

(EN)COUNTERING THE FUTURE:

Notes on intersectional-diverse dramaturgical approaches

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“So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie¹

Looking Back / Moving Forward

For more than 12 years there has been a shift of discussion about diversity and representation on and behind the German theater stages. These discussions are closely connected to certain social-political events, but first, I think it is necessary to agree on the following: there is no *one* perspective of diversity, but there is – in my opinion – certainly *one dominant* idea (and perspective) that has prevailed for a long time in thinking of diversity in public discussions when it comes to theatre and the arts in Germany.

As I write this text, 1,5 years of the coronavirus pandemic have put German theatre institutions on a halt. Slowly, vaguely, things started to open up again. This “halt” opened a wider space of discussions about theatre institutions, power and misuse, racism and oppression, and talks about identities and representation(s). The call for structural reform of state and municipal institutions dominated the German cultural press, blogs, and comment sections. But these topics are not new; they are just being made visible and shed light on what has been hidden for far too long. I believe that we are in a state of in-between. German theatre is in a state of in-between. In the following pages, I would like to discuss and define tools for intersectional and diverse dramaturgy, as one cannot be thought of without the other. Various writers and dramaturges have written articles stating and defending a certain status quo. In their texts, they get personal, compare theatre rehearsals to war situations, and

1 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. 2024. “The Danger of a Single Story.” Ted.com. TED Talks. 2024. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/tr.

gaslight actors who choose to speak up. They completely ignore the fact that the “accusers” had to endanger their working places and careers, arguing that ‘it isn’t more than personal hurt’ and diminishing them by going to the very personal level themselves. They bully them into an argument without understanding or acknowledging the structures of power that are in place, or worse, just calling them bad actors and ending the discussion.

So where to go from here? Retreat? Remain silent? I would like to emphasize the perspective of being *in-between* and put it into relation with the terms of intersectionality and diversity. Maybe the ‘mess we’re in’ could be considered an ‘in-between’ moment for the development of dramaturgy that opens spaces up. Dramaturgies move away from the single-story, the static discourse that holds us back.

From Postmigrant Theater to an Intersectional-Diverse Theater

Since 2008, the term Postmigrant Theater (Postmigrantisches Theatre) has been a milestone and turning point of theatre discourse in Germany. Performers took the stage, presented their bodies and stories, countered and played with stereotypes, and proclaimed that they were more than their backgrounds, ethnicities, and associated stereotypes. Matthias Warstat describes the Postmigrant Theatre as a process in which post-migrants of the second and third generation now present a ‘patchwork’, a plurality of identities, that go past the concept of “Heimat” and “Belonging”,² distinguishing themselves from the first generation of their parents, who mainly came as “Gastarbeiter*innen” in the 1960s and 1970s to Germany. Warstat also emphasizes that the idea and concept of bringing migration onto the stage is not a new one. Amateur groups and performers outside the state and municipal theatre system have been working within their communities for years before coining the term. Adding the “post” proclaimed: We move beyond those identities of nations and belonging.³

But exactly therein lies a paradox, which Warstat also points out. Once I place myself in this frame, I appear. I emphasize myself as that which I am not, which I do not want to be reduced to. Postmigrant Theatre was an important process at a time in which theatres, ensembles, teams, narratives, and texts in municipal and state theatres were predominantly male, white, cis, heterosexual, mostly academic, and seemingly unquestioned. Then came the Arab Spring, and in Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria, protests turned into uprisings, coups, and civil wars.

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- 2 Warstat, Matthias. Postmigrantisches Theater? Das Theater und die Situation von Flüchtlingen auf dem Weg nach Europa in: *Vorstellung Europa/Performing Europe*. 2017. Theater der Zeit.
 - 3 „Sie signalisiert eine Bewegung der Ablösung von den migrantischen Herkunftsmilieus und den mit diesen verbundenen Identitätszuschreibungen.“ – *Vorstellung Europa/Performing Europe*. 2017. Theater der Zeit. (p.29)

For German society and in the German theatre context, the Syrian Civil War marked a turning point. Syrian migration to Europe, to Germany, has been changing the discourse in society and the theatre world. The Syrian migration also pushed further the question of what diversity is, especially that it was and still is predominantly connected to the idea of backgrounds.

The loop of narration

Since 2015, we – and by this “we” I refer specifically to the German theatre context – have seen a significant increase of plays, performances, and productions that dealt with the topics of war, refuge, and trauma regarding the Middle East. What started as projects initiated by white German artists dealing with the problems of the Middle East, shifted more and more towards Arabic artists, mostly Syrian theatre-makers, who now live and work in Germany and form different collectives and ensembles that transformed the German theatre landscape. Examples of this are the Exil Ensemble at Gorki Theater in Berlin, the Open Border Ensemble at Münchner Kammerspiele, or the Collective Ma'louba in Mülheim an der Ruhr. Once again, we are at a point of artists and individuals who are first-generation migrants, who have either come here through refuge or – and this is much less talked about – came here by choice.

I would like to propose a thesis: the discourses that emerged since 2014 mirror the problems that German theatres have when it comes to the diversity discourse and the process of “becoming more diverse”. To quote Judith Butler:

'I am seeking to draw attention to the epistemological problem raised by this issue of framing: the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (...) They are themselves operations of power.'⁴

But what are these operations of power? How can we determine them? There is an operating power of ‘framing’. Let us exchange the word framing with the word ‘narrating’. So: There is an operating power of the narrative. What we choose to tell, what we choose to leave out, makes the story. Or to paraphrase Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: the retelling of one single story sets the discourse off to a dangerous field. What is told about a person or groups of people, what is forced as narrative upon one, makes the story.

It gives power to some, while others are doomed to the role of the victim, the villain, or – even worse – are erased completely.

4 Butler, Judith. *Frames of War – When is Life Grievable?* London; New York, Verso, 2009, p. 1.

Who is included in a story is important, but how the stories are told and what part of the stories we are willing to tell is crucial! Looking at the contemporary German theatre and the themes of war, migration, exile, and refuge, two main narratives and styles of storytelling can be observed:

- a) **Telling the Story:** Performers and non-actors speak about their experiences on stage, sometimes even connecting it to a parable or mythological story.
- b) **Refusing to tell the Story:** Projects that deal with the issues of misrepresentation and unwillingness to play the role of a certain stereotype or one identity. The story is used as a counterargument: I am not this, I choose not to be this, I do not wish to be associated with this. I negate this story.

These two forms lead us into a process, into a “loop of narration”. We are stuck in the loop of the narrative. We are forced into the story of oppression and victimisation, bouncing back and forth between telling the story and refusing to tell it. But we somehow can’t escape it. Since we are either having to explain or defend against having to tell it.

When discussing the themes of the ‘Arabic immigrant’, the starting point of the narrative is the story of refuge, crisis, and war. Even when we move away in time and space towards new stories, mostly in German theatre, we somehow manage to return to the loop’s starting point of trauma, refuge, and crisis. It is important to point out: people’s stories and experiences should not be denied or swept under the carpet of silence. Neither should these experiences be negated. In this argument, the question is rather how are the stories told, and is this the only story that is being told? But what about the past? The parts of identity that happened before the loop?

Or as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says:

‘Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.’⁵

5 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. 2024. “The Danger of a Single Story.” Ted.com. TED Talks. 2024. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/tr.

Intersectional-Diversity or: avoiding the single-story axis

In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which can be found in her text *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*. Her approach is:

I will center Black women in this analysis in order to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences. Not only will this juxtaposition reveal how Black women are theoretically erased, it will also illustrate how this framework imports its own theoretical limitations that undermine efforts to broaden feminist and antiracist analyses. With Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis.⁶

This “tool” of intersectional – diversity and power structures gives us the possibility to understand the plurality of concepts, identities, and forces which form political, social identities. The concept of intersectionality helps us to reveal the powers in place that often lead to the erasing of stories, identities, and people. Furthermore, it helps to broaden the discourse of diversity and the way it can be shown in the theater and arts, because as already mentioned: in the German theater we still approach diversity mainly through the axis of background.

Open(ing) the space(s)

Theatre institutions need to reconsider the way they open their spaces for artists and thinkers to appear within them. This may sound simple, but it is something that still does not happen very often yet. Rather than “talking about”, or “speaking for”, Theatres/ Institutions/Organizations should open the space, so that artists, groups and communities can talk for themselves and allow works to happen, to create artistic spaces that go beyond the reason of making people visible and are done solely for the purpose of being “more diverse”.

Oftentimes certain themes, ideas, or topics are set up by the institutions, whereas the artists are being asked to follow. They are being commissioned and therefore expected to fulfill a specific task, instead of being invited for open exchange, rather than consciously communicating ideas and artistic thoughts in an

6 Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1): 139–67. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>.

open exchange. Oftentimes this leads to frustrations on all sides: artists feeling silenced and mistreated. Institutions are left disappointed because they expected something “completely different”.

Opening the spaces for a variety of perspectives allows theater-makers as well as institutions to avoid situations of ‘talking about’. It certainly helps with the process of retreating from these “loop(s) of narration(s)” and reaching complexities. These tracks need to be set, so that things can move forward, towards an approach that doesn’t only claim diversity but actually works towards a genuine intersectional-diverse approach.

For the moment, it creates two extremely important things to move forward with. First, the development of consciousness for discourses about power relations in artistic works and institutions. Second, multiple perspectives could lead to forms of “radical plurality”⁷ of stories, identities, representations, and power on and off the theater and performance stages. These radical pluralities of stories, ideas, and thoughts create spaces that intersect. They shine a light on privilege, on power, and connect, rather than divide. Finding forms of solidarity is a tool that we need for the future to an intersectional – diverse approach, to work with forms of radical pluralities that move away from identifications towards an approach that is conscious towards the power structures and forms of privilege and works towards complexity of stories.

Encountering

When opening a space, we encounter possibilities for the future and create spaces of exchange. When we begin to encounter within a space it is important to acknowledge the power factors that reside within individuals, groups, and institutions in these spaces. We are not equal, since the power dynamics are different for each, and every, one. Making these structures visible, acknowledging them, can be very empowering. It also shows what possibilities and privileges reside within these encounters.

Encountering pluralities and intersections can help us track new forms of solidarity in artistic exchanges. But it also means to ask the question: What is needed in this space of exchange? What stories do we want to tell? How can we tell them? Which (hi)story does my story continue, and which one does it negate? Asking these questions slowly bypasses the well-known structure of fixed ideas, perspectives, and theatre forms, texts, and performances. Spaces and ideas that might never have occurred can be generated due to fixed structures and the so-called ‘canon’.

7 I refer here to the phrase radikale Vielfalt (Radical Diversity), that can be found here: Czollek, Max. 2020. *Gegenwartsbewältigung*. Carl Hanser Verlag. p.154-155

Encountering is not an easy process; it requires time, active listening, engagement, and a form of trust and preparation. Institutions and individuals need to do their homework, too: It is not a workshop wherein individuals, artists and diversity agents educate colleagues on the ideas of diversity, but a shared responsibility to work within their structures to create the right conditions that will allow spaces to grow.

This also means requisitioning one's perspectives and thinking about forms of communication within departments and the people working therein. And shifts towards sharing knowledge, stories, and thoughts that never were heard before, make visible what has been invisible far too long, and create a future; a new form of canon and repertoire of texts, and aesthetics. This also means going into a process, a form of working that I would like to describe in the next section.

(En)-Countering

Besides the process of encountering, I would like to propose a parallel process of countering: an active avoidance of the single stories that dominate the present, as well as going back in history and countering the past for the present and future.

By presenting stories, individuals, and ideas that have been silenced and untold for the sake of a single story. Repetition forms canon and commemorations, which leads to what is known as "Culture" or "The Canon". Countering is an active process; it begins by opening the spaces and continues with learning how to let new ideas and new people in, making them visible. Countering allows these stories to be told from different perspectives to form a new "Canon of Pluralities". We can also overcome the constant idea of having to play certain dramatic texts and forms repeatedly. And focus on the relevance of the contemporary. This will also give access to a more diverse audience that will connect to the subjects, artists and aesthetics on the theatre stages. It will enable a different form of 'seeing', illuminating what has been there all along. It will allow multilingual, inclusive projects that open the spaces even further. Countering changes the past, not because it denies it, but because it looks back differently. It shows the tracks that have been there all along, that have been disguised and made invisible for the sake of another telling. This can also be an empowering process, laying the track for the present and future. Countering is not a refusal to tell stories or work together. Rather, it is the resistance to repeatedly telling, working, and repeatedly thinking through the same perspectives and ideas. When encountering, we meet and then look for different perspectives that may help to counter what has been there as that what has been told. It can also be a requisitioning of one's perspectives. And it is highly present. Countering means asking what is needed for us to work right here, right now, and move forward. What have I not seen? What could be told here differently?

Emerging Strategies

The previous ideas and notes are still in progress and certainly not finished. Rather, they are emerging points that will hopefully continue to grow. Many ideas were created within spaces around colleagues, texts, artists, activists, discussions, encounters, and networks that grew and developed in recent years. In the middle of 2021, after many months of living in constant alarm, fear, anger, the unknown, and being apart, things seem to be “opening up again” – but what does that mean for institutions like the theatre? Going back to what we know? Go back to business as usual? Where will these discussions take us? I remember when I started working in theatre. I wanted to be part of it because I believed it would be a place where I could find exchange, allies and artistic expression that would resonate with my feelings of being in between. But instead, I felt constantly under pressure, often misunderstood, often “being the problem”, and constantly needed to prove myself. I felt the forces of competition and hierarchy and the idea of having to supposedly fit in. I tried to deny my Arab background, tried to be as “German as possible”, and emphasised my German background as much as possible to feel accepted and worthy of working within the system. Then I realised that all these supposed “survival strategies” were holding me down; my potential and energy were forced to be kept low. They are strategies that hold us in place and distance us from paths of change and solidarity. Growing up in-between is not a lack but a potential; being multilingual is seeing the world through different perspectives over and over again. Or, as Adrienne Maree Brown writes:

‘One Major emerging lesson: We have to create futures in which everyone doesn’t have to be the same kind of person. That’s the problem with most utopias for me: they are presented as mono value, a new greener more local monoculture where everyone gardens and plays the lute and no one travels... And I don’t want to go there! Compelling futures have to have more justice: yes; and right relationships to planet, yes; but also must allow for our growth and innovation. I want an interdependence of lots of kinds of people with lots of belief systems, and continued evolution.’⁸

I am hopeful ...

8 Brown, Adrienne Maree. 2017. *Emergent Strategy*. AK Press. (Brown 2017, 57)