

# Thinking Diversity Anew for Equal Rights in Performing Arts

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**Abstract** In this article, I discuss the inclusion-oriented understanding of immigration-generated diversity by German cultural policymakers. I argue that a change in mindset in cultural policy is imperative for developing and advocating for a new non-discriminatory pluralistic discourse for the performing arts scene where an *Umleitkultur* (detour culture), proposed by the PostHeimat Network, can flourish. I explore a diversity vision following the idea of *Umleitkultur*, which offers a new form of engagement with “difference”.

First, I examine the prerequisites of a diversity discourse in which Whiteness, Christianity, masculinity, heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness are not seen as the norm of society. In this context, I introduce the concept of *thinking and acting interculturally* as a cognitive tool for a cultural policy that strives to pluralise the performing arts field. Then, I propose a set of criteria for thinking and acting interculturally, envisioned as a means of a semantic shift in cultural policymaking towards recognising and validating multiple othernesses. Lastly, I claim that cultural policy’s task is to generate framework conditions that foster bottom-up processes, aiming at an accessible performing arts scene for the entire artistic workforce.

## Diversity is Not an Instrument of Inclusion

Since the early 2000s, the promotion of cultural diversity has been one of the main objectives of cultural policies of the *Bundesländer* (federal states) and municipalities in Germany. The federal government also supports diversity-centred projects through additional incentive programmes from various funding bodies. However, promoting diversity through canonised arts is often seen as the ultimate remedy for all societal issues. A glance at the funding structure and the concepts promoted through various funding programmes reveals the obvious. Although Germany is characterised by social diversity, diversity has mainly been associated with labour migration from the 1950s onwards. In cultural-political terms, diversity and migration are firmly linked with one another, and cultural diversity is introduced as

part of an inclusive framework to integrate “culturally distant” immigrants<sup>1</sup>. Hence, diversity is seen as a point of destination that will be reached on the condition of these “particular immigrants” integrating into the imaginary homogenous German culture (Canyürek 2019: 404).

The ethnicity-focused cultural-political discourse on diversity singles out “migrant others” (Mecheril 2003) and lately refugees<sup>2</sup> as the addressee of policy measures. In parallel to this approach, cultural policies have been introducing countless diversity funding schemes at all three levels of government under the motto of “promoting diversity” through concepts such as interculturality and transculturality. The funding institutions often evaluate inter- and transcultural projects as good examples of integrating migrant others and refugees into society and emphasise the contribution of these projects to social cohesion and dialogue between different cultures (Canyürek 2021). In some cases, even project owners do not agree with the labelling of their work as integration-based participatory projects, and they underline that they produce artistic work together with migrantised and refugee artists.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as stressed by theatre scholar Azadeh Sharifi, “policy bodies and cultural institutions treat interculturality as if it is synonymous with socio-culture<sup>4</sup> practice, and for them, intercultural art per se does not meet the quality standards of ‘German high culture’” (2011: 242).

This intense focus on cultural integration designates migrant others and refugees as the sole agencies of intercultural and transcultural encounters, those

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- 1 I use the phrase “immigrant” to refer to its use in cultural policy, aware of the fact that it is not a neutral term since it designates a distance between people of German and non-German descent.
  - 2 I employ terms such as “refugees” and “people seeking refuge” based on their usage by cultural-political actors and performing arts institutions and initiatives, aware of the fact that they are not synonymous. I seek to, on the one hand, draw attention to the different applications of the term “refugee” in cultural policy and theatre practice; on the other hand, I aim to underline the difficulty of conceptualising a legislative term without disparaging people to their legal status or contributing to the construction of a collective “refugee identity”.
  - 3 As part of my doctoral study, I examined three independent theatre initiatives, namely boat people projekt, Hajusom, and Ruhrorter, and conducted interviews with the representatives of these three theatres. All the interviewees stated that it was expected of them to use a certain vocabulary (e.g., participation, inclusion, integration, diversity) in the funding applications, and their works are still often seen part of socio-culture and cultural education fields, and usually supported by the funding programmes of the actors of these fields. Although boat people projekt, Hajusom, and Ruhrorter were nominated for various inclusion/integration awards many times and won some of them, they regard themselves as political theatres, engaged with the social realities of Germany and their localities.
  - 4 Socio-culture emerged as a concept in German cultural policy to prompt efforts towards the democratisation of culture from the early 1970s onwards, opposing the elitist character of the arts and promising culture for all.

assumed to have a “migrant and refugee identity”, and disregards the other parties of artistic interaction. The position of the White majority society remains external to cultural diversity. As Sarah Ahmed states, “we” emerges as the one who has to live with it [cultural diversity]’ (2000: 95). The process of change is only ascribed to migrant others. This mindset reduces from the very beginning the probability of a dialogical encounter in which all sides are subject to transformation.

## ***Kultur*nation and *Heimat* under Construction**

The emancipation of the notion of diversity from the inclusion/integration frame is ultimately linked to renouncing two ideologically overloaded cultural-political concepts, namely *Heimat* (home) and *Kultur*nation (culture nation). Culture has always been at the heart of Germany’s self-definition (van der Will and Burns 2015). The idea of a culture-defined nation, *Kultur*nation, —in different forms— signifies cultural unity and is still strongly influential in cultural policymaking (Bloomfield 2003; van der Will and Burns 2015; Wesner 2010). This unity refers to the unification of Germany and does not involve the cultural capital of the nation after the labour migration of the 1950s. On the other hand, *Heimat* anticipates an idea of an exclusive home, enclosed in a rigid national frame that defines the boundaries of belonging. As Shermin Langhoff puts it, ‘*Heimat* is, and always was, “fatherland” and is thus inseparably linked with the patriarchy as a concept’ (2020: 477). I argue that there is a firm bond between the concepts of *Heimat* and *Kultur*nation. They still reflect a conservative conception of a historically rooted White masculine national identity and space. Even though *Heimat* and *Kultur*nation have taken on new forms and gained (arguably) less controversial meanings, they cannot escape from the *Leitkultur* (leading/guiding culture) discussions since both terms define top-down culture in a concealed manner.

The idea of an equality-oriented diversity discourse requires a new understanding of inclusive culture in an intercultural society where national and cultural spaces are not defined by the hegemony of the White, Christian, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Intercultural society refers to ‘a community that is never final, always, infinitely, in process, a community without fixed borders, which, furthermore, has a singular “membership” that constantly puts assigned roles or, indeed, the idea of membership as such, in question’ (McDonald 2011: 378). This spontaneous process appoints various forms of otherness as the subject of transformation.

It is a *sine qua non* for cultural policies at all levels of government to support discussions, developments, and structures that contribute to the pluralisation of knowledge production and dissemination in the performing arts scene. In this context, Post*Heimat* offers a refreshing perspective on reconsidering the meanings of cultural identity and home. Post*Heimat* signals a pluralistic re-appropriation

of *Heimat*' (PostHeimat 2020: 1) that pursues a novel interpretation of nation and recognises the multiplicity of being. I envision this alternative interpretation of *Heimat* as a counter-concept that disowns the way of thinking that separates human beings into various compartments and assigns them the role of representatives of certain ethnic groups. Conversely, PostHeimat provides the opportunity to acknowledge identity as a dynamic entity. It seeks to reflect the image of a society, understood as being under construction, in which the idea of culture is always in the making, in constant process. To this end, I read the notion of *Umleitkultur* by the PostHeimat Network as an invigorating suggestion to challenge the national narrative and the static and monolithic perception of "the culture", since the concept entails the pursuit of 'a non-normative culture accepting detours, rather than straight roads' (PostHeimat 2020: 1).

In the following subsection, I explore the potentiality of a concept that corresponds with a dynamic and fluid diversity narrative that confronts the present rigid and restricted boundaries of "Germanness" in line with the notion of *Umleitkultur*. With this endeavour, I aim to seek out a concept for a non-hierarchical performing arts scene in which heterogeneity of thoughts, experiences, knowledge, aesthetics, and world views can be articulated, appreciated, and circulated as normality.

## Going Beyond Dialogue: Thinking and Acting Interculturally<sup>5</sup>

Diversity is inseparable from the identity dimension of culture. Typically, cultural policies recognise community/group identities and produce plans and measures accordingly to enhance the participation of diverse community cultures in the arts. The objectives and funding criteria of many public funding programmes promoting diversity reveal that the individuality of identity is often overlooked. Artists are referred to as people with a "post-migrant perspective" and lately "exile perspective", representing cultural diversity. Further, the limits of their "playground" are strictly defined, confined to migration and displacement as if they cannot hold multiple artistic perspectives and positions.

Linguist Peter McDonald (2011) suggests using the adverbial form of interculturalism, *thinking interculturally*, as an alternative conceptualisation to multiculturalism, varieties of cosmopolitanism, and interculturalism. He claims that the adverbial form 'identifies the intercultural as a diverse, risky and lived process' (2011: 372). McDonald argues that cultures are never separated and distinct but always exist interculturally:

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5 This and the following subsection, "Indicators of Interculturality in Performing Arts", were derived from my doctoral thesis *Cultural Diversity in Motion: Rethinking Cultural Policy and Performing Arts in an Intercultural Society* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2022).

The merits of a formulation like ‘thinking interculturally’ lie firstly in the fact that it avoids the bounded logic of the prefix ‘multi-’, giving priority to this movement across cultural borders of various kinds. It still, of course, assumes that such borders exist and, therefore, that culture (...) plays a powerful role in the world, contributing to many individual and group self-understanding. What the adverbial formulation underscores grammatically is that these borders are porous and labile. (...) Since all cultures, including dominant ones, are less coherent and more mixed than we like to believe, or that the political pressures of a particular moment might require us to believe, the intercultural as an ongoing, open-ended process is all-pervasive. (2011: 372–373)

Moreover, the adverbial formulation is instrumental in comprehending the changing demographic structure of contemporary Germany as well as the individual dimension of identity; it also makes room for a new understanding of an intercultural community, which is envisaged in constant progress and transition. This understanding emphasises that ‘singular beings with their plural identities [are] confronted by underlying structural forces around them, and these forces may put their singularity at risk’ (McDonald 2011: 381). People, with their multiple identities, are the subjects of interaction. Being in an encounter with one another opens the process of a living dialogue that includes both agreement and conflict between dynamic identities (Ahmed 2000; Cattle 2012; Wood et al. 2006).

In this paper, identity is understood as multiple (Hall 2000) and intersectional (Crenshaw 1989). Following the above-mentioned line of thought, I examine the adequacy of the concept of thinking and acting interculturally for a pluralistic diversity vision by approaching it beyond the perspective of dialogue between different cultural communities.

Based on the proposal by McDonald (2011), the new conceptualisation, thinking and acting interculturally, is a heuristic attempt at reconsidering the meaning of cultural diversity outside the prescribed frames that operate as promoting versions of a static, insulated, and impermeable “us” within a nation-state, not allowing multiple othernesses to occur. Thinking and acting interculturally, on the other hand, signifies a conceptual tool, a frame of mind, which should be manifested in the strategies, actions, and organisational structures of performing arts institutions and initiatives. It seeks to offer a reflective outlook on dealing with processes of othering and the underlying power dynamics.

Thinking and acting interculturally by no means suggests cultural hybridity. It describes a curious, relentless learning process that allows co-creating versions of culture in constant motion, and it includes ambiguity, conflict, negotiation, and transition. In this understanding, marginalised positions are not determined as “the other” since the idea recognises the meeting of multiple fabrications of otherness,

inspired by the conceptualisation of Fiona Sze (2004: 127). Thinking and acting interculturally enables transformative encounters for all members of society.

## Indicators of Interculturality in Performing Arts

I examined three independent theatre initiatives, namely boat people projekt, Ha-jusom, and Ruhrorter for the concept formation. These theatres comprise the *casing*<sup>6</sup>, which is part of a case study research analysis presented in my doctoral thesis. Through the casing, I sought to link the theoretical proposition to the empirical basis (Ragin and Becker 1992) in order to reify the conceptualisation. The evaluation of the casing provided different elements of thinking and acting interculturally. Moreover, in this query, the academic and practice-based knowledge exchange of the PostHeimat Network enabled determining various attributes of the concept of thinking and acting interculturally.

The following interlinked aspects are identified as the essential features of thinking and acting interculturally. By no means is the list of criteria complete; it is instead envisioned as a stepping-stone for a semantic shift in diversity discourse, a contribution to the efforts towards recognising cultural diversity beyond a management model that employs cultural differences for organisational efficiency (Faist 2009). The criteria are considered analytical parameters for a change in mindset for the White-dominated German performing arts field. Hence, they are formulated as indexes of an interculturally organised theatre practice. For this reason, the features of thinking and acting interculturally listed below signify a cognitive tool for the performing arts scene rather than a cultural policy measure. One should bear in mind that learning to deal with difference and ambiguity does not alter the existing structural inequalities (Nising and Mörsch 2018: 142). Cultural policy should tackle institutionalised inequalities, discrimination, and racism through an explicit cultural policy vision, careful planning, and implementation strategies for the pluralistic transformation of the theatrical sphere.

The following criteria refer to the interconnected ways of engaging with various axes of difference, the social and political construction of otherness, and the power disparity between partners in artistic exchange:

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6 I use the alternative phrase “casing” instead of case, following the suggestion of Ragin and Becker, ‘as a research tactic (...) to resolve difficult issues in linking ideas and evidence’ (1992: 217). As a cultural policy researcher, my interests were decisive in delimiting the boundaries of the cases. The casing was stimulated by concept formation and it involved ‘not selection on a random basis or the basis of typicality, but on the basis of theoretical interests in cases’ (Ragin and Becker, 1992: 222). Thus, constructing the theoretical framework of the conceptualisation and collecting the matching empirical evidence to exercise the relevance of the conceptual proposition is more precisely denominated as casing.

**Motivation:** Critically examining one's conduct and motives for 'making diversity a goal' (Ahmed 2012). The foremost question is whether the commitment to diversity is related to the fact that 'it is obviously (now) "the right thing to do"' (Vertovec 2012: 306). People that hold privileged positions should interrogate the credibility and authenticity of their motivations (Süngün 2016: 151), especially within White artistic practices and institutions. In this regard, motivation is a decisive signal for determining whether engagement with diversity is understood as an artistic interaction between different realms of experiences and knowledge.

**Process orientation:** Recognising process as an open-ended and continuous learning practice, not limited to various phases of artistic production. Process orientation fundamentally denotes the processes of encounter and exchange, which involve ambivalence, conflict, and contingency. It refers to all forms of deliberation and communication between institutions/initiatives and professional and amateur artists with observable exclusions and different overlapping identities. It also refers to the relationship with the audience. At the level of reception, it means to perceive the process as a way of conveying a diverse array of views, expressions, knowledge, and experiences using performance. These creative processes turn theatre into a space for the mobilisation of juxtapositional othernesses without neutralising it.

**The ethical dimension of dialogue:** Being occupied with the question of how to develop an ethical approach without perpetuating the existing frames that treat some people as "the other". First and foremost, ethical communication refers to a mindset that 'resists thematising others as "the other"' (Ahmed 2000: 144). The ethical premise in this context primarily entails disowning the narrow perception of the human condition. Creating a heterogeneous space includes acknowledging human beings as multiple othernesses with various perspectives, orientations, and affiliations.

On a related second level, the ethics of communication calls for abandoning superior positions that carry the traces of colonial continuities. In this interaction, the White German majority society is internalised as normative, the one that dominates, and "the other" is assigned as subordinate. Terms of communication, on the contrary, require seeing the performative space through a non-insular lens that recognises intercultural society as the norm.

**Conditions of emancipation:** The frame of empowerment starts with questioning the basis of intent and the terms of autonomy. Given the scale of profoundly and historically rooted power dynamics, the liberation of the artistic expressions of "the other" often rests upon the perception and accompanying implications of the dominant positions. Thus, a critical engagement with empowerment recognises 'the hegemonic discourses that reproduce them [hegemonic positionalities], such as whiteness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, Eurocentrism, etc.' (Steyn 2015: 382). In

turn, such an understanding entails 'a self-reflexive critique that questions the ways of "giving a voice" to the systematically silenced' (Cañas 2017a: para. 3). The claim of commitment to diversity further raises questions about the sites of emancipation: What is the basis of emancipation? Who is in the position to set the boundaries of empowerment, and what are their intentions? What are the limits of outside intervention? It should also be taken into account that the aspiration to empower marginalised groups and artists for a fairer representation could unintentionally reproduce clichés; "hence, there is a risk that the representations of "the other" imprison the subjects in stereotypical images strengthening the ideology of "*the national-self* and *the immigrant-other*" (Benjamin 2013: 23). This suggests that the recognition of marginalised people as autonomous subjects and equal partners in determining the conditions of empowerment and negotiating power is vital for the establishment of non-hegemonic forms of interaction.

**Standing in solidarity:** Challenging the unequal distribution of power and opposing various forms of exploitation of excluded performing arts professionals, seeing artistic solidarity and cooperation as a form of resistance, confronting those binary lines between "us" and "the other". Theatre as a space of resistance also means a reflection of an artistic practice that seeks to transgress the historically constructed privileged positions. Hence, it is essential to acknowledge solidarity as a counter strategy for the self-empowerment of marginalised people in their struggle against exclusion. It follows that what lies at the foundation of constructive cooperation is whether it is mutually beneficial. Building fair cooperation, based on trust and consensus, entails a continuous exploration of its conditions, structures, and processes; from the onset, there is an agreement on cooperation itself as an experiment (Hampel 2015). However, one should not dismiss the possibility of cooperation being challenged by conflicting expectations and needs.

**Networking:** Given the exclusionary structure of the German performing arts scene, networking is one of the modes of solidarity practiced through artistic exchange to overcome structural barriers and share know-how and resources. The synergy between performing arts institutions and initiatives, artists, and researchers could be considered a form of cultural activism in which the arts, politics, and activism blend (Verson 2007), as well as a mode of cultural resistance (Duncombe 2002) envisioning the concept of democracy through collective action which contributes to the development of participatory approaches (della Porta and Diani 2006). In this regard, it is also a modality of a bottom-up, alternative policy prospect that explores the possibilities of new equality-based political-artistic imaginaries in the theatrical space.

**Aesthetical frame:** Aesthetics refers to a mode of negotiation of the self through knowledge exchange. This negotiation process is understood more as an act on a

political and ethical level than the aesthetics of performance. It is characterised by the motivation to deal with existing inequities in artistic exchange and concerned with the ways of production of theatrical knowledge outside the Western canon. It searches for trajectories that explore exchange beyond the hybrid, universal, or cosmopolitan appropriation of culture proposed and practised by the same Western theatre vision. As articulated by Bharucha, “the ‘universal minimum’ that can be said to initiate any intercultural exchange is extremely fragile, based more on intuition and good faith than on any real cognisance of the Other” (1999: 15). In this context, the answers to the following crucial questions serve as measures of a genuine interaction: What does the aesthetical frame aim to convey? Who determines it? What are the conditions of that particular aesthetics? How and for whom is it designed?

**Narration of a multiplicity of experiences:** Various forms of narrativisation of experiences foster the development of new theatrical expressions. The Western appropriation of the “cultures of the other” tends to fabricate reductive cultural narratives around diversity, migration, and displacement. These narratives hinder the authentic articulation of artistic expressions by the racialised and marginalised artists and performing arts professionals coming into contact with the majority society.

In the German context, considering particularly the current overexcitement around engaging in “refugee work” and doing migration-oriented “diversity/intercultural/transcultural projects”, even the most well-intentioned approaches often generate victim narratives. These perspectives confine migrant others and refugees to a frame that forces them to perform victimhood and stereotypical roles assigned to them. Alison Jeffers describes this attitude, which unveils itself in the emerging canon of refugee theatre in the UK, as ‘the need for the “right” kind of refugee story in which complexities are smoothed out to create a simple linear narrative of individual crisis and flight’ (2012: 46). This perception does not serve the aim of perceiving “the other” as creative, skilled, knowledgeable, or autonomous beings. On the contrary, as Cañas aptly points out, “this perpetuates a dynamic in which those remain a passive, self-apologetic voice in the national place rather than a galvanising force, utilising social commentary, and involved in acts of political engagement” (2017b: 69). Hence, a range of multiple narrations of experiences would facilitate the exploration, validation, and circulation of different types of stories in which racialised and marginalised voices are not (re)imaged by the Western theatre canon and reduced to simplistic fictitious characters.

**Multilingualism:** Monolingualism is recognised as one of the indexes of German drama theatre. This is related to the historically rooted establishment of theatre as a medium for representing the national interest of the *Bürgertums* (bourgeoisie) (Israel 2011: 61). On that account, the German language is still associated with the ideals of the nation-state which prevail in the theatrical canon, although its

educated middle-class audience has been shrinking (Mandel 2013). This aspect also reveals whose needs and expectations the programming is designed for. In addition, “multilingualism is used by the majority of theatres at most as a conscious stylistic device in individual, content-wise appropriate productions, if, for example, communication problems on a linguistic level are thematised” (Holthaus 2011: 154). Considering the transnational configuration of the world, showing disinterest for linguistic diversity is no longer a possibility. As dramaturge Björn Bicker states, “it is inevitable that immigrant artists will change the formal language of German theatre practice; hence, it will not be possible to maintain the primacy of the pure German (stage) language for long” (2009: 30).

Recognising the interaction between languages is an integral part of multiperspectivity and the reality of an intercultural society. If theatre is understood as the self-reflection of society, then it should be conceived as a space that communicates with various characteristics of this society, including its language. The linguistic aspect refers not only to the modes of communication between theatre, actors, and audiences as a feature of performative strategies but also a connection between the memories of citizens and the histories of societies; the history of the past, present, and future in the making.

Being self-critical and self-reflexive: Having the willingness to develop self-reflexivity and a critical mode of self-understanding to confront the established boundaries and the deconstructive absolutisation of differences in interactions in the theatrical space. For reflexivity to be transformative for all parties involved, the question of ‘how we can at the same time do justice to the other’s otherness (and [their] (...) own situatedness) as well as to ours’ (de Schutter 2004: 51) should be embodied as a vital principle. Following this logic, self-reflexivity reopens a potentiality for thinking critically about deficit-oriented imaginaries of difference ascribed to “the other”. One’s self-understanding depends primarily on the question of whether the differences are entrenched in essentialist partitions attributed to “the other” within the structure of an artistic medium but also in one’s mind.

## **Solidarity, Collective Thinking, Engendering Collective Memory**

Two years of participant observation based on process-tracing demonstrated that although boat people projekt, Hajusom, and Ruhrorter have different strategies and artistic formats, they commonly acknowledge every human experience as equally valuable, and understand diversity as a dynamic learning process that involves critical self-reflection and the continuous transformation of perspectives and artistic methodologies to connect with the contemporary German society. However, in its limited scope, this article cannot exhaustively introduce the approaches and work-

ing methods of these theatre initiatives. Instead, I briefly focus on three aspects that signify the foundation of the conceptualisation of thinking and acting intercultur-ally.

Founded in 2009, boat people projekt defines itself as a political theatre committed to socio-political matters. In their first years, the theatre collective had made mostly plays with refugee youth, focusing on their arrival and living conditions in Germany. The name “boat people projekt” originates from the group’s first production, *Lampedusa*, and is associated with the reality of refugees trying to arrive in Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. In the following years, the artistic perspective of the collective changed tremendously through collaboration and networking with excluded artists. Recently, the theatre has been in the pursuit of a new name:

Over the course of time, we have become conscious of the fact that through our name, we label the people we work with. As we ideally want to prevent this, our name is currently under discussion. Due to the growth in awareness and knowledge of the group’s work, a radical change is difficult. As yet, this question has not been resolved. (boat people projekt 2021)

Starting from 2015, standing in solidarity with these artists has gained importance for boat people projekt. The theatre collective started co-producing with displaced and racialised theatre-makers. In 2016, Nina de la Chevallier, director and co-founder, initiated a research project with Rzgar Khalil, funded by the *Homebase – Theatre for the Coming Society* programme of the Performing Arts Fund, to identify the structural problems displaced theatre professionals face regarding access to the theatre scene in Lower Saxony. Towards the end of 2017, boat people projekt, together with the State Association of Independent Theatres of Lower Saxony (Landesverband Freier Theater Niedersachsen) and the Federal Academy for Cultural Education Wolfenbüttel (Bundesakademie für Kulturelle Bildung Wolfenbüttel) organised a meeting titled “New Connections” to network with professional artists seeking refuge in Germany. The engagement with research projects was subsequently followed by the aspiration to share the working space of boat people projekt with racialised directors and artistic teams.

Hajusom identifies itself as a transnational ensemble determined by collective thinking. Since 1999, the theatre initiative has been working with young performers of various cultural backgrounds. A non-hierarchical artistic exchange between team members is one of the vital components of the creative processes of transcultural performances. This exchange, however, is not seen as the assemblage of “foreign cultures” or the reflection of cultural hybridity. On the contrary, it is perceived as a process that enables individuals to incorporate their visions, images, world views, articulations, and artistic responses in the collective idea of Hajusom. To avoid reducing refugees within the confines of identity, the initiative is concerned with ex-

ploring new storytelling formats that display actors as beyond refuge-beings. Correspondingly, the collective opposes pre-defined Eurocentric/Western projections and labels placed on the artistic profession, theatre education, and training. They consider these prescribed categories to be barriers to the acknowledgment and enunciation of diverse forms of knowledge.

For Hajusom, the central objective is the continual circulation of heterogeneity of knowledge and its transnational performative methodology. Hence, they adopted the concept of “each one teaches one” to deal with the hierarchical relationality between various positions in the organisational structure, such as the one between the co-founding White artistic directors and other team members. The concept of “each one teaches one” relates to facilitating the self-expression of the younger team members. In this context, empowerment is understood as searching for ways to build channels for multi-vocal conversations. Hajusom established two artistic platforms, namely *Lab* and *Transfer*, as part of its implementation strategies of knowledge production and artistic methodology dissemination. Experienced members are part of the artistic management; they give training and workshops to newcomers. Hajusom recognises them as the protagonists and transmitters of the transnational way of thinking and the working strategy of the theatre collective.

Since its establishment in 2012, Ruhrorter has been working with young refugees. The theatre initiative describes themselves as a refugee theatre. They emphasise that “refugee” is a legal status, not an identity, recognising it as an ethical responsibility to decisively underline the difference between legal status and the complex nature of identity. This choice is also interrelated with contributing to the efforts towards removing the barrier between “us” and “the stranger”, bringing “the stranger” from the position of “object” to the position of “subject”.

The aesthetical framework of Ruhrorter relies mainly on non-discursive forms of expression created during long rehearsal processes. This approach was adopted from the artistic format of the Theater an der Ruhr that delineates a ‘specific theatre methodology which premises upon discipline and the cultivation of the self that foregrounds the aesthetics of a reflexive theatre’ (Tinius 2015: 185; Tinius 2023). The focus is placed on the establishment of self-consciousness rather than the theatrical product per se. Hence, process orientation is deemed essential for supporting performers in their mental preparation for learning how to form conscious body movements, develop improvisational impulses, and gradually shape their expressions.

This specific mindset is also a strategy to connect the narratives of otherness, marginalisation, and abandonment by intertwining the history of the postindustrial Ruhr Valley with the experiences of displacement. The theatre employs various artistic strategies to renounce the mentality of “presenting other cultures” to the audience. One of the methods Ruhrorter uses to avoid subjectivities within ethnic boundaries is to create communication between refugees, residents, and the neglected past of the former industrial spaces. The core idea is to make theatre not in a

conventional theatre setup but in a space with its own story, such as a former asylum seekers' accommodation centre, former women's prison, vacant commercial property, etc. The minimalistic aesthetics, combined with mental preparation and presence, is employed to make the stigmatisation and isolation of refugees and long-forgotten places visible and to negotiate the history of the future.

## A Call for an Accessible Performing Arts Scene

Discussions on diversity cannot be disassociated from systematic exclusion, discrimination, and racism in the German performing arts scene. All cultural policy actions, implementation strategies, and funding schemes aimed at promoting diversity must primarily deal with the imbalanced power structure that generates inequalities. One way of reducing the access barriers for the marginalised and excluded artistic workforce is to continually support a diversity discourse that enables the establishing and thriving of an *Umleitkultur*.

Various independent performing arts initiatives and networks actively advocate equal rights and an inclusive theatrical landscape. However, they operate under severe financial constraints, subsidised almost solely through project-based funding. One of the tasks of cultural policy should be to support these non-institutionalised structures that manifest the dynamism of diversity. These have a considerable potential to nurture normalising cultural differences and contribute to the development of a fairness-based discourse on cultural diversity.

Investing in flexible and exploratory structures for the diversification of knowledge, including production, dissemination, and reception, is part of generating the framework conditions for the creation and cultivation of a new pluralistic diversity discourse for a non-hierarchical performing arts scene. To develop an accessible performing arts field for all, cultural policy should provide long-term funding to promote learning laboratories and bottom-up modalities that relentlessly search for new ways of understanding the needs and expectations of an intercultural society.

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