Upstaging Borchert

Michael Thalheimer Reimagines *Draußen vor der Tür*

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Hundreds of lights hang from the rafters at various lengths and depths, transforming the stage of the Berliner Ensemble into an other-worldly dimension. The array of lights evokes the metaphysical, even as it clutters the stage with hundreds of round bulbs and visible cords. Except for downstage, closer to the audience, the space for the actors seems a virtual obstacle course. How do they enter and exit this chaos, and what is this place? In a realist production, the scene would be Germany in the immediate post-World-War-II era, but for an American audience member of a certain age, the points of light might seem more like a parody of George H.W. Bush's 1988 speech to the Republican National Convention. In fact, the play is Wolfgang Borchert's 1947 drama *Draußen vor der Tür*, adapted for the stage in 2022 by director Michael Thalheimer, with set design by Olaf Altmann.

Draußen vor der Tür depicts the return of a German soldier, Beckmann, to his home city on the Elbe River. Traumatized, he can no longer feel a sense of belonging, and even the Elbe rejects his suicide attempt in her waters. The various people he visits in search of sanctuary cannot accommodate his experiences, for they are too busy suppressing their own with postwar delusions of a return to normalcy. He looks for acceptance from a young woman whose own husband has yet to return; a self-important cabaret director uninterested in realism (how ironic); an unrepentant military officer; and finally, his own Nazi parents who, he learns from their home's new resident, took their own lives when the Third Reich collapsed.

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Fig. 1: Kathrin Wehlish as Beckmann. Photo by Matthias Horn. Courtesy of the Berliner Ensemble.

Thalheimer's adaptation of Borchert calls to mind a theatrical conversation in the »Vorspiel auf dem Theater« in Goethe's *Faust*, where the Director and the Poet exchange some ideas about putting on a play; the Director is concerned with making things »frisch und neu« to interest the masses, whereas the Poet wants his words to prevail: »Verhülle mir das wogende Gedränge, / Das wider Willen uns zum Strudel zieht!« It should come as no surprise that Thalheimer sides with the Director over the Poet. It is worth asking if his quest for novelty breathes new life into Borchert's drama seventy-five years after the young poet's death in 1947. The play, which quickly entered the canon and became a standard in German language classes in the US, at least when we were students, seemed so edgy only a few decades after the end of World War II; now, with its angsty characters and its severe nihilism, it can come across as heavy-handed and tired. It's not clear if today's students, having endured the hardship of a 3-year pandemic (and counting), are ready for the play's gloomy story of a traumatized soldier returning home bewildered and broken after Germany's defeat, only to encounter equally bewildered and broken individuals at home, including a powerless God. But for Germans the war in Ukraine feels very

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close, and so Thalheimer seems to thinks now is the right time to deliver Borchert's anti-war message to his Berlin audience. Therefore, in order to underscore the universality of Borchert's drama and its relevance today, he wrests it from the familiar setting of postwar Germany.

Defamiliarization certainly makes sense for the stage of the Berliner Ensemble that was once home to Max Reinhardt and Bertolt Brecht. Admittedly, Borchert's text invites timeless abstractions: its frequent adaptations to radio, theater, and film over the years speak to its universal themes of existential dread and the barbarism that lie beneath the veneer of civilization. Still, when adapting a text that is so heavily associated with the immediate post-war era and the myth of *Stunde Null*, one has to wonder, why now? In an interview with tipBerlin, Thalheimer offers the war in Ukraine as the reason for reviving *Draußen vor der Tür*.[1]

Thalheimer claims that he wanted to make a relevant anti-war statement with a well-known anti-war play; at the same time, he seizes on Borchert's modernist affinities to create an aesthetically innovative production. Those two aims – relevance to present-day realities and aesthetic innovation – can work in tandem, of course, but in this instance the latter comes at the cost of the former. There is plenty of innovative staging, but the play becomes so decontextualized from either the past or the present that it loses any apparent connection to historical events. Some of us quickly lost interest, and actually wished we had stayed *draußen vor der Tür*. All of us were left with questions – for which Thalheimer also deserves credit, even if they are not the questions about war and complicity that he was trying to provoke.

Thalheimer's experimentalism takes a cue from Borchert, who made heavy use of Expressionist techniques to claim the mantle of modernist innovation. To revert to Expressionism was to rebuke the dominant fascist aesthetic that had deemed so much of modernism »degenerate.« The absurdist dimensions of Borchert's play are just as reminiscent of Beckett or Camus as they are of Walter Hasenclever or Georg Kaiser, underscoring the broad recognizability of this drama's pacifist themes and anti-realist aesthetics that were anathema to the Third Reich. Thalheimer's production zeroes in on the existentialist strains that are already present in Borchert's play, but in a staging that turns abstract characters into unmoored eccentrics and renders the theater of the absurd into kitsch.

Let's consider a few examples. To begin with, Borchert describes a wandering Beckmann drifting among the various representatives of postwar German society: the home of a young woman, the theater, the dinner table of his former commanding officer, his childhood home, and finally back out onto the streets and into the abyss. This, too, is an Expressionist element in Borchert's drama, reminiscent of the earlier movement's *Stationendrama* with its peripatetic characters grandiloquently

1 Cf. http://www.tip-berlin.de/kultur/theater/michael-thalheimer-draussen-vor-der-tuer-berliner-ensemble-interview.

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enacting the Stations of the Cross. In Thalheimer's production, however, Beckmann is largely stationary, emerging from the rear and then occupying centerstage for the duration; meanwhile the representatives of German society come drifting from the back, weaving (or roller skating, in the case of the tutu-clad cabaret director) through the sea of light bulbs that fill the scene until they stand with Beckman at the front. At the end of their scene they recede again to the rear, disappearing like figures of a medieval Glockenspiel. Beckman's stationary placement as the only fixed point in an indeterminate universe fosters the audience's (over-)identification with the central protagonist – a bad move for a production ostensibly foregrounding alienation. Despite the recognition that Beckmann has been traumatized, Borchert's text works hard to limit the reader's identification with him. For as a defeated German soldier who has come to realize the full extent of his participation in barbarism, Borchert's Beckmann is both victim and perpetrator. That insight is overshadowed in the sympathetic portrayal of Beckmann we see in Thalheimer's production. Beckmann stands still, assailed by a rogue's gallery of unrepentant, self-interested tormenters.

In the course of Beckmann's encounters, we see the ways that war has undermined all social norms, including traditional ideas about marriage and fidelity, with so many husbands absent and so many wives left behind. Placed into Thalheimer's hands, Borchert's rather tame critique of patriarchal society gives way to a predilection for gender-bending, though in Berlin in the 21st century that seems more gratuitous than edgy. God is portrayed by Peter Luppa in a white silk slip, while the Cabaret Director played by Tilo Nest wears a white lace dress and black roller skates. Whatever Thalheimer's intentions, the choice to use cross-dressing in these characters seems to depend on some potentially homophobic and misogynistic stereotypes. As the representative of the art world, the Cababet Director evokes the cliché of artists as gay; meanwhile, God's powerlessness is equated with his apparent femininity. Regardless, the soldier is the central character, and in this production Beckmann is played by a female actor. Without looking at the program before the performance begins, the first time one hears Beckmann's voice as that of a woman, one might find it jolting. Once Kathrin Wehlisch appears, it is clear she is Beckmann – a name that carries its gender within it. Perhaps Thalheimer hopes to accentuate the sympathy the audience feels for Beckmann – seeing Wehlisch dressed in a large sweater and leggings rather than in a military uniform renders Beckmann a sympathetic figure. Any initial distress and disbelief at this unexpected gender-bending conception rapidly subside, and Beckmann simply becomes a character in the play, almost »degendered« – *ein Mensch*. It worked. For us, Wehlisch and her performance *almost* saved this production that was bizarre in so many other ways.

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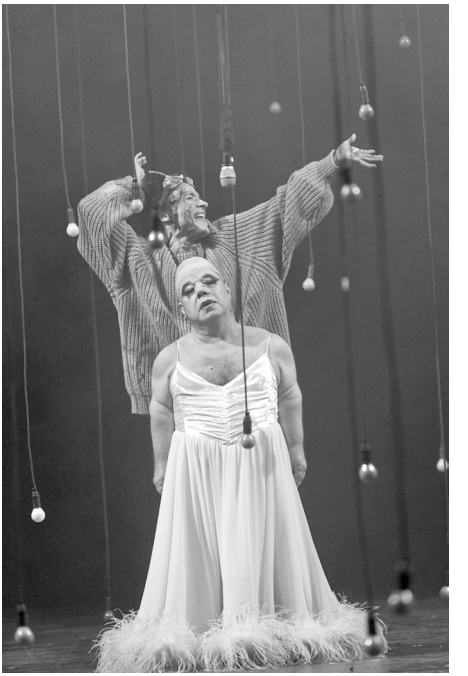
Fig. 2: Kathrin Wehlisch as Beckmann, Peter Luppa as God. Photo by Matthias Horn. Courtesy of the Berliner Ensemble.



Given the skill of Wehlisch's portrayal, Thalheimer's adaptation raises important questions about – for lack of a better term – cross-gender casting. We know, of course, that in Shakespeare's day and up through the 18th century in the Papal States, women were conventionally portrayed by male actors (usually adolescents) in drag because the presence of actual women on stage was considered immoral. The modernist era introduced the concept of theatrical performances by women taking on traditional men's roles. There have been many examples over the years, as far back as 1899 when Sarah Bernhardt played the role of Hamlet, and as recent as last month, when a production of Brecht's *Galileo* in Raleigh, NC, cast a woman in the leading role. What about the inverse? Would a production with, say, a male Mother Courage work? Might a director cast a male actor in the role of Claire Zachanassian in Dürrenmatt's *Besuch der alten Dame*? Of course, the question that immediately arises would be, why do it? What is the ultimate point of cross-gender casting in our day? Is the desire to make a work »frisch und neu« a good enough reason? In Thalheimer's production, Beckmann's portrayal by a woman worked as a great tour-de-force for the actor Wehlisch, but did it really reveal something more about the play's

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message than if the role had been traditionally cast? Was the point to suggest that all humans experience modern warfare the same way, regardless of how their bodies are gendered? Surely not. If we accept Thalheimer's claim that his production alludes to the Ukraine war, perhaps he is asking us to consider the role of gender in that very conflict. Although the combatants in Ukraine are mainly male, as in most wars, we are reminded that many women of Ukraine serve as combatants as well. Casting the lead character of the returning soldier as a woman may have been meant to remind us of this. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that women, children, and the elderly make up the majority of refugees and displaced persons in the Ukraine war. Reports of Russian soldiers raping Ukrainian women underscore that war is all too gender-aware, and that women often bear the trauma of war differently than men. When a hospital maternity ward was destroyed during the shelling of Mariupol, the image of a wounded pregnant woman on a stretcher amid the rubble captured global attention – both mother and child later died.[2] If Thalheimer's intention is to recall that women, too, can be combatants, then it comes at the expense of acknowledging the gender-based violence and trauma this war once again inflicts unevenly on women. Absent any clear exposition of that issue in the play, the decision to cast the protagonist against type does not seem to have had much point beyond initial surprise, a surprise that quickly wears off as other surprises come and go.

Fig. 3: Tilo Nest as the Cabaret Director, Kathrin Wehlish as Beckmann. Photo by Matthias Horn. Courtesy of the Berliner Ensemble.

2 Cf. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60734706.

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If Thalheimer wants to suggest that all casting should be gender-neutral, then we might consider what (if anything) we lose if that becomes standard. Perhaps provoking such questions was part of the director's, if not the dramaturg's, goal. Thalheimer's realization of Borchert's play brings to the fore issues about casting that stray beyond the original text's dramatic conception, which would suggest that subversive casting can be destructive to the essence of a drama and a playwright's intention when creating it. This is certainly what critics of *Regietheater* decry. Furthermore, it seems to prioritize aesthetic questions about casting and costume that are not unique to any particular subject matter, and indeed could be asked about any production at all.

We see, for example, that debates about typecasting currently abound in the context of cinema and television on a wide range of subjects. To mention but one example, Tom Hanks recently commented on his Oscar-winning role in *Philadelphia*, in which he played a gay man with AIDS facing discrimination. Hanks averred that he would not take on that role today, thirty years later, explaining that that »we are beyond that,« i.e. we can find gay actors to play gay roles. Does that mean that, conversely, LGBTQ+ actors can play only LGBTQ+ characters on stage and in film? When is authenticity important and when not? And what exactly is authenticity in the context of playing a role, which is inherently an act of pretense? Debates about »whitewashing« (where white actors portray characters of color) or cisgender actors portraying trans characters raise similar points. If this is the debate Thalheimer is trying to engage, then it is one that distracts from the war in Ukraine, or indeed, from war in general. Rather than focus on events in the world, the production seems chiefly concerned with art – that is, with itself.

Other characters also reflect Thalheimer's departure from Borchert's consistent focus on the lingering atrocities of war. While Borchert portrayed Death as a street sweeper, Thalheimer omits this metaphor, replacing it with an appropriately bloated figure with overlapping layers of flesh, like a grotesque Terry Gilliam cutout. But where a *Strassenfeger* gives us a loaded metaphor for a death-saturated society, Thalheimer's Death has no recognizable social function, certainly nothing evoking sanitizing a sullied Germany. Rather than reinforcing Borchert's message, which is so well conveyed through dialog, Thalheimer's whimsical approach obscures it. Another example: the Oberst, played by Veit Schubert, is an ostentatiously decorated officer whose entire head is covered in shaving cream by Beckmann, who takes a straight-edge razor to his superior in a nod to Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (or Steven Sondheim's *Sweeny Todd*); the scene leaves mounds of lather on the stage for the remainder of the play, to no apparent purpose.

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Fig. 4: Kathrin Wehlisch as Beckmann, Jonathan Kempf as Death. Photo by Matthias Horn. Courtesy of the Berliner Ensemble.

Fig. 5: Kathrin Wehlish as Beckmann, Veit Schubert as the Colonel. Photo by Matthias Horn. Courtesy of the Berliner Ensemble.

Another curious choice was the decision also to give the role of Der Andere to Wehlisch, rendering her character in some sense psychotic. When the Other speaks to Beckmann, Wehlisch cocks her head to the side and speaks in falsetto. The effect is eerie and powerful, perhaps one of the better innovations that Thalheimer stages. War has made Beckmann insane in this production, and everyone else, too, although Beckmann's doubled self seems to be only one with the capacity to perceive it. The

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silent scream that Beckmann emits during the play and again at the play's end is almost spine-tingling in its expression of outrage. But we are left wondering, where should we, the audience members, direct that outrage beyond this decontextualized universe of cavalier clowns?

As the lights come on and the audience exits the theater, volunteers are ready to accept donations for the Ukraine, including for the many refugees, mostly women and children, who have found shelter in Berlin. This action is announced to the audience before the lights go down and the play begins, offering a sort of frame for Thalheimer's play. The website of the Berliner Ensemble elaborates:

> How much responsibility do we take for the wars »outside our door« that we are involved in? To what extent do we care about the consequences of the violence »outside our door« that we profit from? The traumatised veteran Beckmann returns from the war, but a real home-coming is not possible for him. He remains »outside the door«, on a rainy night, on the street. He screams society's collective guilt into their faces and demands answers.[3]

It is entirely admirable that Thalheimer & Co. have decided to do something about a war outside Germany's door, and in that gesture they are very much aligned with Borchert's drama, which ends with Beckmann's plea for someone to answer his call for help. There is nothing in Thalheimer's staging, though, that acknowledges the traumatic history linking Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, even though Borchert's Beckmann is most likely returning from the Eastern Front of World War II.

To be sure, Thalheimer, like Borchert, seems concerned with *all* war – and all of us as implicated subjects, to use Michael Rothberg's term.[4] But in refusing to draw distinctions among wars, Thalheimer's universalizing gesture sidesteps a fuller engagement with questions of guilt and responsibility. Indeed, he rejects any interpretation of the drama as historically specific.

> Für mich geht es nicht um den Zweiten Weltkrieg oder um deutsche Soldaten, sondern um einen Menschen, der einen Krieg erlebt hat. Daraus erklärt sich auch unsere Besetzung: Beckmann wird von Kathrin Wehlisch gespielt. Schon bei der der ersten Lektüre und bei der allerersten Konzeptionsprobe war mir klar, dass es für mich um ein universelles Thema geht, nicht um deutsches Zeitkolorit.[5]
>
> (»For me, it [i. e. the play] is not about the Second World War or about German soldiers, but rather about a human being who has experienced a war. That's the

3 Cf. http://www.berliner-ensemble.de/en/production/draussen-vor-der-tur.

4 Michael Rothberg: The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators. In: Cultural Memory in the Present, ed. by Hent de Vries. Stanford: Stanford UP 2019.

5 Cf. http://www.tip-berlin.de/kultur/theater/michael-thalheimer-draussen-vor-der-tuer-berliner-ensemble-interview/

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explanation for our casting, too: Beckmann is played by Kathrin Wehlisch. As early as the first reading and the very first conceptual designs, it was clear to me that it's about a universal theme, not German-tinted history« – our translation).

Of course, the Second World War evokes a collective trauma that extends well beyond Germany's borders. As we can see in Russia's claims that Ukraine's government is led by Nazis, the last century's wars reverberate in the current conflict in Ukraine. By dehistoricizing the play, Thalheimer seems to be taking a page from other German intellectuals and activists who see war as the enemy, not those who provoke it. Recently a number of public figures in Germany, led by philosopher Richard Precht and author Juli Zeh, signed an open letter calling upon western countries to cease military assistance to Ukraine, and instead to put all their efforts into bringing Putin and Zelensky to the negotiating table.[6] The letter has met with anger by many, who echo a sentiment expressed in 1994 by Peter Schneider in the context of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Schneider decried Germany's refusal to condemn Serbian aggression, and he saw Germany's refusal to draw any distinction between victims and perpetrators as a moral failure.[7] Critics of Precht and Zeh note a similar refusal to distinguish between invader and invaded. Rather than take a position in the conflict, Thalheimer expresses the belief that we cannot judge, for we are condemned to spectatorship.[8]

In this way, Thalheimer's production is at least consistent, for his bold staging renders the audience as viewers of a theatrical spectacle. Perhaps Thalheimer relies on the audience's familiarity with German history and current events to supply the historical specificity that he prefers to omit. For many audience members he may be right. But for a younger generation less steeped in the knowledge of the 20th century amid current-day crises, the dismissal of history as a relevant factor in the war in Ukraine seems a lost opportunity. Beckmann's silent cry is poignant, but in Thalheimer's staging it is a protest with no discernible object in the world just outside the theater's doors.

6 Cf. http://www.zeit.de/2022/27/ukraine-krieg-frieden-waffenstillstand.

7 Cf. http://www.spiegel.de/politik/der-suendenfall-europas-a-2ace5b03-0002-0001-0000-000013684449.

8 In the same interview with tipBerlin, Thalheimer states that »Wir sind verdammt zum Zuschauen.« Like Precht and Zeh, he also casts doubt on arming Ukraine as a solution.

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