

WITNESSING A NEW STAGE IN GERMAN THEATRE

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Walking through a garden designed and planted by refugees starting life anew in Germany, each plant in a suitcase, I head into the related exhibition at the Europäisches Museum, in Berlin's Dahlem.

*daHEIM: glances into fugitive lives*¹ explores the migrant experience and forces the visitor to stop and consider the individual humanity of the people who made the art. The exhibition logo, a figure carrying their identity, an outsized fingerprint, on their back. A huge Hiroshige wave transforms the end wall into a sea of people facing borders of bedframes – “my dreams do not end at borders.” Among the wrecked beds, ghostly installations of clothes, everyday clothes that anyone might wear, on the walls are drawn detailed maps of convoluted journeys, journeys to find a place to simply have a life. Everywhere, people's voices: “My only possession is time” – “We are people who had to leave in order to have a life” – “I stood at the sea and all I had was my soul, and even that I had to risk in search of a life.”

All begging the question; and then what? To quote Austrian playwright, Elfriede Jelinek's play, *Die Schutzbefohlenen (Charges: The Supplicants)*,² written in 2013 in response to immigration injustice in Vienna: “who will make sure that we will also be seen as *beings*?” Deeply moved by the exhibition, I wonder how this question might be addressed through my art world, that of theatre, and how this experience might appear on stage. So many questions. How to work with this situation creatively, opening up and finding something new in a wider dialogue that genuinely interests society, without recourse to forced political correctness and imposed guilt? How to develop and sustain such theatre for the future, to embed it in society? What about cultural as well as linguistic translation; how do we know what's truly meant? Can fragmentation and post-dramatic theatre segue into other theatre traditions? How to ensure an independent and equal voice for all? And whose voice is actually heard?

What follows is my witnessing of exile theatre in Germany, primarily made by refugees, between 2016 and 2018. Some of which features on my blogsite, *Outofthe-*

1 Kunstasyl, 2016–17. 'DaHeim: glances into fugitive lives'. Europäisches Museum, Berlin.

2 Jelinek, E. 2013. 'Charges: The Supplicants', translated by Honegger, G., 2016. Seagull Books, London, p15.

BlackBox.co.uk, a gathering of shows, people, interviews, meetings – which along with my notebooks, is quoted throughout.³

The year before, in 2015, Angela Merkel had thrown open the German borders to Syrian refugees, famously announcing “Wir schaffen das.” (We can *do* this). A gauntlet taken up and thrown farther by Shermin Langhoff of Berlin’s Maxim Gorki Theater, when she galvanized much of the theatrical response across the country. Theatres across Germany had risen to the challenge, responding with all manner of welcomes – plays, workshops, events, cafes, even direct support for the refugees, connecting people. As Leonie Webb of Gorki’s Exil Ensemble observed to me:

“Shermin’s really good at seeing needs, identifying who’s not represented already, ideas that people want to think about. It’s not just about ethnicity. And we don’t just want to speak to one part of the pie.”

And indeed, there are so many people, so many groups, that need representation on stage, to have their voices heard. The **Roma Armee**’s playing at the Gorki – an angry howl of young Roma asserting their identity. “*This is what we have in common, our diversity*” they cry, telling their stories, addressing issues within their culture head-on – issues of sexuality, under-age marriage, and modernisation – but also telling of oppression, brutal dismissive treatment founded in prejudice, at the hands of others. . . “*we have a disappeared history but there will come a time when you beg us to remember.*” A sentiment echoed in the discussion afterwards about how people outside of the mainstream of society get treated – *Gorki reminds us of the words of Hannah Arendt: “The community of European peoples went to pieces when – and because – it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted.”*

The particular stage in question is situated in a city that is home to both the Memorial for the murdered Roma and Sinti peoples and now, to Europe’s first-ever Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC). Berlin – a city of terrible contradictions, but always changing, always moving – is a natural home for this show. Clearly, the ongoing movement of people and the need to cross borders will continue, whether because of war or climate change or even because people want to move around, to try living somewhere else. Far from shutting down, the social debate around migration and borders needs to expand, along with our thinking.

And yet, after the initial enthusiasm and general welcome of 2015, other responses rose. Support had been growing for the far-right wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a reaction against ‘the other’, not just the usual xenophobic

3 Much of the material in this article derives from the author’s 2017–18 British Council funded project exploring refugee theatre in Germany. This was reported through a blogsite – www.outoftheblackbox.co.uk – and the various quotations from that site have been included to indicate their source rather than using repeated references.

kneejerk – “they’ll take our jobs” – but a deep fear for a notion of traditional German culture, whipped up further with populist politicking. German society divided between those who welcomed its new citizens and the diversity they brought and those who put up barriers, protesting a perceived assault on *Heimat*, a deeply bedded sense of ‘German-ness’. A disturbing new organisation, PEGIDA emerged. German theatre director, Falk Richter, disturbed by the dual fears unfolding in his society – not just the fear of change and the unknown ‘other’, but more fundamentally, the fear of the associated resurgence of the far-right wing, wrote and directed a play – ***Fear***. Staged at Berlin’s prestigious Theater Schaubühne, it sparked an aggressive and sustained reaction from the AfD.

And the play? A warning of dream fragments coming home to roost... Dancers shimmering in and out of shadow – is this how fear moves? Images of Nazis, past and present, loom on screen amid huge green zombies and images of AfD politicians. Set in a comfortable middle-class home, the characters explore the rise of the new right-wing, populism, nationalism, and perhaps most importantly, the complacency of their own lives. Europe is possibly sleepwalking into a nightmare.

Really? Had modern German culture become so fixed, so fragile, so fearful? I went to the home of a veritable pioneer of internationalism in German theatre, ***Theater an der Ruhr*** in Mülheim in North Rhine-Westphalia where Artistic Director, Roberto Ciulli has spent more than 35 years pursuing a vision of a theatre that takes impossible turns.

“A vision for a theatre that would develop intercultural understanding, exploring new philosophies and attitudes from other cultures, taking work across international borders and bringing work back to be seen in Germany... Bringing new ideas and viewpoints, uninfluenced by our western media. The idea was that theatre is about a journey, to travel into new cultures, to be interested in the things you don’t know. No-one else was doing this in Germany then.” said Executive Director, Sven Schlötcke.”

There’s not much Ciulli hasn’t done in internationalizing the Mülheim theatre – there’ve been many theatre exchanges, festivals of Eastern Mediterranean theatre, a home for a Roma company and his Silk Road project connecting with countries along the ancient trading routes, finding ways to communicate, circumventing the censors if needed, not unlike staging theatre in the old DDR:

“All our shows feature symbolism and representation over words. Censors only focus on fixed rules. It’s like in Iran – men and women are forbidden to touch, but how much more does it say if onstage, they don’t touch by only one centimetre...”

More recently, they've supported two refugee companies – *Ruhrorter*, an independent company making site-specific work with refugees in the post-industrial Ruhr landscape, and 'intercultural theatre lab', *Collective Ma'louba*, Arabic-speaking and 'penetrating the taboos of Arabic and European society' – both members of the Post-Heimat network. As Schlötcke concludes:

"the understanding that flowed from all this was wonderful – transcending language. The language of theatre is universal. The Art itself is the opportunity to communicate. And this travelling insight brought a journey through aesthetic thinking too."

Back in Berlin, I attended a poetry reading by French-Algerian poet, Habib Tengour:

Chasing a place dream
Of this place that bears place name
Crushed in exodus hunger
A place that is but the expression
Of the desire to place you there where voice
Carries away.

*Aleppo 2*⁴

I'm there on an introduction from the French poet, Pierre Joris, who argues that the future is all about translation, as poets, and people, become more nomadic. Like Ciulli, he sees the importance of exchanging cultures, breaking down barriers, not building them. Reading his blog later reminds me that much of twentieth-century Art is about collage, juxtaposition – the strands of tension between what fits and what doesn't, being key to making it work. German post-dramatic theatre is likewise a collage – mixing genres, texts, interpretation – that can offer a richer, often more thought-provoking experience to the viewer – "*an art-based way of questioning authority, tradition and the establishment*," to quote one of my interviewees from the Free University's Institute for Theater Studies. Ah, here was a great opportunity for a new kind of theatre within Germany, making it easier to open up, to exchange ideas on a practical as well as a theoretical basis. Well yes, but... ,

"there's a difference between picking up a public conversation and actually committing to fostering a different kind of aesthetic environment that lasts and creating structures that last."

So now, where was the theatre of Germany's new citizens? In whose voice did they speak?

4 Tengour, H., 2017–18. 'Already Berlin', www.tamaas.org – accessed 4 June 2021.

I talked with Necati Öziri, who had run the Maxim Gorki Theater's Studio Я for a time – “a place beyond all borders; an art haven for marginalised subjects and ways of thinking, a platform for discussion and creative processes – post national, queer, empowering.”⁵

Moving on from defining refugees in terms of their journeys, their terrible experiences, to them expressing themselves as human beings, people concerned with universal issues that affect everyone. A post-migrant approach...

“The idea was not to talk about ‘others’, but that ‘others’ should speak for themselves” said Öziri. Enter... **the Exil Ensemble** – a group of theatre practitioners drawn mostly from Syria, but also Afghanistan and Palestine. With total control over their repertoire and staging. “Their work also gives German theatregoers an opportunity, to see their world through different eyes. Langhoff terms this, ‘desintegration’: opening up German society to celebrating and preserving transculturalism, rather than the oft-proposed integration, which just homogenises everyone into whatever is meant by ‘German-ness,’” continued Öziri.

Exil Ensemble's programme ranged across theatrical approaches, tropes, genres, exploring what mattered to them, what matters to anyone. And outside of the Gorki support and branding, they were indeed totally in control. In *Winterreise* they worked with Israeli director, Yael Ronen, on a narrative ensemble-derived piece to present their own experiences and perceptions of Germany through the device of a bus trip around Germany. Another show, *Skelett eines Elefanten in der Wüste*, written and directed by Exil's Artistic Director, Ayham Majid Agha immersed the audience in a city, a society, upheaved by civil war:

We feel the intensity of the city under fire – the characters leap up above the walls around us, telling us about their world, the circus, their neighbours, trying to come to terms with their own feelings in this impossible situation. No-one ever knows what's coming. A sniper traces us with his red laser dot. This isn't (relatively) benign CCTV surveillance but the scrutiny of snipers – the danger of the predator. A tiny fragment of a broken society. How can anyone really understand these experiences who hasn't lived through them? Even the tangle of language in the surtitles reminds us of the divisions between people, between lives.

And away from the German-run institutions, lots more was happening – Öziri recommended a visit to **Club Al-Hakawati**, a grassroots theatre group working at Theater X in Berlin's Moabit.

5 Maxim Gorki Theater, online. 'www.gorki.de/en/studio-ya' – accessed 7 June 2021.

“No-one gives us our voice. We take it. We support each other, help each other, raise issues together. It’s not enough for refugees to survive, they need to live,” says the group’s Artistic Director, Ahmed Shah. “It’s not the pure form, but we’re the hakawatis for the modern age... our stories come from being marginalised... we don’t want to be treated as background for a play.”

This last point, a reference to a 2014 production of *Die Schutzbefohlenen* which came in for criticism for objectifying the refugee members of its cast. Relegated to the role of a largely non-speaking chorus, they were virtually treated like props. Not at all in line with Jelinek’s original intention when writing her ‘language artwork’.

“We don’t want integration, we want to develop our own voice. We use carnival – no author, many voices, dialect, gender-mixing... all individual stories told simultaneously so you don’t know which one to listen to...” continues Shah. Other members of the group chime in:

“I’ve always lived in Germany – I never saw bombing – but I saw a racist war, an emotional war, a discrimination war.”

“My father’s a Palestinian... he can never go home, never touch the earth of his homeland. This earth means so much – more than gold – the beautiful red colour, the smell. I was born here in Germany, so I could go... he asked me to bring back an olive tree... and when I gave it to him, it was the most emotional moment of my whole life. He looked so happy, so sad – ‘This is the only connection I will ever have with my own land,’ he said. We both cried... this earth, it matters so much.”

And the theatre? Club Al-Hakawati work collectively bouncing ideas off one another, using all manner of forms – Ahmed again;

“this tradition of poetry in Arabic countries is very strong, so for our new piece, based on Picasso’s painting, **Guernica**, we’ve written in verse, rhymed verse, felt verse – mixing poetry into the movement, the acting. And the movement becomes dance, a universal code for the audience. After all, doesn’t movement convey alienation better than words? Do things slowly – there’s more power. Bodies speak so much. We’re using movement to transcend language... And there’s a great opportunity to mix the languages – Arabic, German, English even.

I think about all those shows I’d seen in German with English subtitles and those points at which I sensed that the translation didn’t really ring true. All those life-times of German culture that would always be partially lost to me, coming from the UK... and likewise Arabic cultures outside of my Eurocentric experience. It’s not just about the words. Language is full of unspoken, implied meanings and connections. Is it ever possible to ensure a full translation, to truly communicate what’s happening in another culture? And so often, theatrical translation is left till the end

as an almost administrative task – although I will learn later about the idea of a Cultural Mediator. . .

I hear about another self-starting theatre group. Originally set up by three teenage refugees in Hamburg – **Hajusom** – *an ensemble aiming to empower young people to find their own creative expression and helping members to professionalise. Growing through a process of ‘each one teach one’ they’ve built a sustainable, cross-generational continuity since 1999. The shows have been post-migrant for years, focussing on themes like teenage love, climate change, posthumanism. . .*

By now, the Exil Ensemble have moved on to interpreting the German canon, as they take on Heiner Müller’s **Hamletmaschine**, itself a mashup of Shakespeare’s most revered play, through the lens of the Syrian civil war, with German director, Sebastian Nübling. And then it’ll be Russian avant-garde writer, Daniil Kharm’s **Elizaveta Bam** – a piece of proto-Absurdist theatre requiring the audience to rely on their intuition rather than their intellect. A veritable tumble of work. Working together with German practitioners but always ringing with their own voice.

It’s not only people that get displaced – sometimes it’s the shows themselves too. Hanane Hajj Ali’s one-woman show, **Jogging – Theatre in Progress** at the tiny TAK Theater in Kreuzberg, part of Theatertreffen, is a case in point. That subtitle is literal – Hajj Ali reserves the right to change the play each time she performs it. She lives in Lebanon but no theatre there will stage her work, because of the artistic content. And because she refuses on principle to submit a script to the theatrical censors. So, for theatrical performances, she can only play abroad. Her theme, the search for freedom – of movement, of spirit, of life – almost impossible for a woman in Lebanon. . .

A bare stage. A woman circles the space, jogging slowly. She stops, looks at us and says simply: “I was like salt that had dissolved in water.” She tells stories of women, women wanting to bear witness, to scream against the stifling patriarchy that denies them autonomy in their own lives, her own story threaded throughout. Medea’s story from ancient times. Two others, more contemporary. Yvonne kills herself and her daughters, not as vengeance, but to save them, not wanting them to “suffer the torment that I endured.”

She records a suicide note for her husband, but the words are not hers, they are those of Virginia Woolf, the references crossing cultures. Zahra must grieve for her three sons, all ‘martyrs’ to war.

Hajj Ali challenges the notion that women’s happiness and sense of fulfilment must be defined in relation to men and to family, not in their own independent achievement or decision. And she needs to tell this story. “Theatre cannot die,” she says in an interview after winning a major international award,⁶ “sometimes it re-

6 Greene, A., 2021. www.americantheatre.org/2021/02/09/hanane-hajj-ali-jogging-for-survival-in-beirut/ – accessed 9 June 2021.

mains latent, only to explode again like water that can't be trapped by stone. It erupts like justice, like freedom."

The situation of women is a theme in several of the shows that I discover. **The Boat People Projekt** a refugee company in Göttingen in Lower Saxony, presented a collaborative piece, **Nora**, from Syrian director Wessam Talhouq, which tells the story of a Syrian woman's dilemma, whether to stay or go – "every time I made the decision to leave, I remembered a hundred reasons to stay. And when I decided to stay, I remembered a hundred reasons to leave."

Over at Berlin's Volksbühne (under the controversial new management of Chris Dercon – an intriguing story, but one for another day) another play centred around this theme. The actors, all women, specifically Syrian refugees, living in exile in Berlin. Couched as an audition to cast a contemporary version of Euripides' **Iphigenia**, the play was written collectively by the cast and writer, Mohammad Al Attar, himself a Syrian refugee. Answering questions from the Casting Director, the nine women reveal individual experiences of war, the difficulties of starting life anew in a different country, life within a patriarchal society offering a picture of oppression, inevitable suffering but surely somewhere, a shred of hope. This piece, the final instalment of Al Attar's international trilogy referencing the ancient Greeks, the first two, **The Trojan Women** and **Antigone** staged in Jordan and Lebanon respectively – the same issue spread across three countries.

Which brings me nicely to Mudar Alhaggi's **Your Love is Fire** staged by **Collective Ma'louba**. A metaphorical piece about fate, external control, dealing with what life throws at you, in this case, a war. Or more accurately, a playwright. . .

Alhaggi wrote the play in three different cities as he left Syria to seek a new life in Germany – an experience through which he had virtually no control over his own fate. I ask Mudar; would the play have been different in Syria? And he says; "it wouldn't've happened on the big stages in Syria because it wouldn't fit – this modern idiom, this content." The story belongs to two women, Rand, who stays in Syria because of her relationship with Khaldoun, a Syrian army soldier. And her flatmate, Hala who's leaving for Germany any day now for a new life with, well who exactly? Khaldoun comes home on 24 hours leave but dramatic artifice keeps thwarting reunion – one scene runs three times, each with a different outcome. Slowly the action is subsumed by the writer's own story as he takes centre stage, at one point developing writer's block, his own loss of control, while the characters petition him to free them up to live their lives. Unmoved, he determines that, like him, they must wait, wait endlessly to find out their destinies; "There is no beginning to the music. No end to the walk in the devil's garden."

The dislocated tone as the piece progresses emulates the post-dramatic structure so prevalent in German theatre, but in this case, it's borne of life circumstance rather than aesthetic artifice, the very displacement of the writer, bared on stage.

So much inspiring theatre, art, poetry – so much food for new thought. But at root an unease. How would all this activity sustain as the big Staatstheaters move onto the next issue? Funding in the ‘Freie Szene’ outside of this sector is insecure, perilous even. How could ‘desintegration’ be assured and German theatre, and indeed society, remain engaged with these new perspectives and cultural practices?

My final interview was with Anne Schulz of city theatre, Münchner Kammerspiele. Under its new director, Matthias Lilienthal, the theatre had reinvented, putting internationalism and transculturalism at its heart, designating itself as a welcome theatre, establishing a broad programme of events, opening up to all the city’s residents regardless of where they came from, what they stood for or how much money they had. Artists from all over the world were invited to stage work there. One such piece, *Der Fall Meursault – Eine Gegendarstellung*, from Iranian director, Amir Reza Koohestani, interrogates a classic text from the European canon, Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger*, from an alternative perspective. Playing across a carpeted stage, increasingly buried in sand, issues pile up – issues of identity and the intersection between Arabic and European cultures – through naming the Arabic man that Meursault so casually dispatches in the original. Moving the focus to imagine *his* story. Adapted from a controversial novel by Algerian journalist, Kamel Daoud which on its publication in 2013 had met with both acclaim and hostility.

The Kammerspiele and Ruhrorter from Mülheim, had initiated a meeting of the six companies at the heart of this book – *Post-Heimat Encounter#1* – and Anne invited me along. The name referencing the desire to move beyond ‘integration’ to embrace a diverse society for all. A moment of consolidation, review – a reboot, a new beginning. The purpose, to consider establishing a network to, in the words of Ruhrorter’s Jonas Tinius:

“share successes and challenges, the funding systems, the aesthetic practices, how they’re dealing with culture and language together, ensuring that all parties have an equal voice.”

Six companies introduced themselves and a fascinating and inspiring picture began to emerge, along with a realisation that this proposed network should be crossing borders far beyond Germany. The work ranged across generations, across cultures, across aesthetics. Committed and ambitious. An ambition challenged by issues of language and cultural translation and by resources and funding but undimmed for all that.

An exciting couple of days at the Post-Heimat conference ensued in which all my previous questions and more started to crystallise. Initially, we addressed two strands – Funding and Aesthetics – the former practical, but vital, stuff around the operation, organisational issues particularly the location of control, sustainability, and

the very real difficulties of finding and maintaining funding. The latter, considering audiences and communication, the issue of cultural translation. . .

“Think about the power that the translator has over the non-Arabic speaking audience – what if it’s wrong?” said one participant. “And then there’s the audiences – they’re a vital part of any theatre piece. How do we get them to engage? And how can we work with the communities that are hostile to diversity, some of whom feel ignored themselves?”

And throughout both discussions; *Everybody agreed that diversity should apply at every level, not just on and around the stage, but from administrative and aesthetic decision-making to festival juries too, but the practicalities of this are complex. And this diversity shouldn’t just be rooted in nationality, it should be truly intersectional reflecting all the complex variety of humanity. So much of the funding currently goes to people organising ‘the other’ rather than ‘the other’ directly. Much of the work is produced under the umbrellas of established theatres because they have the local understanding. And the resources. However well-intentioned, this must beg a question: where is the power? Whose voice is speaking? And in a truly intercultural group, it’s not just about developing training and familiarisation programmes. Ultimately don’t we need to find a new idea of what theatre should be, a new aesthetic?*

A public symposium – *Witnessing Transitions and Possible Futures* – brought in another perspective, the notion of visibility, as well as further thoughts on diversity;

“most European theatres are effectively private spaces because you can do what you like on the stage with a complicit audience, so it all stays within the bubble... But what happens when you leave the black box? To regain theatre’s importance in our society, we must paradoxically leave the theatre itself.” Theatre is the most functional and playful laboratory that we have for trying out what can happen in society at large. But we need to update it with new perspectives borne out of a deeper understanding of each other. The art of translation is crucial, reinforcing the words with movement, the way we create the best space for understanding. Even something quite obvious, a reverse approach – “how about some Arabic-West translation for a change?”

In Germany, the involvement of theatre in social cohesion moved on apace with the Integration Act of 2005. Cultural participation became a buzzword but it mostly remained about the public being audience rather than maker and the same applies to diversity. “The theatres have been bringing in immigrants and calling it ‘diverse’ for years but until we hand over control, it isn’t. We need diversity at every level.” And that’s where we’re at now. A clear recurring theme.

And a play. The Kammerspiele had recently established the **Open Border Ensemble**, with the aim of enabling the continuation of professional life outside Syria for four actors, in a similar way to the Exil Ensemble at the Gorki. Creating their first show, *Miunikh-Damaskus*, on a devised ensemble basis with a German director and additional actor, they had developed a new creative role, that of ‘Cultural Mediator’ in a bid to transcend cultural and aesthetic division. Aiming to reach out to a broader

audience, they had also decided to present the piece away from the theatre in various locations across the city – the symposium in action. We headed off to experience this show first-hand and:

settled down in front of a 'pop-up' mobile stage outside a community centre. . . joined at one point by three curious passing children who unceremoniously plonked themselves down at the front, we watched a piece of collective writing, deconstructing cultural stereotypes, exploring how everyday cultural differences between the two cities actually point up the similarities, our core humanity – whether through falling in love, or discovering beer, heading off to a party – simply getting on with living. To quote the blurb: "The memories of two cities and their presence merge into a possibly limitless city. Wait a minute, where are we? Munich or Damascus?"

As I headed home, I passed through the big central square in the city centre. Past a PEGIDA display packing up – aerial views sweep across forests, fantasy castles, German towns interspersed with images of churches and children flickering across a huge screen. Accompanied by soaring choral church music. This was *their* dream Germany, the things perceived as threatened. I wondered what they would have made of what I had just seen. How we might begin to square this circle. . . and then I thought about the decision of the Munich City Council not to renew Lilienthal's contract, a shutting down of so much possibility. . .

To find new perspectives, to keep growing as a society, we all need to shift ourselves, to become inwardly nomadic as well as outwardly open. To celebrate who we all are, when we finally find a life.

