was installed for surtitles. All productions playing on this stage had German or English surtitling, depending on the theatre production’s primary language. This had an impact on the type of audience coming to the theatre. A new non-German speaking audience could finally discover German theatre plays, while regular audiences were given the opportunity to get familiar with non-German speaking plays. Furthermore, with the OBE, a presentation text of the project in Arabic was included in the 17/18 season program, along with a presentation of the Welcome Café in Arabic and Farsi. Trivial gestures in other multilingual contexts were significant transformational ones for the Münchner Kammerspiele, calling for a renewed audience to contribute to a more transnational theatre experience.

In addition to the question of what is being said and to whom it is addressed to, the question of who is speaking and what this “who” represents on stage had to be openly addressed with the arrival of the Syrian performers (Totah and Khoury 2018). It meant negotiating the interplay of internal and external pressures arising from the organizational and economic frameworks of the institution (Garde 2021).

Also, including non-German speaking performers in the theatre institution meant demanding theatre-makers to encounter other theatre practices and understandings and confronting them with a language they do not understand. When dealing with diversity, it is an additional layer of complexity to the creative process, narratives and aesthetics. From the German theatre perspective, beyond embodied diversity, the presence of an 'unknown' language was a trigger to disrupt familiar sounds, including the one seen as the stranger. As Garde (2021) points out, this was meant to challenge theatremakers and audiences "to engage with the everyday realities of societies in transformation". The non-understandable language by a German audience became one of the signs through which diversity could manifest itself. For three years, the *OBE* performers participated collectively or individually in more than ten<sup>10</sup> theatre productions – four of which I was thoroughly involved in artistically. More than highlighting the simple manifestation or absence of the 'unknown language' on stage, I wish in the following to examine the different usages of the Arabic language on stage by recalling some of the productions that included performers from the *OBE* to uncover the plurality of mechanisms that needed to be invented for doing diversity.

## First Season

In fact, the first season of the *OBE* was quite exceptional in terms of experimenting with the Arabic language on stage. Discussions about language and work conditions with the two female directors, German Jessica Glause and Argentinian Lola Arias came before the rehearsals. Inviting a person who could translate from Arabic to English or to German<sup>11</sup> to join each process was agreed upon. The interpreter played a key role. It quickly became the mediator figure next to the dramaturge within the asymmetrical relations between the director and the performers shifting binaries into triangular dynamics (Khoury 2016). However, both directors saw that if this would facilitate the process, the issue of language was more than a mere detail within the context of the *OBE* project. Working with a documentary approach

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<sup>10</sup> The theatre productions included: 'Miunikh-Damaskus: Stories of One City' by Jessica Glause, 'What They Want to Hear' by Lola Arias, 'Dionysos Stadt' by Christopher Rüping, 'MacBeth' by Emir Reza Kohestani, 'The Life of Vernon Subutex' by Stephan Pucher, 'Melancolia' by Felix Rothenhäusler, 'For the Last Time' by Kinan Hmeidan, 'iREHAB' by Majd Feddah, 'Im Dickicht Der Städte' by Christopher Rüping, 'Kränkungen der Menschheit' by Anta Helena Recke, 'Passing – It's so easy, was schwer zu machen ist' by Renée Pollesch, 'MAL' by Marlene Freitas.

<sup>11</sup> We could not find an Arabic-German interpreter for the duration of the creative process of Glause production and invited researcher Ruba Totah to join the process and translate from Arabic to English.

that emphasizes the lived experience of the performers had to be dealt with artistically. Their approach included creating a theatrical text based on first-hand narratives from the cast. This gave the director space to explore and reflect upon a sensical use of the language.

In the case of 'Miunikh-Damaskus: Stories of One City', we have already examined in a previous article (Totah and Khoury, 2018) how this matter was addressed by the director from the start of the creative process as a challenge to be surpassed. The participant observer reported:

"How do we manage language together?", "How to avoid misunderstandings?", "How to initiate a space to know each other?", "This will be important for our work, especially since there are three languages," "The most difficult thing is the language now," punctuated the director's introductory speech on the first day of rehearsals.'

We demonstrated how translation operated as a creative strategy in paving the way towards a third common space. As a matter of fact, this was translated on stage through different mechanisms: one was to make the German performer repeat the content of the Arabic text spoken by the performers in German as a slightly desynchronized dubbing. To avoid redundancy, this required the performer to have high acting skills. The other was to include in the scenography a 'translation machine' in the form of an old school fixed sharpener where instead of the pen, a paper roll would unfold with the transcription of the translated text activated with a handle by the performers. Both ideas had an aesthetical playful resonance with the content of the speech – one performer was working in dubbing before joining the *Münchner Kammerstücke*, and the sharpener was mentioned during rehearsals by another performer.

In Lola Arias' 'What They Want to Hear', the relationship between the languages of the speech became one of the main concepts the play revolves around dramaturgically. This politically engaged theatre play was mainly based on the re-enactment of an asylum seeker's fateful interview to get refugee status in Germany. This interview engaged the asylum seeker, who was a Syrian archaeologist, an interpreter, and an employee from the BAMF as the main characters. The text was written throughout the rehearsals in the theatre as opposed to for the theatre. The process was an incredible exercise in multilingualism. It was developed using the three main characters' spoken languages – Arabic and German as well as English as the communication language all the team spoke – none of which was the director's native language. The team included a trilingual interpreter who worked on translating parts of the text and later as a *souffleuse*. The final version was written in three columns for each language. During the rehearsals, dialoguing around which language to use was often debated before making the final decisions. 'Who is the play addressed to' came often. Arias heard how the performers wanted to relate to their respective lan-

guage and found a mechanism to embrace it. To stay faithful to the reality of the situation, the asylum seeker was narrating his story in Arabic, the employee was asking her questions in German, and the interpreter was shifting from one to the other with all that this action held: reinterpretation, cultural presumption, misunderstanding, etc. The scenography set was composed of a ground floor, the BAMF office, and an upper floor where the narrative actions of the story were taking place. One of the three languages was used depending on who the performers were representing. Comments by the main protagonist were inserted in some scenes. Those were said in English and addressed to the audience. One comment by a technician from Afghanistan was said in his native language. The surtitles of the interview were projected on the floor, separating the upper part from the lower part like an information banner. The rest appeared on the middle top of the stage. The overall process was intense on many levels, with the team often getting lost in translation. Regardless, Lola Arias did succeed in a *tour de force* in creating and directing a theatre production where the core speech was in a language that she could not understand the subtleties of, a play where a German-speaking, Arabic-speaking or English-speaking audience could all comprehend the story.

The ten-hour-long performance 'Dionysos Stadt' by Christopher Rüping included one of the OBE performers. Throughout the performance, he only spoke in Arabic and English. There was dramaturgical research on the characters he played in regard to how he would be represented. In the first chapter of the play – which included four – he was given the role of Zeus. The God of Gods condemns Prometheus for illegally bringing people fire, a symbol of light, enlightenment, and self-empowerment. In 'Dionysos Stadt' Zeus comes up from hell and asks Prometheus why – *leish*: "One day people will use it to build the bomb." Bombs against themselves and against the gods. People will use it to make war. The reference here is direct when uttered by a performer from Syria. Rüping's production reflected clearly on the language speech on stage with care towards German and non-German audiences. The English-German translation was sometimes part of the scenography staging itself. In the third chapter based on improvisation, the audience was given an English document to follow the plot on stage. This is without forgetting the humour where, for instance, one of the performers starts speaking in English and, before shifting to German, recommends the audience to kindly ask the Bavarian neighbour for translation if needed. The presence of a non-German performer in the cast had proven to have included an awareness of the complexity of the use of different languages in theatre throughout the process and that ended up included organically in the production itself without a feeling of 'forcing' such an inclusion but rather working with it meaningfully as one of the many components of the theatre making. For this play too, the choice of the translator-facilitator was determinant in how he became part of the team and the relationship he developed with the performer as well as the team. Also, it should be noted that the German versions of some of the Antipe

Greek plays had to be found in their Arabic translation, which was not available in Europe. We could luckily find one last copy in a Beirut library that travelled with us to Munich.

## Second Season

This experience paved the way for the second season, where no production tailored for the *OBE* was programmed. Instead, the performers were acting in theatre-programmed performances. This was the case in 'MacBeth', 'Vernon Subutex', and 'Melancholia'. Each of these experiences presented its peculiar challenges. At this stage, it is important to note that some of the performers were starting to get familiar with the German language as they were following courses. For 'MacBeth', both *OBE* performers were given lines in Arabic as well as in German for their secondary roles – which did not put them in a very comfortable position. The experience of 'Vernon Subutex' was different. It was agreed upon that the performer would speak in German. He was provided with a pronunciation coach to practice his accent. This was a productive training that informed the performer. However, in the end, since he did not have the capacity still to master German yet, he learned his text by heart and spoke it in a fair, good German but without understanding its inherent structure. Whoever knew this detail, was amazed by the effort. Whoever did not could not even hear an unfamiliar accent. A seamless integration into the dominant language was activated for the sake of the play. Indeed, the performer had to *act* the language. As for 'Melancholia', adapted from the movie, the *OBE* performer acted in English while the rest of the team was performing in German. This came as a dramaturgical choice knowing also that the original movie script was written in English.

Aside from that, the theatre enabled the small-scale productions of two individual works by *OBE* performers: 'iREHAB' by Majd Feddah in collaboration with Denis Metaxas and 'For the last time' by Kinan Hmeidan with Rabelle Ramez and Rita Ha-jjar (video). 'iREHAB' was played only for one night. It expressed, using psychedelic surrealistic esthetics, the turmoils of the performer-director and his theatre experience in Munich. The text was in English but mostly projected. In this theatrical essay, Feddah spoke back to the politics of the theatre instead of speaking on it. Such a 'speaking back' involved a refusal to play a 'good' actor or represent what the theatre system expected of him. It embraced literally and metaphorically the stranger and its strangeness while looking to disturb the audience of any familiarity that would make them understand the inside world of the performer-actor. The title itself, including the notion of rehabilitation, presumed the alienated condition of the pro-

tagonist but also the prejudice against him as an Arab<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, 'For the Last Time', a video performance based on Jean-Luc Lagarce's text 'Juste la fin du monde', introduced a reflection on the meaning or feeling of non-belonging to a specific place, nomadism and therefore, the possibilities of starting anew. The unending cycle of constructing and deconstructing was illustrated concretely by the performer building a real wall that he would destroy at the end of each performance. In the video projection, we heard his voice reading the text in German. Indeed, the performer wanted to address this work to a German-speaking audience. Not yet feeling comfortable speaking the language, working on and recording the text in the spoken language of the 'new place' came as an effort of wanting to be understood at least by the local audience.

### Third and Last Season

After going through all these linguistic experiences and questionings, the third season, which happened to be the last, witnessed radical experimentation. Doing diversity seemed to have its limits somehow. In 'Passing – It's so easy, was schwer zu machen ist' that elaborates on what is to be authentic and what is to be a "passing through", director René Pollesch chose not to translate his play to English and not to have surtitles. As a result, the play – knowing the central role text has in Pollesch esthetics – was inaccessible to non-German speakers and the text of the *OBE* performers ungraspable by the German audience. Preserving local languages as opposed to English seemed to represent a kind of political gesture that mattered more than what was being said. Following a similar thread in terms of shifting away from translation, inviting one of the *OBE* performers to join the team of choreographer Marlene Freitas Montero's 'Mal – Embriaguez Divina' questioned what could then be a theatrical experience outside of spoken words. Where to locate diversity in the meta-language of the body?

### Conclusion

After contextualizing the process and the complex dynamics at stake within the *Open Border Ensemble* project, I briefly tried to identify how the notion of diversity on stage was brought on stage by the theatre makers who had to engage with the *Open Border Ensemble*, considering language as one of the visible signs of diversity. Looking chronologically as an outsider audience at how the non-German language was used in the different productions of the *Open Border Ensemble*, one could conclude that the

12 In Arabic, the title would read بـ الإرهاب!, which means terrorism.

theatrical process followed an evolution line: from a laboratory of doing diversity through challenging monolingualism, to a process of 'integration' where bilingualism was experimented, to an acculturation process where the hosting German language took over the hosted language or made sure it is heard but without encountering it. However, such an analytical approach dismisses the specificities of each project and the accumulated knowledge by whoever is taking part in and shaping this diversity work, making it sound easy and simplifying what is an extremely ambivalent process.

What certainly remains in question is how to activate a more holistic, intersectional and non-managerialist diversity work on the ground? In which way should we consider rethinking the conditions, resources and tools of diversity work outside of its labelling and marketing? How, then, to continue doing diversity beyond assigning it to a diversity agent within a theatre structure<sup>13</sup>? Indeed, if the existence of such a position brings forward issues of inequalities and injustice and more awareness towards the ways cultural and arts institutions are doing things, it still is problematic. As Ahmed argues (2012), other bodies are discharged from doing the work by making some bodies responsible for diversity. Consequently, those diversity bodies are stuck in reproducing a circle of privileges they are trying to break out from, while being the ones generating valuable knowledge of institutions and trying to transform them.

For as long as diversity is associated with the need to 'include' the others in a broader ecosystem defined by the hosting culture and not redefined together with the host, where the hosting/hosted relationship is willing to rearticulate its terms, and as long as the others are identified as such by what makes them different (in appearance and language etc.) from whoever belongs to the dominant culture, dealing with diversity ironically would necessitate maintaining the racialization of those others as 'bodies out of place' (Ahmed, 2000; Puwar, 2004). Redefining thus diversity requires moving away from the "stranger fetishization" (Ahmed 2000), whether as the origin of danger or the origin of celebrating differences, to comprehend how the stranger is not anybody but a socially constructed body. More broadly, in a vision that seeks to reflect on what a post-heimat theatre in Germany could be, it seems to me essential to keep on challenging the understanding of how to do diversity work, and to what extent it is doable and to when.

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<sup>13</sup> The *Post-Heimat Network* started to delve into the discussion of cultural diversity way before the creation of the diversity agent position for German cultural institutions. In fact, it witnessed its emergence. This position was specifically created and financed by the KSB within its *360° program* (2018–2023) to guide the diversity-oriented process of change at their respective cultural institution in Germany. For more, read Ozlem Canyürek, *Cultural Diversity in motion*, transcript Verlag, 2022.

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