

## 6. Solidarity, Collective Thinking, Self-Empowerment

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As a building block of a new diversity perspective, following the efforts towards achieving a pluralistic German theatre landscape, in the second part of the empirical inquiry, the study investigates three independent theatre initiatives, namely *boat people projekt*, *Hajusom*, and *Ruhrorter*. These theatres have been working with immigrant and refugee artists since their establishment. The objective of the empirical analysis is twofold: first, examining the perception, strategies, and artistic methods of these groups – as independent theatre initiatives subsidised by various funding institutions of the national government – when addressing diversity; second, assessing whether or to what extent the approaches and implementation models of the chosen theatres could contribute to the concept formation of this study, aimed at facilitating a future-oriented theatre practice.

The casing, as part of the case study research, is employed to elaborate on the abstractly formulated theoretical idea with the help of inductively assembled cases (Ragin & Becker, 1992, p. 220). The casing enables the researcher to construct various levels of concept formation, tested through empirical data. Thus, the empirical investigation includes studying the cases as a means of delineating various dimensions of the conceptualisation of *thinking and acting interculturally*. Furthermore, through an in-depth analysis of the cases, the researcher attempts to offer a theoretical proposition for a mindset shift in the organisational structure of the German performing arts field.

The primary concern of the empirical inquiry is not theory testing with the support of cases but concept formation, elaboration, and refinement (Ragin, 1997). Hence, the methodology does not depend on performance analysis. The political, ethical, and aesthetical dimensions of the chosen theatres constitute the main elements of this case study research. The investigation aims to achieve this by adopting a case-oriented approach, which allows the researcher to use an interactive and flexible analytic frame, open to revisions in the course of the empirical analysis (Ragin, 1997). To this end, *process tracing* is an integral part of the analysis since “it provides a way to learn and to empirically evaluate preferences and perceptions of the actors, their purposes, their goals, their values and their specification of the situations that face them” (Vennesson, 2008, p. 233). The

empirical inquiry thus seeks to discover how the examined theatres' approaches have transformed over the years.

In addition to case study research, the casing is evaluated as part of the dispositive analysis to detect the interconnection between discourse and practice, which are both indispensable components of the cultural diversity dispositive. By doing so, the research intends to identify the assemblage of elements involved in the power/knowledge relationship in the theatre realm.

Concerning concept formation, the cases are selected strategically to obtain a comprehensive perspective on various facets of *thinking and acting interculturally*.

It should be noted that none of the examined theatres designates themselves as an "intercultural theatre" or a theatre that employs an "intercultural frame". "Intercultural theatre" is referred to here as the theatre practice introduced in the late 1970s by Peter Brook, later followed by theatre-makers such as Eugenio Barba and Ariane Mnouchkine. Conventional intercultural theatre includes the uses and adaptations of non-Western performance traditions in Euro-American intercultural practices, which are inherently Eurocentric, orientalist, and pertain to cultural colonialism (Bharucha, 1999a, p. 3).

Conversely, the concept of *thinking and acting interculturally* seeks to pinpoint the indicators of a theatre practice envisioned outside the formulations of the Western/European vision of cultural exchange in knowledge production and dissemination (see Section 7.1 for the concept of *thinking and acting interculturally*).

It should also be taken into consideration that the theatre initiatives analysed in this chapter do not utilise the vocabulary of cultural politics and policy such as "inclusion", "integration", "participation", "intercultural dialogue" to describe their performative practices.

## 6.1 Criteria for Determining the Casing

Prior to the case study, the researcher mapped out the independent theatre domain and identified around 140 performing arts initiatives working with refugees and immigrants. They receive incentives from diversity and intercultural funding programmes of the national, *Länder*, and municipal governments. Despite the variety of projects realised by these initiatives, it is disputable whether the execution of these projects meets the objectives described in their funding applications. The researcher observed that even some well-intentioned projects instrumentalise stories of traumatised people seeking refuge; usually what is exhibited on stage are the refugees' biographies and painful experiences of flight. People are reduced to a "refugee identity", or they are treated as if they belong to a collective "refugee culture". It is also questionable on whose behalf the project owners speak and what their motivation for engaging in such projects is.

Against this backdrop, the casing was based on the criteria developed by the researcher. The following criteria are envisioned to contribute to the concept formation after concluding the case study evaluation:

- dynamic engagement: acknowledging commitment to the topics of migration and displacement as a continuous process and perceiving cultural diversity as the norm of society.
- awareness and openness: being conscious of a plethora of heterogenous perspectives, experiences, and knowledge, understanding engagement with difference as a mutual learning opportunity and accepting it as an artistic process of “meeting of various fabrications of otherness” (Sze, 2004), which includes both conflict and agreement.
- empowerment: supporting the self-empowerment of immigrants and refugees as amateur and professional artists. This applies to the involvement of amateur and professional artists in various levels of production, from conceptual design to implementation processes. On another level, it denotes all artistic collaboration that contributes to immigrant and displaced artists being recognised by society and provides them with the opportunity to earn a living as part of the artistic workforce in the German performing arts scene.
- artistic reflection: searching for new narratives and experimenting with diverse artistic formats to develop novel aesthetical perspectives. This refers to inter- and transdisciplinary approaches that push conventional theatre-making boundaries to discover heuristic methods and forms of narration.
- multilingual performance: understanding the value of language in articulating diverse artistic expressions on stage and in text. Embracing the contribution of language affiliations to productions and performative demands.
- intercultural encounter: supporting interconnectedness between immigrants, newly arrived artists, and the majority society to combat the biased perception towards those who are seen as “the other”.

6.1.1 Tania Cañas, art director of the RISE Refugee<sup>1</sup> organisation, declared a manifesto in 2015 regarding the self-serving usage of diversity and the exploitation of refugees and refugee experiences. She claims that “diversity is restricted to an aesthetic presentation, rather than a meaningful, committed, resourced, long-term process of shifting existing power-dynamics” (2015, para. 1). In the above-mentioned manifesto, *10 Things You Need to Consider if You Are an Artist*, Cañas (2015) addresses White artists who want to include refugees in their projects without

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1 RISE: Refugees, Survivors and ex-detainees is the first organisation in Australia run by refugees, asylum seekers, and ex-detainees.

pondering over their privileges, and victimise the experiences of refugees. The manifesto includes:

1. Process not product: We are not a resource to feed into your next artistic project. You may be talented at your particular craft but do not assume that this automatically translates to an ethical, responsible and self-determining process. Understand community cultural development methodology but also understand that it is not a full-proof [sic] methodology. Who and what institutions are benefiting from the exchange?
2. Critically interrogate your intention: Our struggle is not an opportunity, or our bodies a currency, by which to build your career. Rather than merely focusing on the 'other' ('where do I find refugees' etc.) subject your own intention to critical, reflexive analysis. What is your motivation to work on this particular subject matter? Why at this particular time?
3. Realise your own privilege: What biases and intentions, even if you consider these 'good' intentions, do you carry with you? What social positionality (and power) do you bring to space? Know how much space you take up. Know when to step back.
4. Participation is not always progressive or empowering: Your project may have elements of participation but know how this can just as easily be limiting, tokenistic and condescending. Your demands on our community sharing our stories may be just as easily disempowering. What frameworks have you already imposed on participation? What power dynamics are you reinforcing with such a framework? What relationships are you creating (e.g. informant vs expert, enunciated vs enunciator)
5. Presentation vs representation: Know the difference!
6. It is not a safe-space just because you say it is: This requires long term grass-roots work, solidarity and commitment.
7. Do not expect us to be grateful: We are not your next interesting art project. Our community are not sitting waiting for our struggle to be acknowledged by your individual consciousness nor highlighted through your art practice.
8. Do not reduce us to an issue: We are whole humans with various experiences, knowledge and skills. We can speak on many things; do not reduce us to one narrative.
9. Do your research: Know the solidarity work already being done. Know the nuanced differences between organisations and projects. Just because we may work with the same community does not mean we work in the same way.
10. Art is not neutral: Our community has been politicised, and any artwork done with/by us is inherently political. If you wish to build with our community, know that your artistic practice cannot be neutral. (Cañas, 2015)

This study takes the declaration by RISE Refugee as the framework for assessing the cases in the empirical analysis. Some of the measures of analysis were extracted from this statement in addition to others formulated by the author. The inquiry is based on the below-outlined catalogue of questions:

- What is the theatre's objective for working with refugees and immigrants?
- What is the power structure of the artistic exchange?
- What is defined as the focus of collaboration? What are the ethical parameters?
- How is the notion of empowerment interpreted and put into practice?
- What solidarity work is the theatre engaged in?
- How does the theatre deal with the issue of self-reflection? How are the various knowledge frames and aesthetical perceptions of team members manifested through the works of the theatre?
- To what extent have the perception and working method(s) of the theatre evolved in time? What are the lessons learned?
- How is the process of exchange reflected in the modes of artistic production? What role does the heterogeneity of languages play in the methods of performance?
- What are the efforts to bring diverse artistic experiences and knowledge into contact with the audience?

As stated, the selected theatres constitute a fragment of the cultural diversity dispositive. Hence, the casing is also investigated from the dispositive analysis perspective.

## 6.2 *Boat people projekt*

*Boat people projekt* is an independent theatre ensemble in Göttingen, Lower Saxony, co-established by theatre director Nina de la Chevallerie and director and author Luise Rist in 2009. Over time, the staff composition of the theatre has expanded, and currently, Franziska Aeschlimann, Reimar de la Chevallerie, Hans Kaul, Birte Mühler, and Sonja Elena Schroeder are in charge of different tasks within the team. *Boat people projekt* works as a collective; under this label, various projects are realised by the core team as well as by guest artists. As the theatre initiative states, "We strive for broad diversity not only in our programming but also in the composition of our artistic team and the partners with whom we work" (boat people projekt, 2021). Hence, the theatre applies diverse artistic approaches and working methods:

We work in different teams within the organisation, but *boat people projekt* always applies for funding. Some years ago, we used to realise all projects with Nina and Reimar [de la Chevalerie]. Now, we are more interested in working on different projects. (...). But *boat people projekt* is still our roof. We meet twice a month, sometimes more often. (...). It is a double project system. There is no hierarchy in our group (...). Sometimes we do not go in the same direction, but that is normal. That is why we do not always all work together. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

Since its foundation, *boat people projekt* has been focused on migration and displacement. The collective has been working with professional and amateur actors seeking refuge long before “refugee stories” were omnipresent in the German theatre scene. In recent years, they have started co-producing with displaced and immigrant cultural professionals.

The first venue of the theatre used to be a refugee accommodation centre, housing around 100 people. In 2019, they opened their own venue, *Werkraum*, with 80 audience seats. *Boat people projekt* also cooperates with other theatres to showcase their productions, such as *Theater im Pavillon* in Hannover, *LOT Theater* in Braunschweig, *Theater Aufbau Kreuzberg* (TAK) in Berlin, and *Theater im Kulturhaus Karlstorbahnhof* (TiKK) in Heidelberg. Depending on the production, *boat people projekt* joins forces with many partners, from independent and public theatres and cultural institutions to migration and refugee organisations, from schools and universities to foundations working in the field of migration.<sup>2</sup>

The theatre collective receives various public subsidies from institutions of the national government as well as the Lower Saxony federal state and municipal government, private institutions, and foundations.<sup>3</sup> However, like many other independent theatres in Germany subsidised by public funding institutions, *boat people projekt* is funded precariously.

*Boat people projekt* has gained broad recognition in recent years. In 2015, the theatre won the Initiative Award of the Hanns Lilje Foundation, followed by other prizes, such as the Göttingen Peace Award in 2016, as well as an award presented in the category of independent theatre for extraordinary achievement, based on the results of a survey conducted by the magazine *Deutsche Bühne* (German Stage) in 2018, and the *Theaterpreis des Bundes* (Theatre Award of the German Federal Government) 2019, and in 2020, the collective received the *Niedersächsischer Integrationspreis* (Integration Award of Lower Saxony). In 2016, *boat people projekt*

2 The cooperation partners vary depending on the content of productions. For the current list of institutions and organisations that have cooperated with *boat people projekt*, please visit <https://www.boatpeopleprojekt.de/>.

3 Since 2018, *boat people projekt* has been receiving yearly institutional funding from the Göttingen City Council to cover the rent for the venue.

was also nominated for the BKM's Special Award for projects encouraging the cultural participation of refugees. *Flutlicht* (Floodlight) was shortlisted as one of the 10 best practices out of 150 nominations. Lastly, in 2017 the theatre ensemble was nominated for the George Tabori Award of the Performing Arts Fund.

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 by boat. Members of the theatre have been discussing changing the name in the last few years. A quote from the theatre's website reads:

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)

For this reason, on June 5, 2019, *boat people projekt* invited a team of designers, researchers, and collaborating artists to exchange views on a prospective name that would appropriately communicate the artistic and political perspective of the theatre without categorising people from other ethnic and cultural affiliations.<sup>4</sup> The core team members expressed the difficulty of agreeing on a name that would represent multiple identities of the theatre, since the collective has had different ideas, artistic approaches, and methods from the very beginning. One of the critical aspects, voiced by Sonja Elena Schroeder, was the challenge of being labelled from the outside, being presented and awarded as a good theatre practice working with immigrants and refugees, and how this was affecting their positionality as a theatre. Sheila Hilpert pointed out another crucial aspect of the problem: the necessity of focusing not on individual visions but a collective vision. *Boat people projekt* has not yet overcome the conflicts around this issue and is still in search of a decision in agreement with the diverse perspectives of the collective.

### 6.2.1 Engaging with Immigration: Why and for Whom?

One of the co-founders, Luise Rist, worked at the municipal theatre *Deutsches Theater* in Göttingen for eight years before she initiated *boat people projekt* with Nina de la Chevalerie. Together they conducted a small research project within this municipal theatre as they aspired to learn more about people from other countries.

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4 The author was part of a workshop organised to think collectively about the vital components of *boat people projekt*. Hence, the paraphrases of the participants' views are based on the author's notes taken during the meeting.

Rist elaborates on the urge to engage in such a research project and the decision to establish *boat people projekt* afterwards:

I had a good time there [*Deutsches Theater*] but I had no contact with the outside world. I heard about the news [refugees arriving at Lampedusa in Italy] and wanted to meet more people from other countries. I just asked the theatre if we could have a small research project. So, we invited people from Africa. It started out as a small endeavour. (...) Then I realised I wanted to do a bigger research project. So, I went with Nina [de la Chevallerie] to meet and get to know the refugees in refugee camps [in Göttingen]. (...) At the time, this topic was not something people cared about. It all started with the news from Lampedusa. I suggested going in this direction, and Nina agreed. I left my job at the municipal theatre as I wanted to write more, and be more autonomous. Then we started getting to know refugees and artists from other countries. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

Following this decision, their first project, *Lampedusa*, inaugurated the emergence of *boat people projekt*. *Lampedusa* was actualised after a six-month research process, including coming together with artists of African descent living in and around Göttingen. The performance took place in a public bus in September 2009 in Göttingen, with a group of amateur African participants. The project aimed to depict the journey of refugees to Europe through the eyes of the refugees themselves (*boat people projekt*, 2018a).

In the first few productions, the co-founders worked with refugees who were not professional actors; “they were just people who were interested in taking part” (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017). In their third performance, *Keinsternhotel* (No-Stars Hotel), they not only worked with a mixed cast of professional and amateur actors, but, for the first time, the text was co-written with a guest author, Marie Louise Bibish Mumbu, from Congo.

Rist describes their growing interest in carrying out projects with refugees and cooperating with other artists:

Surely, I could write about other subjects, too. But it [forced migration] seems to be a big part of our lives now. Every city in Germany is changing. The topic is still there, and it is expanding. So, we thought about how we could talk about it.

We intend to get to know people from other cultural backgrounds and observe how society is developing with other cultures. We try to find actors and other artists for our projects who share the same vision. As a result, our team is constantly growing. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

According to Rist, bringing “the stranger” closer is necessary in order to change the superficial perception German society has of refugees (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017). In the coming years, their work continued to



unequivocally reflect the urge to contribute to a shift in society's biased perspective. In 2011, in their following project *Mikili*, they portrayed the fortress Europe together with people from Africa (boat people projekt, 2013), borrowing a word from the Lingala language for its title, introduced to the team by the guest author Marie Louise Bibish Mumbu. "*Mikili*" is a unique word; it means Europe from an African perspective, and "*Mikilist*" is a person who moves to Europe and perceives this newly discovered world in various colours unique to the person themselves (boat people projekt, 2013b).

### 6.2.2 Working with Young Amateur Refugees

*Boat people projekt* employs various strategies when creating performances with young amateur refugees. Their projects with the youth stretch for a long period of rehearsals since the theatre considers artistic exchange a process that involves building trust in one another.

After the initial rehearsals, Rist writes parts of the play based on the input from young refugees participating in the projects, to avoid documentary theatre (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017). In her opinion, some refugees prefer to express themselves through performance only, rather than be involved in the artistic creation. Rist states that many funding institutions and foundations have a politicised approach to projects realised with refugees, and they expect to see a certain wording in the applications, such as "participation" and "integration". They also require participants to develop the performances by themselves. Rist deems such expectations ambitious and, in some cases, upsetting to young people:

They are expected to develop everything on their own. It is too much for them, and sometimes they never come back [to rehearsals]. They are content when they have a structure. I try to observe them. For example, I see somebody who looks distracted. Then I can give them a character and a confrontation. If they disagree, (...) then we change everything or we do not do it at all. I just give them a frame with words, and not the words of the funding institutions. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

Although no hierarchy is determined in the projects with young refugees, Rist's statement reveals an unintended dominance in the production processes, signalling a struggle to discover non-hegemonic forms of interaction. Nonetheless, the participants are included in the formation of plays from the very beginning of conceptualisation. Their ideas and wishes shape the artistic direction of the projects, accompanied by the director's observations:

I try to find out what they like and what they dislike, which scene they feel like themselves in. I ask them: "Would you prefer a bigger role, or do you just want

to sing?" (...) We had a boy from Afghanistan. He was not able to speak. He was traumatised. (...) I was not expecting that he would want to sing. I asked the group who would like to sing. He volunteered. Before he started singing, he was so shy. But when he sang, he was amazing. And he smiled. Singing was all he wanted to do. That was his role; he did not want to act. I told him, "Everything is allowed. You can even sit somewhere, or we can find a position for you to stand". But in the end, he said: "No, I can do it like the others". But he did not want to speak. It is a very fragile process. Within this process, I very much like to see the presence of participants. Every personality that comes in has something to offer. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

In addition to the pedagogical aspect of working with people who have been traumatised, Rist is aware of the risk of instrumentalising refugee stories and the dilemmatic nature of bringing refugees into productions:

I see, for example, this person wanting to express something, then I suggest a direction they could go in; sometimes they do, and sometimes they take a different path. Sometimes the character in the play is connected to the personality of the actor. But I do not use biographical monologue. Sometimes they tell me: "I would like to say something about Afghanistan", and I say, "Okay, we will find a place. You have a message, and it is important for you". (...) Other times they want to say something about a specific situation, which is risky because they are a refugee at that moment. I do not allow this to happen too often. If they have this wish, I have to incorporate it because I respect their wishes. But usually they have their own characters, and I just try to intensify them. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

Rist expresses that her reason for involving the requests of the refugees into the productions is their right "to not be seen as refugees but as human beings with different life experiences" (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017). However, she is self-critical about reflecting personal narratives of forced migration:

I think it is important not to expose their stories, but it is not always possible to do everything right. It is not a usual situation to be in that position, to be a refugee.

I try to be careful. Sometimes it is difficult to see the difference between involving the aspirations of participants and not contributing to the victimisation of their experiences. Still, I do not like people displaying their sad escape stories on stage, shocking the audiences. In the end, it does not help them [the refugees]. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

Her articulation suggests the difficulty of finding a balance between fulfilling the wishes of the refugees on the one hand, and not revealing their biographies on the

other. It also indicates the complex aspects of a power structure that come with a number of challenges including the unintentional domination of the author's perspective in the process of exchange.

### 6.2.3 Focusing on Solidarity and Self-Empowerment

Starting from 2015, standing in solidarity with professional artists seeking refuge in Germany has gained importance for *boat people projekt*. This interest was, to some extent, related to the political debate on the flow of refugees to Germany. Around that time, Nina de la Chevallerie met with Rzgar Khalil, who arrived in Germany at the peak of the so-called “refugee influx”. Khalil is a Syrian artist who lived in Iraq for a few years, due to the civil war in Syria, before moving to Germany. Once they met, de la Chevallerie and Khalil instantly decided to work together. In 2015, Khalil co-wrote the text for the theatre performance *eine Stadt verändert sich* (A City is Changing) with Luise Rist, and was also part of the cast. The same year, he wrote the text of a short film, which he co-directed with Nina de la Chevallerie, called *die Träume der Unschuldigen* (Dreams of the Innocent), and then in 2016, he performed in the theatre production *Hilfe* (Help).

With the arrival of more people seeking refuge in Germany, an overwhelming number of cultural initiatives and NGOs were very eager about the idea of helping them by means of art practices. The sudden interest of some of these establishments in refugees was, to some degree, related to the availability of various funding options for cultural productions involving refugees. However, to this day, in many projects, displaced people are presented as victims. They are objectified through the established Eurocentric gaze, which (re)produces stereotypes about “the stranger”. Regarding this embodiment of a hegemonic relationship, in 2016, *boat people projekt* developed the production *Hilfe*. *Hilfe* was written by a Berlin-based author and journalist, Sophie Diesselhorst. Taking a critical stance on the unbalanced power regime, the theatre collective and the author questioned the limits of helping refugees in a political climate in which making socio-cultural projects for and with refugees is a nation-wide trend. In this production, the theatre focused on examples of presumptuous attempts that had crossed ethical lines without considering what kind of support refugees really needed (*boat people projekt*, 2019a).

In the following year, the attention of *boat people projekt* expanded to addressing the working conditions of professional refugee artists in their new localities. Consequently, Nina de la Chevallerie initiated a research project with Rzgar Khalil, funded by the *Homebase – Theatre for the Coming Society* programme of the Performing Arts Fund, to map out the number of displaced artists who were now

living in Lower Saxony.<sup>5</sup> They aimed to determine whether other professionals have sufficient information about the theatre scene in the region and are able to work as artists (N. de la Chevalerie, personal communication, December 5, 2017). The precarious situation they are in makes the refugees vulnerable. They are often exposed to exploitation – they are either not paid at all or receive inadequate pay for their work. This fact was the main reason for *boat people projekt* to conduct the research project *Artistic Network Meeting Point*:

I heard from some Germans who said that they were working with Syrian actors. I asked them how much they were paying them. The experiences fluctuated so much that I thought it was important to find out. I was curious because we have been dealing with this topic for a long time. (...) I have to provide the artists with some information; to be able to tell them, “Do not work for 200€ for six weeks. That is not right. Sure, you are the newcomer; you have to start somewhere. You cannot earn 4000€, but 200€ is not okay”. I needed to tell them that. (N. de la Chevalerie, personal communication, December 5, 2017)

The same year, in the production *Die Probe – Galixeo in Deutschmania* (Rehearsal – Galixeo in German Mania), *boat people projekt* worked with two actors who studied dramatic arts at the University of Damascus, Ahmad Kiki and Roula Thoubian. Sophie Diesselhorst wrote the play with Anis Hamdoun, who left Syria in 2012 and arrived in Germany via Egypt at the end of 2013. The two authors re-created a dystopic version of Bertolt Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* in which the residency permit, job, and life of a Syrian director are in danger when a nightmare becomes reality in an imaginary scenario where the racist AfD wins the election.

After the research project, *boat people projekt* continued to focus on solidarity through working with other cooperation partners in the region. Towards the end of 2017, the theatre, together with the *Landesverband Freier Theater Niedersachsen* (LaFT; State Association of Independent Theatres of Lower Saxony) and the *Bundesakademie für Kulturelle Bildung Wolfenbüttel* (Federal Academy for Cultural Education Wolfenbüttel) organised the meeting *New Connections* to network with professional artists seeking refuge in Germany.<sup>6</sup> The session also aimed to foster intercultural exchange and dialogue, and share know-how between cultural professionals in the German performing arts scene and newly arrived refugee artists. The following questions were identified regarding the challenges of accommodating diversity in the theatre scene:

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5 See Chapter 5 for the analysis of the special incentive programme, *Homebase – Theatre for the Coming Society*, as well as the research project carried out by Nina de la Chevalerie and Rzgar Khalil.

6 *New Connections* was funded by the Socio-Culture Fund.

- What are the available solutions for overcoming language barriers?
- How can we avoid making too many aesthetical compromises in our artistic work and ending up with the lowest common denominator?
- Do the publicly funded projects actually meet the expectations of refugees?
- How can we get rid of the label of “refugee” without forfeiting the networks, partners, and funding associated with it?
- Which strategies can be developed to make diversity a top priority in large institutions? (Bundesakademie für Kulturelle Bildung Wolfenbüttel, 2018, p. 10)

Moreover, participants of the meeting discussed further issues, which unveiled the demand for more knowledge, consultancy, and artistic alliances in order to develop collaborations so that displaced artists can continue to create in Germany:

- Where can the finished works of refugee colleagues and ensembles be shown? Where can they offer their freelance projects and workshops? (...)
- How can cooperation take place on an equal footing from the beginning?
- What background are they required to have in order to be considered a professional theatre-maker in Germany?
- There is a great need for consultancy on how the German theatre landscape works and is financed, how to apply for jobs, etc. (Bundesakademie für Kulturelle Bildung Wolfenbüttel, 2018, p. 12)

De la Chevallierie elaborates that her motivation for getting further involved in research projects is to share her expertise with colleagues seeking refuge in Germany:

I sometimes ask myself why I do this [she laughs]. It is not art. (...) In the conference [*New Connections*] many people came to me afterwards and said, “Thank you, Nina. You have shown us a path we can take”. I love seeing people come together. I love it when I see Mustafa, Nur, Martina, and Harold find each other and plan a project together. They have the potential to create something. And in a way, I am part of it too. It frees me up a lot. That is the meaning of it for me. Of course, I am always wondering where I am, why I am doing this.

(...) I do not want to be in this profession in 10 years. I want them to learn to write applications and do their projects by themselves. I would like to see more immigrants working in theatres in Germany, instead of only seeing White men. (personal communication, December 5, 2017)

*Boat people projekt* conducts research projects to identify the structural problems that displaced theatre professionals have been dealing with while trying to access to theatre scene, and believes that these projects are vital for the diversification of the German theatre domain dominated by White male hegemony.

## 6.2.4 The Impact of Intercultural Collaboration on Personal Development

The growing cooperation between the collective, displaced artists, and young refugees has had a lasting effect on the team's world views and working methods. Rist reflects on how her perception has changed over time due to the projects she has done with young refugees:

When I started the kids' group, I had had no experience with young people in theatre. I had only worked with professionals at *Deutsches Theater*. I learned a lot from them [young refugees]. I learned about the life they see here and their way of asking questions. I learned to speak differently; in German, I mean. That was so important for me. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

De la Chevallerie's statement on personal development shows similarities to that of Rist. Likewise, she discloses that cooperating with immigrant artists has not only broadened her horizon on aesthetics in theatre practice, but has also led to a critical examination of her thoughts, conduct, and motives:

When I started, I could not name the countries of the African continent. I knew too little about Islam. So, there is knowledge. Experience is another one. How do we treat one another in an intercultural context, what mistakes am I making, do I have a post-colonialist mindset? I question myself every day, all the time. I make mistakes every day. We discuss this a lot. I go to conferences and talk about these matters. It is incredibly reflexive. I had never thought about it that way before. So, that has changed a lot, but also my mentality has changed. (...) We [herself and Rzgar Khalil] just listened to Arabic music together. I never thought I would ever find it aesthetically interesting (...). But since I changed my artistic activity, my perception has changed as well. (personal communication, December 5, 2017)

The development of skills and competencies through artistic exchange has had a substantial impact on their projects. Rist states that this interaction has influenced both her writing and her view on predetermined ideas about "the other":

This morning, for the song project [referring to *On Air*], I was preparing a monologue about the use of the appointment calendar in Germany. A man had told me that nobody in Syria uses an appointment calendar. I said, "I understand that is the situation now, but before the war, you were organised. Do not tell me that you have never had an appointment calendar; it is a cliché to think that you are disorganised". He said, "No, we have never had a calendar. We organise things differently. Families are our calendar". Then I wrote this monologue about the calendar. I liked the idea of someone being able to organise themselves without a calendar. I have developed skills that I did not have 10 years ago, skills that enable

me to see the world differently. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

In her recent productions, de la Chevallerie has been working more as a producer than a director. She aims to provide directors who are particularly new in Germany with the possibility to work (N. de la Chevallerie, personal communication, December 5, 2017). For instance, in 2018, in *Nora und ihr anderer Name* (Nora and Her Other Name), *boat people projekt* worked with director Wessam Talhouq, author Ayham Abu Shaqra, dramaturge Kaouthar Hiba Slimani, and stage designer Wessam Darweash. They are all part of the theatre group *Hekayah*, now living in Germany, Sweden, and France. The primary goal of their first collaboration under the roof of *boat people projekt* was to facilitate an artistic exchange and experiment with new creative approaches (boat people projekt, 2019b). De la Chevallerie explains how her perception of diversity has evolved over time, now leaning more towards solidarity:

In May [of 2018], Wessam Talhouq will direct under our label. We have applied for funding from the ministry for him to be able to work independently. He chose the play and the ensemble himself. I just helped him find the people, because, of course, I have more contacts than he does since he has only been living here for two years. (personal communication, December 5, 2017)

In 2019, in *Schwesternherz oder Zehra Nasıl Öldü?* (Sister Heart or How Did Zehra Die?), de la Chevallerie cooperated with author Ceylan Ünal from Turkey, who wrote a play depicting life in a foreign country and being a stranger wherever you go. Through the story of two female Turkish characters, the author dealt with stereotypes and distorted images of people perceived as strangers in both worlds, Germany and Turkey.

Being open to otherness enables the members of *boat people projekt* to deepen their knowledge on the methodological principles of engaging with the subject of migration and working with people from diverse cultural orientations and artistic traditions. A notable change in mindset over the years gives the impression of the theatre collective drawing inspiration from an exploratory method. Their collaborative forms of intercultural exchange are characterised by a negotiation model of theatrical presence. This approach recognises that theatre is not a neutral space; it incorporates ambiguity and apprehension.

### 6.2.5 On Aesthetics and Narrative Content

The artistic approach of *boat people projekt* has evolved over time through exchange and collaboration. Rist confirms that “there is an established way of perceiving aesthetics in Germany, in Europe” (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4,

2017). For Rist, although the German theatre tradition is unique and inspiring, it is also excluding. She states that her reason for leaving public theatre was linked to her interest in exploring different theatre styles, which eventually led her to break with the public theatre tradition.

The timeline of exploring other theatrical forms goes back to their early projects. For instance, in 2012, Rist and de la Chevallerie directed a play, *Rosenwinkel* (Rose Corner), about Roma people. The play dealt with stigmatisation, belonging, and not belonging. The directors described their desire to learn more about “the strangers”, they state, “who are sometimes more familiar to us than those we do believe to know” (boat people projekt, 2013a). This narration resonates with Rist’s aesthetical shift since she started working with artists of Roma descent:

I worked with Roma people from Kosovo. They like to see dramatic features in theatre, and they like Bollywood films. I learned a lot about Bollywood from them. And now I like it too.

It may sound strange, but sometimes I associate myself more with my Roma friends when it comes to aesthetics. (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

Language plays an essential role in the verbal enunciation of aesthetics in German public theatre. In many established municipal and state theatres, performative features are conventionally characterised by European/Western aesthetics and flawlessly spoken German as the stage language. In this context, the independent theatre scene is also more concerned with exploring new theatrical forms through the contribution of a collage of languages.

Similarly, *boat people projekt* have been using a combination of languages, depending on the content of the stories and the cultural creators with whom they are cooperating. This practice pertains to the narrativisation of experiences, made possible due to the fact that their theatre-making process developed over time, through their collaboration with immigrant and displaced artists. De la Chevallerie ruminates over the aspect of language in a theatrical production as well as the difficulty of communicating through verbal exchange:

I find different languages on stage interesting. I see a potential for communication. Of course, you need a lot of patience for working with one another. (...) In theatre, in art, we can overcome many things using intuition. (personal communication, December 5, 2017)

For *boat people projekt*, the involvement of different languages on and behind the stage is part of the process of learning about diverse aesthetical perspectives. Recognising language as a crucial aspect of intercultural communication enables theatre members to improve their skills of dialogue and empathy. Nevertheless,



including different languages in productions in addition to having cast members who do not speak flawless German causes tension for parts of the well-educated audience of German descent, according to de la Chevallerie:

There are German people who find it great that they are hearing these different languages. But there are also those of them who are annoyed when it is hard for them to understand someone on stage. If a performer does not speak High German [*hoch Deutsch*] and the audience cannot understand them, some members of the audience might get stressed. Older people in particular are annoyed by it. On the other hand, there are people with a “migrant background” who understand these languages and feel connected to the story. They might think “the actors come from my cultural circle, I can understand them” or “the theatre cares about other cultures like mine”. That means I might lose some audiences, but I might also gain other ones in turn. (personal communication, December 5, 2017)

Rist also highlights this challenge of exchange projects since German theatre is sometimes very conventional, and there is a belief that the audience will not like such productions (L. Rist, personal communication, December 4, 2017).

Concerning the audience, the theatre collective claims that they are “looking for topics, forms and narrative strategies to make theatre today tangible for a diverse audience” (boat people projekt, 2021). De la Chevallerie confirms that they have been pursuing this goal, and pinpoints their diversity-oriented approach to gaining a new audience:

We have a very diverse audience, which we are very proud of. Also, we try to develop and evolve. That is something I have learned about diverse cultural backgrounds. The tradition of going to the theatre involves negotiating what happens there. That means asking the question: “What would make me stay in the theatre as an audience member? Being able to find topics that have something to do with me”. That is, of course, a process. Perhaps many people go to the theatre once and see, for example, a play by Ibsen in High German and think it has nothing to do with them, and then stop going to the theatre altogether. (personal communication, December 5, 2017)

*Boat people projekt* understands cultural exchange as a process and a learning method. This strategy calls for modifying the established forms of reception. In this regard, facilitating the construction of interaction between the majority society and artists labelled as immigrants and refugees by showcasing their work could be recognised as counter-hegemonic. In terms of reception, the conflictual process of negotiating artistic expressions also opens a channel for productive communication with the audience.

### 6.3 *Hajusom*

*Hajusom* is a transnational theatre collective initiated in 1999 by Ella Huck and Dorothea Reinicke in Hamburg. Over time, in addition to the ensemble, various constellations of people were incorporated in the interdisciplinary theatre productions. One of these programmes, *Hajusom Lab*, serves as a platform for bringing young refugees together to create dance, music, and poetry pieces, and provide them with mentoring on various subjects. Several groups were founded under the roof of *Hajusom Lab*, such as *M.Power* for performance, *Sedah Hajusom* for music, and *G. Connections* for hip-hop sessions.

Further, the platform *Hajusom Transfer* was established for knowledge transfer. The concept of *Hajusom Transfer* was introduced by Zandile Darko, Ania Faas, Elmira Ghafoori, and Sofie Olbers. On the one hand, the group aims to convey the transnational frame to newcomers provided by experienced members, and on the other hand, the expert members offer workshops, seminars, talks, and lecture-performances to disseminate artistic knowledge throughout society. Hence, they collaborate with schools, universities, artists, cultural and social workers, and volunteers.

The group has expanded over the years along with the broad recognition of the theatre collective. The team members and their responsibilities are as follows:

- Ella Huck: artistic director and co-founder
- Dorothea Reinicke: artistic director and co-founder (since 2021 senior advisor)
- Julia zur Lippe: managing director and project coordinator
- Gabriela Vasileva: assistant manager
- Katalina Götz: assistant art director
- Vera Heimisch: guest performance manager
- Michael Böhler: stage designer
- Josep Caballero García: choreographer and artistic director
- Markus Lohmann: stage design
- Manuel Horstmann: sound and video design
- Viktor Marek: composition and live music
- Mathis Menneking: video
- Andreina Vieira dos Santos: costume design
- Joan Funnah: Coordinator of the *LAB*

Below listed team members also offer lectures and lecture-performances within the diverse activities of *Hajusom Lab*:

- Carlos Andres Rico: music group, *Sedah Hajusom*
- Sergio Vasquez: music group, *Sedah Hajusom*

- Can Gülec: hip-hop dance group, *G. Connections*
- Elmira Ghafoori: performance group, *M. Power*
- Hamed Ahmadi: performance group, *M. Power*
- Farzad Fadaei: performance group, *M. Power*

Since 2010, *Hajusom* has been working as a non-profit organisation and supporting the youth organisation *Freie Jugendhilfe* (Independent Youth Welfare Service).

From its early days, *Hajusom* was considered one of the best practices nationwide. The group has been nominated for various awards. In 2001, the collective won the *Berliner Festspiele* Award with the production *7 Leben* (Seven Lives), and in 2003, another production of theirs, *die Kinder der Regenmacher* (Children of the Rainmakers), was nominated for the same award. In 2008, the musical *Back Up Story* received the National Funding Prize of the Hamburg Mannheim Foundation. In 2011, with *Bollyland*, the theatre was awarded the Innovation Award of the Socio-Culture Fund (*Innovationspreis Soziokultur*). In 2014, *Hajusom* received the Max Brauer Award of the Alfred Töpfer Foundation for its distinctive cultural and social engagement in Hamburg. In 2015, *Gender-Ding*, the first production of the new ensemble, *Neue Sterne* (New Stars), was presented with the Federal Award of the Berlin Festival and was nominated for the BKM Award for Cultural Education. In 2016, *Hajusom* was nominated for the BKM Special Award for cultural participation with its youth project, *Zukunftskünste* (Future Arts).

In the early years after its establishment, *Hajusom* obtained project-based funding at the city level from public and private institutions. Following the nationwide recognition in the coming years, the theatre collective started receiving a wide range of non-structural incentives from national and regional funding bodies as well as other private and non-profit cultural, art, refugee, and migration organisations.<sup>7</sup>

The most prominent independent production venue for the performing arts in Germany, *Kampnagel* in Hamburg, is *Hajusom*'s co-production partner. *Hajusom* has been staging its productions at *Kampnagel* and cooperating with the *FFT Düsseldorf*, a platform for professional independent theatres, and the municipal theatre *Münster Theater*.

### 6.3.1 Cultural Diversity as Political and Social Commitment

*Hajusom* was co-founded as the result of the social and political aspirations of Ella Huck and Dorothea Reinicke. Both artists were involved in interdisciplinary performance projects before establishing *Hajusom*. Nearing the end of the 1990s, Huck was the director of a social centre for young refugees coming to Germany

7 For the latest list of funders, please visit <https://www.hajusom.de/>.

from Afghanistan, Iran, and West African countries, residing at the periphery of Hamburg. Towards the end of 1998, Huck and Reinicke conducted a three-month theatre workshop with a group of young refugees that inaugurated *Hajusom*:

She [Ella Huck] said, "I have the feeling that this group is interested in artistic work. Do you think you could do something with them, like a workshop?" I said, "That sounds exciting". So, we organised this workshop in what was then the middle of the *Versorgungseinrichtung* [social centre for young refugees]. There was a big hall we could use. The first time we met, there were 30 people residing there, but also people from other refugee centres. It was a wild thing because we were not experienced in the so-called "*Flüchtlingsarbeit*" [refugee work]. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

For Reinicke, their interest in making theatre projects with refugees is embedded in their determination to be politically engaged with society. This motivation was accompanied by the decision to experiment with a new format with amateurs:

I must say it was our lifeline at the time. My generation and I were very much politically driven. I wanted to be even more political than I already was in my artistic work. I was also fed up with the attitude of some universities and the performing arts scene. It was precisely at that time that I was looking for a chance to work with young people who were not students at theatre schools, but just young people. Then I got this call. Just thinking about it made me happy. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

She further reflects on how her political and social sense of responsibility urged her get involved in a transnational ensemble. For Reinicke, acknowledging the heterogeneity of people with various ethnic affiliations in her locality is closely linked to the drive to contribute to an artistic discourse and practice aware of diversity. In her understanding, enabling the recognition, appreciation, and normalisation of a diversity of views, expressions, and ways of living is vital for a peaceful co-existence. Furthermore, the failure of (cultural) politics and politicians to introduce schemes and measures for recognising differences as normality in a culturally diverse society compelled two artistic directors to get involved in civic engagement through performing arts with refugees:

I have always lived in this culturally mixed part of Hamburg, in St. Pauli<sup>8</sup>, and if you ask me, this is what a healthy relationship between people of a local community looks like. The relationships are very open. It is not so much about who you are, how much money you make, what your profession is; it is about

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8 St. Pauli is a quarter in Hamburg, where immigrant inhabitants comprise 36% of the population. The quarter is known for its alternative cultural scene.

being a person living with other people in the same locality. This is a constant in our artistic perspective. In the last two years, everything that has been uttered by the politicians has already been heard before. It was a chance for Ella [Huck] and me to bring our political and social collectiveness together. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

After the workshop series at the refugee centre, Huck and Reinicke continued to create theatre performances with young refugees. The emotional and societal impact of the workshops reveals the dedication of the directors to work further in this direction:

We felt it in our fingertips, our hearts, and our minds, and not just us, but everyone who was part of this process did, during the entire three months. We felt that it was relevant work, and we could not stop. Everyone said: “No, it cannot be over; we were just getting started”; that is why we decided to keep going. We kept going with the work, and continued developing our piece a bit more. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

This initial spark had given way to the formation of a theatre collective, which, in the coming years, turned into a transnational artistic practice.

### 6.3.2 Collective Thinking at the Foundation of an Artistic Method

In the beginning, the collective created merely theatre productions. After a few plays, *Hajusom* evolved into an interdisciplinary art project. For the ensemble, the first phase was instrumental in building a network of partners with knowledge and experience of working with refugees in various related fields. During this phase, they aimed to enhance their awareness of diverse subjects to better their artistic methodology. It was also essential for *Hajusom* to “create an atmosphere of trust and a sense of security from the very beginning” (Huck, 2014, p. 128). Forming personal relationships with refugees was perceived as the first step to building team spirit. The ensemble’s diversity framework originated and developed from this approach:

Many of them were traumatised by the escape and situation in their countries or the situation here. They had to fight for everything. This was not an everyday situation for us. We needed to understand that this was not going to work in the same way as working with other people who lived in Germany, who were safe living with their families. So, when we would finish a rehearsal, we did not say, “See you next week”. We asked: “Hey, what is going on?” We talked with each member of our group after rehearsal or met up with them later that week. Then, we realised we needed to learn about asylum rights and all the related subjects. We went with them to the immigration office. We had to learn what was going

on in their lives to be able to understand where trauma therapy would be able to help. After that, we found cooperation partners, including a trauma centre and a hospital for refugees, which then sent their therapy patients to us. A while later, we created a strong network of lawyers, doctors, refugee centres, etc. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Steadily, their collective thinking led to the expansion of the group and the professionalisation of established members. Around the same time, the ensemble became known outside Hamburg and started receiving invitations to stage their productions in cities throughout the country:

*Hajusom* grew in time with the participation of new people, but there had always been an inner circle in which some of the members stayed for a long time and became professionals over the years. After five or six years, all of our performers were exhibiting quite a high level of professionalism. The group was always big, maybe 15 to 20 people on stage, and this inner circle of people working professionally transformed along with them. So, we received the first awards for our productions and got to tour around Germany. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

This frame of mind is also reflected in the name of the ensemble. The label *Hajusom* consists of the first syllables of three refugees' names: Hatice, Jusef, and Omied. The three of them were unaccompanied teenage refugees, who were either deported, or left the group shortly after the establishment of *Hajusom*. Nonetheless, the name itself establishes the non-hierarchical ethical frame that *Hajusom* aims to construct for an equality-oriented artistic exchange:

They are not just ordinary letters. They mean something. It was their names listed in the application, which also meant that it was not our proposal. It was our joint application resulting from collective thinking. Also, there is an interesting story behind all three of them. Hatice had not been on the stage once before being deported. Yousef had to leave after two years. Omid is still in Hamburg, but one day he just left. For us, naming the group after these three refugees is also a sign of how we think. This is not our work, this is the work of a collective. This is their story. And the stories of the three of them are exemplary. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Reinicke defines this way of thinking as the collective spirit of *Hajusom* and the reason why the work of the ensemble will remain relevant in the future. What sustains the cosmos of *Hajusom* is the determination to propagate the enunciation of various artistic ideas and concepts. They deem this perspective to be the spirit that maintains and nourishes the notion of connecting people and their visions, knowledge, and experiences:

We truly believe that this work will not lose its relevance; if anything, it might become even more relevant. It is rather a feeling of a specific flow or strength, a particular spirit that emerges inside *Hajusom*, and all the people who are part of *Hajusom* feed this spirit. That is what holds us together. It was not a rational thing but a conscious political step. We believe that this work needs to be done. We still feel it with every production and constellation of artists involved; there have been some changes within the groups, but the spirit is still there. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Following the premiere of a play, *Hajusom* takes two to three weeks off, and then the team comes together to discuss the concept for the next production (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017). These meetings are meant to enable all team members to actively take part in the production process. The concepts, as well as the artistic direction, are developed through collective thinking:

From the very beginning of a new piece, we ask the group, “What do you think? What should be the artistic focus? More music, more dance? Do you think we should work with this choreographer again? Do you have another suggestion? Do you know any artists we should be working with?” It is a very collective process from the beginning. And the learning is mutual; we call it “each one teach one”. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

The collective achieved thinking diversity anew gradually, over the course of several years. As their artistic framework developed, their work expanded to different activities beyond theatre performances. Currently, the team consists of around 400 performers with and without migration and displacement experiences.

### 6.3.3 Transnational Approach for Performative Practices

The social and ethical obligation of the directors to treat every human experience as equally valuable is a prerequisite for cultivating the idea of a transnational collective. As Huck states, this notion characterises a jointly developed interdisciplinary creative process with artists from a wide range of ethnicities and cultural affiliations:

This is not just a job. Anyone just looking for a job with us would be all wrong. They would not be able to understand the thing that holds the group together. (...) I believe that the right people will find their way to us – artists established in a particular art form, but who also have a certain understanding of humanity. (Huck, 2014, p. 153)

Non-hierarchical exchange is at the foreground of their organisation. For *Hajusom*, reciprocal dialogue is the central principle of performative practices; hence, the

ensemble focuses on two levels of communication: as human beings and as artists (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017).

Their artistic framework is characterised by the recognition and valorisation of plurality in thinking and grasping the world in diverse forms. This perspective is conveyed through a transnational aesthetical method that ruptures the firm division between socially engaged art and traditional high culture:

Everyone brings their knowledge and experience. It is like a big pot. It is not a melting pot; it is a connecting pot. We can still see the other elements; each one has their unique form of colour and energy. You see each one of the elements, but it is still one whole. The phrase that best describes it is “transnational aesthetics”. That approach is fundamental when working transnationally – aesthetically trying to find new qualities and symbols that are not connected to these categories of social work or art. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

This frame also disowns the language of cultural politics and the perspective of national inclusion/integration policies:

If you do artistic work on a personal level and on an equal footing, each member gets the feeling that their contribution is important. There is this *Leitkultur* debate in Germany on wanting to integrate people into one culture. We never use the word “integration”. We say, “Your experience is valuable; we are interested in you and your knowledge and what you want to do in the future. We want to support you in your perspective. We want to get to know you on an artistic level. We want to find out what kind of personality and energy is there. We want to support your vision”. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Openness towards multiperspectivity is understood as essential in facilitating possibilities of emancipation. *Hajusom* continually explores new forms of narration to illustrate different levels of identity and deal with the label of “refugee”:

They are very talented. They already have a level of knowledge that was eye-opening in many ways. This multiperspectivity can be so refreshing for the artistic process if you do it right; not because they are refugees and tell their stories, but because they have their lives to tell as individuals.

The texts are always transcribed improvisations, or the performers write something down at home. In either case, they are the authors. Through further editing together with other performers and ourselves, the stage version then develops through the rehearsal process. (Reinicke, 2014, p. 137)

The transnational strategy enables them to create an artistic format that goes beyond the imposing European/Western aesthetics. From this perspective, ascribing value to a collection of individual experiences and knowledge is considered crucial in shifting the terrain of rigid and traditional structures. This



perspective also involves a critique of cultural policy, its funding structure, and the German theatre scene:

In Germany, there is an extreme distinction between different types of theatre, and an established perception of the cultural funding they should receive. The separation between youth theatre, refugee theatre, between professionals and amateurs is also associated with a certain judgment of quality. (Huck, 2014, p. 161)

*Hajusom* denounces this restrictive definition of art and clear-cut separation of genres. The performing arts initiative searches for new artistic forms and techniques of narrativisation to present multiple perceptions, expertise, forms of creativity, and skills. Consequently, the collective defines their transnational framework as a method of resisting the firm categories such as art, social work, and theatre pedagogy:

We are creating a new form. For us, these sorts of categories are obsolete. We do not need these borders. Is our work social, artistic, political, therapeutic, or pedagogic? Therapists say that what we are doing is an excellent form of therapy, and others say: "Well, you are very good theatre pedagogues". We say, "We are not pedagogues; we are just artists, and we are discovering new approaches with our people whose experiences are just as worthy as ours". This is why we are part of the independent theatre scene (...). It is a strange discussion to be having. Is it professional? Can it even be called performance? Is it an art form if it is not spoken theatre? The expectations of using these traditional roles and speaking excellent German feel strange to us. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

For *Hajusom*, the definition of professionalism goes beyond the rigid understanding of artistic work and art education:

We believe that even those who do not have an art education are professionals. (...) We do not accept these categories for our ensemble. We do professional work; the entire framework is professional. We work with *Kampfnagel*, so the entire production process is professional as well. Our artistic process is founded in professionalism. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Nonetheless, the collective is, like many other theatres, confronted with the issues of an exoticising portrayal of cultures and stereotypical attributes. In this regard, it is fundamental for *Hajusom* to underline that they are not a refugee theatre but a transnational art project:

We are not a refugee theatre. They are not victims. Our people are powerful on stage; they know what they are doing. We have not had a single audience member say: "That made me so sad, poor refugees". It would be upsetting if we did. That

is not what we want. We do not want their tears of shame. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

The conceptualisation of their working model is based on creative interaction between new and old members of *Hajusom*. Communication is understood as a two-way process, inspired by the principle of “each one teach one”.

### 6.3.4 Each One Teach One: Principle of Knowledge Transfer

In 10 years, *Hajusom* has received nationwide recognition. Platforms such as *Lab*, *Transfer*, and *Neue Sterne* (New Stars) emerged with the involvement of newcomers and music and dance performances.

The concept of “each one teach one” serves as a catalyst for the circulation of a multiplicity of knowledge. Hence, the platforms *Lab* and *Transfer* were created to put the “each one teach one” strategy into practice. With this principle, *Hajusom* also aims to create an intergenerational model of knowledge transfer. The creative interaction between new and old team members generates new artistic experiences:

The long-term performers work with groups of newcomers. This is something that would not be possible if *Hajusom* were a three-year project. You would not be able to have this long-lasting experience. The performers know the entire structure of our way of working. The idea of the concept is for them to take over. (...) We love to support them in making a public presentation of what *Hajusom* and its methods are. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Knowledge transfer is provided with the help of experienced team members; this methodology generates and safeguards a powerful connection for newcomers to the cosmos of *Hajusom*. Ferzad Fadaï has been a member of the group since 2009, and is currently responsible for coordinating junior groups. He is also a lecturer to one of the performance groups. One of the first performers, Arman Marzak, who joined *Hajusom* in 2002, offers cooking classes to newcomers. They both mentor young members:

He [Ferzad Fadaï] accompanies the *Neue Sterne* [New Stars] to the opening nights; they call him, tell him their worries; he is like a role model to them, a big brother. Arman Marzak, too. (...) He meets up with newcomers privately, invites them to dinner, cooks with them, and has been doing this cooking course within *Hajusom* for three years, which he is now offering within *Hajusom*, with our people at his home. (Reinicke, 2014, p. 147)

*Hajusom Transfer* also offers workshops and lecture-performances for schools, universities, volunteers, cultural and social workers in Hamburg and across the

country. Their aim is to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the field of transnational theatre, which *Hajusom* aspires to further disseminate to society at large. Moreover, through these lectures and workshops, the ensemble discusses how concepts such as participation and empowerment can be reconstructed artistically through a transnational approach:

The focus of our work changes depending on the group. It might be just artistic work; the focus might be on different modes of communication and how to work as a collective. We just had a workshop for social workers in collaboration with the *Diakonie Hamburg*. They are all professional social workers who think they know how to deal with certain situations. Farzad Fadaï led the workshop. The social workers were amazed to see his ability as the master of the workshop. It is training, in a way; a transcultural training programme. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Moreover, internal and external transcultural training is considered necessary to neutralise inequality in power relations within the organisational structure of the ensemble. To counteract the inherent hegemonic configuration that creates privileges among young team members and founding directors, *Hajusom* seeks to develop a collective power in production processes.

### 6.3.5 The Emancipator vs. the Emancipated

*Hajusom's* current artistic position formed as a result of a long and experimental process. In the first phase, among other things, the initiative supported performers who wanted to inform the German audience about the realities of their countries of origin. In the early productions, the ensemble faced the challenge of finding the right balance between enabling refugees to articulate their thoughts and images on the one hand, and not being misled by displaying traumatic experiences on the other. Nevertheless, in some cases, it was essential for *Hajusom* to provide the conditions for unimpeded enunciation:

This one boy in *7 Leben*, who came from Sierra Leone, used to be a child soldier. For him, it was a burning desire to talk about the situation in his country. He was very politically aware. He said he wanted the German audience to hear about the colonial history of Africa. He wanted to tell them about this civil war, and show them what was going on. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

In 2000, the group staged *7 Leben*. The production was not mainly based on the story of this young refugee from Sierra Leone. It was a collage of themes related to immigration on many different levels (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017). The production won the *Federal Award for Berliner Festspiel*.

However, *Hajusom* was highly criticised by the audience for having allowed the boy to tell his story (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017). The criticism influenced the theatre collective, and in the following projects, they decided to focus on other subjects. In 2002, with the production *die Kinder der Regenmacher* (Children of the Rainmakers), through focusing on the pre-colonial period in Tanzania, refugees of African, Iranian, and Afghanistan descent called into question the predetermined notion of cultural identity. They dealt with the formation of group identities based on ethnicity, such as “African” and “Asian”. In 2005, in the play *Holiday Inn* performers brought into focus their political struggles without exhibiting their own stories (Huck, 2014, p. 129). In the following years, not only did their way of engaging with forced migration and refugee narratives alter, but the performers became more involved in the creative process. For instance, in 2008, the storyline of the musical performance *Back Up Story* was written by *Hajusom*’s young actors (Huck, 2014, p. 130).

To avoid making refugees an object of exploitation, *Hajusom* does not compel team members to talk about their lives. Only in some cases, indirectly, individual stories showing the artistic development of the group’s production are included (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017). It is the mindset of the ensemble not to reduce refugees to “refugee narratives”, i.e., not to “expose refugees as refugees” (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017).

Encouraging the members to introduce their ideas to the team facilitates building self-confidence and self-expression. This approach creates an environment of open communication and fosters the creative abilities of young members. Reinicke elaborates on how projects are shaped by the interests and visions of young performers:

The topic of climate change was suggested by a member of the ensemble. He said it was exciting as it concerns all of us. That is how we came up with *Silmandé*. Then, some of them said, “We learned a bit about colonialism in school”. Many of them, however, did not know the ongoing drama of colonialism in their countries. They said they wanted to learn more. We were very interested in working on this subject. We prepared rehearsals together with part of the group and some external professionals, such as historians and sociologists, who could give us some input on the post-colonial discourse for a little further education and training for everyone in the group. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Their advocacy for cultural pluralism provides insights into the power structure of *Hajusom*. In order to overcome unequal designations and the domination of one artistic view, *Hajusom* is interested in conveying diverse forms of connections and robust exchange between team members. *Hajusom* has a positive approach to valorising the heterogeneity of knowledge:

I never wanted to only be a director, to only have this position at the top of the hierarchy. So, what I love about *Hajusom* is that it is a collective and an artistic team with many people who come together and shape the productions. The best part of working with many different people is that all these people come from all over the world and have different cultural backgrounds. We have a chance to become enriched by their knowledge and capacities and everything they bring with them. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

The collective regards theatrical interaction with the audience as one of the many forms of self-empowerment. After each performance, members of the ensemble gather with the audience. The purpose of the performers communicating with the audience is twofold: first, to overcome the inherently unjust power dynamics between the White artistic directors and the team. *Hajusom* strives to involve everyone in all parts of the artistic process:

We have these *Publikumsgespräche* [audience talks] to reflect on the actions of the characters and the reasons behind these actions. This kind of reflection is directed towards their artistic work. They want to talk about it; they want to say what part of their work is personal experience and what has to do with the universal theme, and which part they found the most interesting artistically. (D. Reinicke, personal communication, December 15, 2017)

Second, the encounter with the audience is a vital aspect of the young artists being involved in this transnational approach. The realisation of their individual autonomy and the inclusion of the audience in productions are recognised as mutually transformative processes. With the intention of establishing an artistic space in which cultural differences can be negotiated through transcultural performances, *Hajusom* introduced a new approach in their most recent project. In *Azimut Decolonial – An Archive Performs*, the audience became part of the collective thinking strategy of the ensemble by way of a walk-in installation. In this production, *Hajusom* dealt with the colonial history of Germany. “*Azimut*” is a term in astronomy borrowed from Arabic, which translates to “directions”, and denotes a type of angular measurement in a spherical coordinate system. Through the self-discovery of performers and collective historiography on colonialism, *Hajusom* posed the question: “Even though under the same sky, do we see the same stars?” The play was conceptualised with artists Latai Taumoepeau from Togo and Martin Ambara from Cameroon. With the project *Azimut*, *Hajusom* pursued the traces of a complex system of colonialism through theatre performance and archiving. The archive consisted of various video and audio materials as well as texts and photographs, and it was created to display the different aspects and layers of Germany’s colonising past (E. Huck, personal communication, October 11, 2018). *Azimut Decolonial – An Archive Performs* presented the archive in a way that

enabled the audience to physically walk through it. The production had a unique stage setup; through various levels of content, colonialism was illustrated as a parasite crawling into the hall of *Kampnagel* (E. Huck, personal communication, October 11, 2018). During the performance, the viewers did not remain passive; they were actively involved in the play. By moving through the hall, they took part in the deconstruction of the entrenched discourse on colonialism. By reinforcing dynamic dialogue between the performers and the audience in this production, the collective implemented their transcultural strategy of acknowledging and appreciating diverse ways of being and their performative articulations.

## 6.4 *Ruhrorter*

*Ruhrorter* is a theatre collective, established in 2012 in the post-industrial province of Ruhr, in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. At first, *Ruhrorter* started as a project of a pioneering private-public theatre, *Theater an der Ruhr*, located in the city Mülheim. The director, Adem Köstereli, initiated *Ruhrorter* together with Wanja van Suntum and Dr Jonas Tinius. With time, not only have new members joined the team, but *Ruhrorter* has become an independent theatre initiative. Within the team, there is no hierarchy; all members are responsible for several tasks (A. Köstereli, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017). The team discusses various aspects together, from strategy to content, the problematisation and reflection of their approach in decision-making processes (A. Köstereli, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017). However, each member has their core engagement areas:

- Adem Köstereli: directing and project management
- Wanja van Suntum: sound and space installations
- Dr Jonas Tinius: research
- Alexander Winestock: texts and dramaturgy
- Julian Rauter: directing
- Dijana Brnic: directing
- Maximilian Brands: sound and space installations
- Julia Rautenhaus: stage, costume, and installations
- Franziska Götz: photography
- Ann-Kathrin Allekotte: public relations and networking
- Jan Christoph Godde: sound directing

The name of the theatre collective in German explicitly communicates its objective: “*Ruhrorter*” means “places/people along the Ruhr”. The project was inspired by a multi-storey building that had formerly been used as an asylum accommodation

centre for a long time and was then left deserted. In an interview, Jonas Tinius elucidates how the temporality of the space shaped the content of the project:

The name *Ruhrorter* simultaneously denotes a particular street and a building, but also a person from that area, an area which in this case is situated between Oberhausen, Duisburg and Mülheim, three different places/spaces [*Orte*] right by the Ruhr. And yet, the building itself is temporally complicated. Yes, it is a concrete building, and yet it has been unused for nine years. It is abandoned, yet it still bears the traces and marks of its former inhabitants, many of whom are no longer in the country. Taking this site as a metaphor or a prism through which to regard many of the issues this project engages with, the temporality of the project is partly what the project is about. (Flade & Tinius, 2014)

The theatre aspires to intertwine this forgotten past of the Ruhr region and the invisibility of refugees. The group produces site-specific theatre productions and installations, accompanied by anthropological research. The installations are mainly intended for the German audience, to raise awareness about the history of the region since the stories of many abandoned sites are unknown to residents (W. van Suntum, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017). The ethnographic aspect is a vital pillar of the project; thus, *Ruhrorter* documents the artistic process of their theatrical performances. The anthropological observations serve as a methodological means in search of new forms and aesthetics of dealing with the societal issues of exclusion, otherness, stereotyping, and the stigmatisation of refugees.

Director Köstereli used to perform for the youth theatre of the *Theater an der Ruhr* ensemble over the course of 10 years, during which he established ties with the theatre, where he also met some of the future team members of *Ruhrorter*. Before the establishment of *Ruhrorter*, he had been making theatre with marginalised young people for five years under the roof of *Theater an der Ruhr*. Thus, *Ruhrorter* is profoundly influenced and inspired by the artistic tradition and ethical perception of this local theatre. Alexander Winestock expresses their strong connection to *Theater an der Ruhr*:

No matter how the tastes and styles developed differently throughout the years, we were attached to that house for 15 years or so. Our first contact with theatre was there – theatre as an artistic form, as a philosophy of art, something of both political and aesthetical qualities, potentials, and refinements as well. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

Moreover, *Theater an der Ruhr* provides a rehearsal venue in addition to technical, financial, and marketing support. *Ruhrorter* is also in close communication with the theatre regarding consultation, advice, and feedback on theatre performances

and installation projects (W. van Suntum, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017).

The theatre collective applies for funding programmes offered by different institutions. They do not receive any structural public subsidy. However, since 2014, *Ruhrorter* has been receiving funding from the Ministry of Family, Children, Youth, Culture, and Sport of the State of North-Rhine Westphalia within the Intercultural Dialogue Support Programme. The initiative is also supported through project-based funding of various institutions at the federal, state, and local level.<sup>9</sup>

Especially in recent years, *Ruhrorter's* works have become well-known and praised by the local media. In 2018, the theatre initiative won the *Ruhrpreis* (Award of Ruhr) and in 2020, they were awarded the second prize of the Innovation Award of the Socio-Culture Fund for the project *Idealstadt* (Ideal City).

#### 6.4.1 Tackling Exclusion and Stigmatisation

In its theatre projects, the initiative works with young refugees. Their precise focus on the stigmatisation and marginalisation of refugees is to a great extent related to their connection to *Theater an der Ruhr*.

*Theater an der Ruhr* is a visionary ensemble, founded by the Italian émigré director Roberto Ciulli and dramaturge Helmut Schäfer in 1980. The ensemble has been collaborating with stateless and refugee artists and facilitating artistic encounters and international exchange between theatre-makers in Germany and marginalised artists since its foundation. *Theater an der Ruhr* has a distinctive artistic and political approach to otherness and the heterogeneity of cultural affiliations. For them, theatre is understood “as a public institution that not only deals with the experiences of otherness and diversity but is essentially constituted by them in the first place” (Tinius, 2017, p. 210).

The theatre-making philosophy of *Theater an der Ruhr* is manifested through the engagement of *Ruhrorter* with the topics of foreignness, exclusion, and stigmatisation of “the other”. Köstereli states that *Ruhrorter* pursues the same perspective since some of the team members started their theatre career at *Theater an der Ruhr*. Therefore, they are familiar with working with people who have experienced stigmatisation (A. Köstereli, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017). The director reflects on how he and Wanja van Suntum were overwhelmed as adolescents by the presence of refugees in the 1990s in the Ruhr region and how this experience, years later, paved the way for *Ruhrorter*:

There was one experience in the early grades of elementary school that really affected us. This was happening during the Bosnian war. We had many refugees in

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9 For the latest list of funders, please visit <http://www.ruhrorter.com/>.



our classes. They were invisible. They were there, but, somehow, we did not know who these people were at the time, why they were there, what kind of conditions they lived in. They were there for some time, and then they just left. We came to realise that we knew nothing about these people. Since we went to the same school, we both had an idea about wanting to work with people who had not been in our focus while we were working at *Theater an der Ruhr*. This was our reason to establish the project *Ruhrorter*. (A. Köstereli, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

*Ruhrorter* provocatively describes itself as a refugee theatre, facing the risk of being seen as exhibiting “refugee stories” from a voyeuristic perspective. The collective highlights that an ethical obligation is a prerequisite for making theatre with refugees. Their viewpoint on the code of ethics has been profoundly impacted by *Theater an der Ruhr*. Both theatres share the principle that “one should conduct theatre with refugees by working through shared understandings of bodily experience, corporeal movements and aesthetic reflection rather than recounting authenticating tragic stories of national wars or serving an agenda of national cultural integration” (Tinius, 2016, para. 14).

This choice is also interrelated with the mission to contribute to a positive change in society’s perception of refugees via artistic means. In this context, *Ruhrorter* seeks to tackle existing negative images of refugees in their region:

(...) to create a small impact on a sub-institutional level by presenting to the audience a theatre by refugees, which shows that there is no difference between me as a spectator and them as a refugee in the way of perceiving the other person. We are interested in how engagement and interaction can help change the perception of “the other”. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

The theatre’s work centres around demonstrating the artistic abilities, perspectives, and knowledge of refugees through theatre practice in order to dismantle subjugated positions. *Ruhrorter* is concerned with the reductionist assumptions about refugees in society. Van Suntum states that if cultural differences were not seen as obstacles, and we focused on the performances of the refugees instead, we might have a different idea of Afghanistan, Syria, and so on than the one in our imagination (W. van Suntum, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017).

The theatre initiative expresses that refugees are capable of telling many different stories when surrounded by an artistically oriented mindset. Hence, for *Ruhrorter*, it is crucial to persistently search for new artistic forms that do not display refugees as the representatives of their country of origin, but to validate and circulate their skills and knowledge:

No matter where these people come from, no matter what their biographical story is, they all have something they can share in an artistic environment, through an aesthetical form that is not based on the documentation of personal experiences (...). One of the crucial areas of concern is emphasising this transformation from private material to an art form. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

Weinstock also criticises the prevailing attitude in many projects realised with refugees in Germany. He states that their working models are counterproductive; they lead to the stigmatisation of refugees instead of helping them:

There is a segment of the theatrical infrastructure in Germany that carries out projects with refugees. We find this approach very questionable. It seems to produce a counter-effect that strengthens the stigmatisation, status, and subjectification of being a refugee. Representing someone as a refugee does not only affect the people on stage but also the audience. Because then the audience has this pitying attitude: “Oh my god, how very tragic”. So, everybody involved in such an artistic process might be influenced in a way that is not productive in regards to what such artistic forms claim to achieve. (personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

This critique of victimising of “the other” through performance illustrates *Ruhrorter*’s response to the problematic post-colonial theatre approach. By interweaving the forgotten industrial past of the Ruhr region and the exclusion of refugees, the theatre initiative intervenes in the public sphere to make both their stories and existence visible.

#### 6.4.2 Site-Specific Productions for Fostering Collective Memory

*Ruhrorter* chooses unconventional performative spaces to emphasise the absence of deserted sites in the memory of the city and its inhabitants. Members of the theatre confirm the strong association between the way they conceptualise projects and their aspiration to display these performances in derelict places to reflect on the post-industrial history of the locality:

We grew up here, in the Ruhr area. We see potential in abandonment, and we use it. There is also a cultural-political side to it. There are so many spaces left empty here. We should use them more. These buildings are either not used or they are demolished. Our own contribution to the discourse is to make these abandoned spaces and their past visible again. (W. van Suntum, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

We try to explore a different dimension of the story and history that comes from a site. (...) The projects that take place in these spaces change the

surroundings; they are inscribed in the space. The surroundings, architecture, and story of the room or the building are, in turn, inscribed into the play as a sort of archaeological work. We try to intertwine biographical, structural, and urban layers, stories, and history. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

In 2014, *Ruhrorter* staged one of their early productions, *Two Himmel* (Two Skies), on the top floor of the premises of *Theater an der Ruhr*, which was a former asylum seekers' accommodation centre. This building also has a symbolic meaning for *Ruhrorter* in terms of combining immigration, theatre, and the industrial past of the Ruhr region.

In the 1990s, refugees were living there. Now, most of the building is empty. The ground floor is used by *Theater an der Ruhr* for rehearsals. So, the place itself has these different parts of the Ruhr Valley's industrial, immigration, and theatre history. In this way, parts of the site are merged with our artistic production. The same goes for the installations. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

In 2015, *Und die Nacht meines Anfangs* (And the Night of My Beginning) was performed in a former women's prison. In 2016, their third production was shown in an old department store in the city. The following year, a house that formerly hosted women with "illegitimate children" became the theatrical space of *Ruhrorter*. Other performance venues used by the collective included an empty commercial property in 2018, and two churches in 2019.

To connect the narratives of otherness, marginalisation, and abandonment, *Ruhrorter* embraces an experimental artistic format. Through long-lasting rehearsals and mostly non-verbal communication, the theatre explores new theatrical methods for tackling the stigmatisation and self-isolation of refugees.

### 6.4.3 Minimalistic Aesthetics for the Renegotiation of the Past and the Future

*Ruhrorter* has a specific aesthetical framework that does not mainly rely on discursive elements but instead on visions created through gestures of the body. Through almost non-verbal narratives and ghost-like bodily movement, *Ruhrorter* introduces a theatre concept where the negotiation and renegotiation of meaning occur (Canyürek, 2018).

*Ruhrorter* inherits its distinctive aesthetics from *Theater an der Ruhr*, an "aesthetically driven theatre, which does interpretations of classical and contemporary texts (such as the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, Büchner, Goldoni, Chekhov, Kafka, Pasolini, Weiss) with a mixed cast, seeking out a universal theatre

language which transcends linguistic and cultural differences” (Bloomfield, 2003b, p. 61).

The theatre collective applies a process-oriented approach, initiating every project with a basic framework and a concept further developed during an extended period of rehearsals based on improvisation. Rehearsal time usually stretches over a period of six to seven months since the aim is to assist the performers in gradually shaping their own expression:

We create a frame; we recognise certain things that might be interesting in a project. But we try to do it in a way that does not impose it on the participants. We say: “Here are some topics, some stories. They might be interesting for you to visualise, or it might be stimulating for you to find imaginary representations that would express some things and topics you are personally interested in”. The topic might be related to their personal stories; it might also be entirely something else. It is really up to them. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

During the rehearsal process, amateur actors are actively involved in the creation of the content of theatre productions. The aesthetical form of each performance is agreed on together, based on an acting style that is mostly visual:

The ideas then find an aesthetical form that might also prevent the risk of having somebody tell their story in a theatrical form. It is very much visual, mostly not language-based. The performers work with images; it is a certain logic of a visual flow. Perhaps the most important role of the director is getting people interested in this kind of aesthetics. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

In theatrical performances, the role of *Ruhrorter* is to facilitate unleashing the cognitive potentiality of the participants. The artistic aim of the theatre group is an abstract form of narration:

(...) to reach the possibility of being understood, which empowers people through mental presence. The responsibility of the director and the team is, in that sense, to train the participants in these mental processes. It is an image-focused theatre that gains its stability and its presence from mental activity rather than verbal narratives. There is a narrative but not in the sense of us telling you the story from A to B to C. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

The theatre collective also considers this mental preparation a pedagogical requirement of the highly demanding communication mechanism of performance and aesthetics. Participants acquire the skill of being aware of their presence:

You need to train people if they are not professional performers. You train yourself to communicate via performance that is not necessarily verbal. Not only do you train yourself concept-wise, but you also learn to control your body on stage. (W. van Suntum, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

The collective deems this specific mental frame another integral part of the artistic methodology of avoiding the self-isolation of refugees. Their mission is to support the self-empowerment of performers not only in and for theatre but, more importantly, in their personal lives. Being a refugee is a complicated situation. In addition to their commitment to changing society's negative perception of refugees, *Ruhrorter* is also concerned with how these young people can cope with being seen as “the other”. Hence, the theatre aims to help create mental strength that remains as a useful tool to combat self-stigmatisation outside the artistic activity. As a result, engaging in an artistic process to establish self-consciousness is their ultimate focus, rather than the theatrical product per se:

For each participant, the sustainable core of the project is something you learn because of theatre, use it in the theatre, but it stays with you no matter whether you continue making theatre or not. Without this state of mind, the piece would not work, since it uses minimalist aesthetics even though it is very visual. People are not there as private individuals, nor as refugees but, in a way, some blurry characters who maybe express something that is coming from them but not in an interrogative way. The viscosity can only be formed if this focus and presence of the mind are there. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

Recently, the inclusion of text into their experimental aesthetics has gained importance for the group. The aspect of spoken language adds a new layer to the improvisation-based visual theatre, an impulse to enable the performers to broaden their contribution to the productions (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017). This facet also explains the relationality between the usage of different languages and the aesthetic approach of *Ruhrorter*:

We are now working on the idea of a multi-language-based theatre as we are interested in different voices. What can a voice tell besides the message of semantic language, what is in between the two, and how can we use it for the project? It is up to everyone to decide which language they want to speak in, whether it is German, Arabic, or French. Last year, this idea came up in the group. We now have a permanent group of participants, many of which have been with us for three or four years now. The group expressed their wish to try out different languages. It is not important for the performers to be able to speak perfect German, even from the aesthetic point of view. What it means to speak, to be in front of a microphone – these are the things that matter to us, not the language itself. (A. Köstereli, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

In this context, the inclusion of verbal elements is connected to the internalisation of empowerment in the struggle against the marginalisation of refugees. The objective of focusing on voice rather than spoken language is to strengthen the self-awareness of refugees as individuals with their personal histories, visions, and expectations:

What moves into focus is not so much the text or story told with words, but what it means to speak, what it means to hear your own voice, to present your voice. The pure fact of the voice, even the moment before it is heard. The moment you speak, when you hear your voice, it tells you more about yourself than anything else. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

Theatre scripts become a vehicle of aesthetical communication between refugees and the audience. Language merely serves as a tool for the actors to articulate their experiences, ideas, and feelings as protagonists of the theatre productions:

When they are performing an Arabic text or an Arabic translation of Goethe (which we did last year), when they know how to move on stage, as an audience member you still get feedback, even if you do not understand the language. As Roberto Ciulli says, theatre is a universal language. (...) For example, in one piece, two characters, a girl and a boy, had a dialogue in Farsi and Arabic. The performers knew what they were going to talk about. We gave them the topic, but we never had a written text. There was trust, and we felt that it was the right text for that production. (A. Köstereli, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

Mutual trust is built through this intensive exchange and interaction between the artistic team and performers. The abstract aesthetical frame is thus derived from the well-established artistic communication with the performers.

#### 6.4.4 Theatrical Elaboration from Conceptualisation to Implementation

The working method of *Ruhrorter* indicates an approach to documentary and political theatre centred around otherness. During the long rehearsal process, step by step, the performers form their own expressions. In this regard, *Ruhrorter* understands performance as a non-static transaction attained via artistic interaction between team members.

*Ruhrorter* does not have a rigid operational methodology. The young director describes their process-oriented approach as a work in progress (A. Köstereli, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017). During rehearsals, the performers slowly develop improvisational impulses.

*Ruhrorter* is not concerned with the underlying cultural differences or similarities used to tackle marginalisation. They deal with stereotypes by raising awareness on the singularity of (cultural) identity. Hence, they search for alternative

theatrical forms to present a different image of refugees than the one constructed by society:

The specific cultural background of the performers is not important; it is not even explicitly shown. Yes, we work with refugees, but on stage, it does not matter whether they are refugees or come from different cultures. We work with them; we encourage them to show themselves as complex and interesting people whose biographies are richer and way more intricate than their recently given refugee status. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

The team is cautious about not contributing to the reproduction of the existing categorisations of people based on cultural affiliations. The group sees this mental exercise, developed during challenging rehearsals, as a way to demonstrate the fact that these performers are equipped with various skills and knowledge:

People share an artistic experience on stage. It does not matter that they are refugees. On the stage, you see a performance. Of course, we aim to make this experience possible for society, for people who are interested in seeing such work. (...) it is important to work with refugees to show that they are more than just refugees. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

Supporting refugees in their exploration of creating characters and stories is essential for the theatre initiative. Their commitment to the artistic medium engenders improvisational impulses for the participants, and builds an atmosphere of going beyond the “victim narrative”. This process has also proven useful for balancing the power disparities between the artistic team and performers:

For our last piece, we spent three months rehearsing on stage. Still, we had no idea... Nothing. And then Mohammed, Raghad, and a few more participants took the initiative to get the group together without us. They came up with an idea. (...) They gave us the direction for where the improvisation should go. (A. Köstereli, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

To this end, ethnographic documentation is an indispensable part of the group's strategy not to reproduce and circulate stereotypical images. The anthropological dimension not only provides insights for critical self-reflection on their aesthetical and ethical vision, it also furthers academic research in interdisciplinary fields regarding theatre, migration, and cultural studies.

#### 6.4.5 The Role of Ethnographic Work in Artistic Reflection

From the beginning, the collective has conducted ethnographical research along with theatre productions and installations. Anthropologist Jonas Tinius was incorporated in the team while carrying out his doctoral study. The process

started with intense rehearsal observations; in time, anthropological monitoring contributed to the production of knowledge through articles, symposiums, interviews, and panel discussions. Tinius describes his role as “a questing eye” and “an additional reflexive element” (personal communication, December 1–2, 2017) advancing the production of aesthetical knowledge in addition to the academic knowledge of theatre discourse.

Van Suntum emphasises that “practice is necessarily blind; but, professionals like Tinius can see the blind spots” (personal communication, December 1–2, 2017). Hence, *Ruhrorter* evaluates the addition of an ethnographic approach as an enlightening component of the project, constructive for self-learning. Above all, anthropological observations have provided them input on the production processes useful for further artistic development:

It is like having an outside eye looking at our artistic process and the process of creating parts of the installation. With the help of this professionally trained observer and analyst, we can critically reflect on a more abstract level, from a distant point of view, on what we are doing. (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

Furthermore, these internal observations link theatre practice to research. Anthropological observation aims to question the existing power/knowledge framework of discourses on diversity, theatre, migration, displacement, and identity. In this context, *Ruhrorter* proposes inaugurating artistic and scientific discussions and cooperation to stimulate the formation and transfer of knowledge through alternative aesthetics and practices.

Over time, these two elements facilitated the development of knowledge exchange between scholars and theatre practitioners from various fields. However, the issue of not receiving structural financial support puts the sustainability of the project, the advancement of collaborative work, and the further development of multidisciplinary perspectives at risk:<sup>10</sup>

We are establishing networks in such a way that has begun to develop into teaching projects, publication plans, academic collaborations, and long-term discussions. There is a general problem with project funding. If we had five-year funding, we would develop all kinds of other different things. This could lead to an even more sustainable direction. (J. Tinius, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

A commitment to process is evident from the works of *Ruhrorter*, from aesthetics to code of ethics, from political stance to critical engagement with the discourse

10 Due to insufficient funding in 2020 and 2021, *Ruhrorter* reduced their artistic activities. As a result, the initiative did not create any theatre productions for two consecutive years.



on immigration-related diversity. To ensure long-term sustainability of the project as well as its impact on society, *Ruhrorter* is concerned with finding new artistic ways to question the homogenising categories of identity and the label of refugee (A. Winestock, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017).

*Ruhrorter* understands this process as a continuous task to create an interaction between old and new residents. They invite the audience to stay with them after performances to establish personal encounters and reshape society's perception of refugees by way of aesthetical means.

The ethnographic aspect of the project also aims to draw attention to the reinforcement of populism and nationalism by some artistic approaches that confine identity to ethnicity and nationality. Tinius points out the complexity of identity and the significance of not enclosing it in unifying compartments. He also rebukes the current project funding schemes that support such projects:

I have a problem with the projects that put people's stories on stage. This is sold as empowering, progressive, aesthetic theatre, and it receives a massive amount of money. However, it does not contribute to breaking some of these stereotypes; it actually reproduces them. (...) I am not saying we have the solution, but I think one needs to be more reflexive than that. The real problem with these kinds of projects (...) is that people are being portrayed as capable of living only one kind of way. What is identity? Identity is constructed through imaginations, through complex processes. What we need to put on stage is the complexity of how we become human beings. What are our possibilities? How do we relate to society? The complex ways in which memory works in favour of not reducing people to one single idea. (J. Tinius, personal communication, December 1–2, 2017)

Tinius adds that the artistic production in the performing arts that engages with the topics of immigration requires debate, and the latest developments in the field should be reflected upon to create a critical discourse about the possibilities and problems of artistic methods (personal communication, December 1–2, 2017).

In the case of *Ruhrorter*, the anthropological dimension builds a layer of resilience to a self-reflexive theatre model to provide intellectual interaction in addition to aesthetical expertise, and deal with the subjugation of knowledge and the power dynamics of structures.

## 6.5 *PostHeimat*: Confronting Structural Inequalities in Performing Arts<sup>11</sup>

In 2018, the three theatre collectives that constitute the casing of this research joined forces with other theatres to locate structural issues that produce and maintain inequalities in the German performing arts scene. *PostHeimat* emerged from this cooperation.

*PostHeimat* is a performing arts network, founded in 2018 by *boat people projekt*, *Collective Ma'louba* (Mülheim an der Ruhr), *Exil Ensemble* (Berlin), *Hajusom*, the *Open Border Ensemble* (Munich), and *Ruhrorter*.<sup>12</sup> *PostHeimat* is funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation and the Ministry of Culture and Science of the German State of North Rhine-Westphalia.

The network seeks to generate artistic exchange and collaboration to contribute to the notion of a pluralistic performing arts scene in search of artistic interventions without territorial borders. Members advocate for the deconstruction of the White, male, middle-aged, heterosexual, able-bodied hegemony in the configuration of the performing arts scene. To this end, they endeavour to introduce a fairness-based critical diversity discourse and propose explicit essential measures for cultural policies to create equal, non-hierarchical performative spaces.

*PostHeimat* (2020a) rethinks the performing arts field through an intersectional diversity approach. The network believes that cultural policy and the performing arts scene must deal with systematic exclusion, discrimination, and racism in order to accomplish an accessible performing arts scene for all performing arts professionals, and offers the concept of intersectional diversity for an inclusive diversity discourse. The network considers themselves a learning space for performing arts collectives, ensembles, artists, researchers, and cultural activists to discuss overcoming structural barriers within institutions and accommodate the heterogeneity of artistic expressions, thereby democratising the performative practice. By combining interdisciplinary research and practice-based perspectives,

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11 The researcher is a member of *PostHeimat* and one of the moderators of the cultural policy workshops, which are part of the main engagement areas of the network. She is also the network's contact person for its intersectional diversity concept. This section is based on her observations and notes taken during the meetings of the *PostHeimat* network.

12 *Collective Ma'louba* is an Arabic-speaking artistic and theatre collective, currently in residence at *Theater an der Ruhr*. *Exil Ensemble* is a platform at *Maxim Gorki Theater* for professional artists forced to live in exile. The *Open Border Ensemble* was a project of *Münchner Kammerspiele* for artists with refugee status in Germany. Barbara Mundel, the new artistic director of *Münchner Kammerspiele*, discontinued the *Open Border Ensemble* in the first half of 2020. Krystel Khoury, who was the artistic director of the ensemble, is still a member of the *PostHeimat* network as a theatre-maker and researcher.

members of the network explore the fundamentals of an equality-based cultural policy framework and new artistic responses that would diversify knowledge production and dissemination. Further, they are concerned with the power dynamics within institutions that produce and regulate hierarchical positions. Hence, the network, among other objectives, addresses the role and task of cultural policy to introduce framework conditions and related essential policy measures for initiating opportunities of equal access to the performing arts scene.

The name of the network reveals their mission. The word “*Heimat*” (homeland) has a negative connotation associated with the colonial and racist past of Germany. *Heimat* implies an exclusive homeland concept, enclosed in a rigid national frame that designates the boundaries of belonging. In this context, *PostHeimat* is a counter-concept that pursues a novel interpretation of nation and a multiplicity of being. It disowns the way of thinking that separates identity into compartments, and acknowledges identity as a dynamic entity. *PostHeimat* seeks to reflect the mirror image of society, understood as always under construction, in which the idea of the “cultures of the homeland” is continuously renegotiated. Thus, *PostHeimat* does not mean abandoning the possibility of connecting to the term “*Heimat*”, but, instead, going through it and across it to find new meanings that signal a pluralistic reappropriation of the notion (*PostHeimat*, 2020b).

By the end of 2021, the co-founding theatre initiatives plan to organise internal meetings, titled *Encounters*, and are inviting artists, groups, institutions, and researchers who share *PostHeimat*’s vision to participate. As a result, the network develops and expands through interaction between old and new members.

## **Encounter #1**

The founding meeting of *PostHeimat* took place from May 25 to 27, 2018 in Munich. *Münchner Kammerspiele* and *Ruhrorter* co-organised a working weekend with *boat people projekt*, *Collective Ma'louba*, *Exil Ensemble*, *Hajusom*, and the *Open Border Ensemble*. Other participants of the first gathering were freelance theatre practitioners, scholars, and researchers. Together they discussed how to keep the matters of diversity, displacement, and immigration on the agenda of cultural policymakers. In parallel with the working sessions of theatre initiatives and researchers from various disciplines, students from different universities participated in workshops that focused on new artistic and aesthetical approaches in production in the context of diversity.

The interdisciplinary approach of *Encounter #1* provided insights into numerous aspects of diversity and highlighted the importance of collectively thinking about the challenges of accommodating diversity in the German performing arts realm.

The participants of the meeting shared their views on the issues, demands, and expectations concerning cultural policies and funds as well as aesthetics

and artistic practice. Some of the emerging topics of the first encounter were (Canyürek, 2019b, p. 34):

- diversity-oriented expansion of the scope of theatres,
- sharing know-how and information and pooling resources,
- developing strategic partnerships,
- exchanging views on current implications regarding the diversification of staff composition, such as hiring diversity agents to change the policy of a theatre,
- discussing various funding schemes with policymaking actors that promote process, training, and research on immigration,
- debating the conventional criteria for assessing artistic work, and triggering a shift in aesthetics,
- increasing collaborations and co-productions,
- being aware of the power relationships between people receiving funding and guest participants engaged in the creative process,
- spending more time and resources on translation, and understanding it not only as a tool but a means of transmitting the work and idea,
- finding new tools and making sure to not reproduce the same stories, ideas, and problems, and
- searching for new ways of translating age-old stories from the canon as well as the unheard stories of immigrants.

## **Encounter #2**

The second meeting was hosted by *Theater an der Ruhr* between March 22 and 24, 2019. Since the previous gathering, the network had expanded with the involvement of more theatre-makers, researchers, academics, and cultural activists. At *Encounter #2*, three working groups around the topics of network, cultural policy, and production aesthetics were created to identify the priorities and engagement areas of the network.

### **Network Working Group**

The network workshops focused on the construction of the network's identity. Hence, participants of this working group dealt with the questions of who they are as a network, what their objectives are, how they can achieve their goals, what their vision and ethical values are, what challenges in the performing arts field they would need to address. They defined the framework of communicating the objectives of *PostHeimat* and opened it up for discussion to the members of other working groups. The following points were determined as the essential elements

of the network's identity and the prompts for further debate (Hesse & Jurca, 2019, pp. 6–7):

- We are a network of transcultural groups in the field of performing arts.
- We aim to empower performing arts collectives and individuals through supporting artistic exchange, providing resources and co-production by creating frameworks and concrete actions.
- We aim to critically examine structural and political developments in the performing arts scene.
- We create opportunities to share and exchange experiences within and among transcultural groups and/or political discourses.

Further, the group specified the network's ethical stance and vision, which reflects its critical mindset. Participants also discussed possible challenges for the performing arts scene and the *PostHeimat* network (Hesse & Jurca, 2019, pp. 6–7):

- We require diversity as the norm on the levels of ensemble, team, and institution.
- We aim for multilingual communication on a textual, contextual, and non-verbal level.
- We claim a new theatre beyond labels.
- We are challenged by conscious and unconscious social preconceptions and stereotypes, which heavily influence the relationships between network members.
- We are challenged by social and cultural policies as well as administrative and legal regulations that do not support the transcultural planning and implementation of timeframes needed for our visions and projects.
- We are looking for new means of interaction with diverse audiences and new modes of perception and reception of artworks.

Against this backdrop, the group underscored the necessity of collective thinking and solidarity for *PostHeimat* to stimulate a bottom-up initiative for the transformation of the performing arts scene in a post-migrant society (Hesse & Jurca, 2019, pp. 6–7):

- The power of our network is in providing visibility via a stronger and more heterogeneous collective voice for accommodating diversity in the performing arts.
- The power of our network is in generating synergies and resources for all to share.

- The power of our network is in enabling and promoting a variety of new forms of art and aesthetics (i.e. method, content, process).
- Our network embodies the accumulation of expertise from diverse fields (i.e. theatre practice, research, policy, and activism) within the context of diversity discourse.

### Cultural Policy Working Group<sup>13</sup>

As the first step, the cultural policy working group exchanged views on the network's perception of diversity, and how they should identify the context and scope of diversity when communicating with policymaking and funding institutions. The group recommended that the diversity approach of *PostHeimat* should be based on the concept of *intersectionality*, coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality acknowledges the fact that identity comprises many layers, and not only do some of these components converge, but, also, modes of oppression, discrimination, and racism often operate along intersecting markers of difference. To address the obstacles of accommodating diversity in the German performing arts scene, the group advised that the diversity framework of the network should deal with the power relations and hierarchies within institutions that maintain the structural exclusion of some performing arts professionals who are marked as "the other". As a result, the policy group determined that the network should recognise anti-discrimination as its main area of concern rather than the current depoliticised and misused notion of cultural diversity.

After several workshop sessions, the areas listed below were identified as vital topics to be promoted and enhanced by cultural policy (Canyürek & van Suntum, 2019a, pp. 4–5):

#### 1. Cultural education

- to support training, workshops, and experiential learning opportunities (including coaching, mentoring, and shadowing, i.e., observing rehearsals and learning from methods applied) for non-established professionals, catered to the specific demands of the performing arts scene,
- to put a code of conduct into practice, which the network should develop in cooperation with diverse actors of the performing arts scene (i.e., awareness of language and its discriminating dimension, ethical standards, equality), and
- to enable mandatory anti-discrimination courses and workshops for developing multiperspectivity, intercultural competencies, and skills for performing arts initiatives and institutions.

#### 2. Funding and capacity building

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13 The cultural policy workshop sessions were moderated by the author, Özlem Canyürek, at *Encounter #1* and by Özlem Canyürek and Wanja van Suntum from *Ruhrorter at Encounter #2*.

- to provide consultation and advice on funding (e.g., information on funding opportunities and coaching on application procedures in several languages),
  - to establish differentiated funding options (not only for productions but also for the process, training, research, translation, rehearsal space, and a separate funding pillar for artists without an institutional affiliation), and inaugurate a long-term structural funding scheme for independent theatres,
  - to introduce clear funding guidelines for all incentive programmes (based on clearly identified diversity standards defined by the performing arts field itself),
  - to reinforce transparent diversity-focused criteria for jury selection,
  - to foster network support for collaboration and cooperation between public and independent theatres, and
  - to offer funding guidelines and strategies for amateur ensembles.
3. Production
- to promote process-oriented matchmaking between institutions and external diversity/anti-discrimination-trained producers, as well as between institutions and translators.
4. Consultancy in other areas
- to introduce measures for tackling the legislative issues faced by artists seeking refuge in Germany (e.g., legal consultation for visa applications, regulations of payment for freelance work, and so on),
  - to offer psychological counselling for performing arts professionals with refugee status, and
  - to propose strategies for audience development.

Two interrelated documents, the *Intersectional Diversity Act (IDA)* and *Diversity Access Point (DAP)* have emerged from the work of the cultural policy group. *IDA* is understood as the manifesto of the network, and *DAP* is a virtual platform envisioned for the development of a pluralistic and equality-based performing arts realm. Two task forces were formed to further develop the conceptualisation and the scope of *IDA* and *DAP* to be presented at *Encounter #3*.

### Production Aesthetics Working Group

The focus of the production aesthetics group was tackling the misapplication of the notion of diversity by engaging with the paradigm of transcultural aesthetics in theatre production. The participants of the workshops pointed out three fundamental dimensions of the interrelation between cultural diversity and aesthetics (Khoury & Schulz, 2019, p. 8):

1. Creative process
  - Creative processes with a diverse cast require continuity and time (e.g., a build-up phase).
  - The process should receive as much attention as the output. Time is not a luxury.

- The process is more important than the outcome. Sometimes we focus more on the outcome and not enough on the process. Especially with a diverse cast, it is essential to emphasise the process rather than the outcome.
2. Translation
    - For both text and context, the role of the translator is crucial. This should be considered in terms of money and time; when making budget cuts, translation is often the first to go. We should advocate for the recognition of the translator's work as the central part of production.
    - Multilingual aspects of a theatre performance should be taken into more extensive consideration.
  3. Transcultural theatre and dynamics
    - The transcultural approach should be an empowering process, and as such, it needs experimentation and risk-taking.
    - Transcultural dynamics can be implemented on several levels: through the content as well within the working process; for instance, they can be embedded in interpersonal relations between diverse team members.
  4. Aesthetics
    - Aesthetics is a broad term that can expand even further within diverse contexts through the exploration of new forms.
    - The perception of aesthetics is linked to the traditional way of thinking about making art and developing taste accordingly.
    - The domination of a single story or canon carries the risk of disseminating homogeneous knowledge on aesthetics.

The members of *PostHeimat* concluded that the subsequent encounter needed to focus on three specific areas of concern: communication, research, and cultural policy. Consequently, the three working groups continued their activity around those topics to further develop the ideas of *Encounter #2* at the next meeting.

### ***Encounter #3***

The third meeting was also organised by *Münchener Kammerspiele*, between October 25 and 27, 2019. New artists, researchers, and theatre groups such as *Label Noir* (Berlin) and *Experi Theater* (Zurich) were part of *Encounter #3*. Building on the conclusions of previous meetings, the working groups exchanged views on concepts such as intersectional diversity, transculturalism, post-colonialism, discrimination, and racism. The representatives collectively agreed on the usage of these critical concepts, which reflect the diversity perspective of *PostHeimat*.



## Communication Group

The network sessions evolved into a communication group, whose work was directed towards enhancing internal communication between the network's members and organising the development of the network's website. In the third meeting, representatives of the communication group worked on the communication strategy and content of the website, which was planned to be launched in early March 2020.<sup>14</sup>

## Research Group

Members of the research group outlined the network's mission statement, which was then finalised with the contribution of other working groups. *PostHeimat* considers themselves a learning space; thus, the statement was not intended as conclusive. It was designed as a progressive text, to be further developed through vigorous exchange between members.

Moreover, subsequent academic publications are meant to convey the network's conceptualisation of intersectional diversity, its ideas, and its approach to achieving an equality-based performing arts scene.<sup>15</sup> Together with other groups, the researchers aim to link artistic practice and theory with concrete policy proposals and a diversity framework that engages with the requirements of a post-migrant society.

## Cultural Policy Group<sup>16</sup>

After the second meeting, the cultural policy group was divided into two subgroups to conceptualise and expand the content of *IDA* and *DAP*. The representatives of the group recommended that in order to give impulses to cultural policy and be part of decision-making processes accordingly, the network needs to politicise the diversity discourse. They presented the first drafts of *IDA* and *DAP* for all members of the network to discuss and reshape together. The cultural policy subgroups regarded both *IDA* and *DAP* as works in progress, an attempt to generate a structural frame for determining and initiating a debate on the needs of the performing arts scene.

14 The bilingual website was launched in March 2020. For more information, visit <https://www.postheimat.com/>.

15 During the completion of this book, the *PostHeimat* network was in the process of preparing various materials from the previous encounters and experiences, to be published by transcript under the title *PostHeimat: Migration, Theatre, and Imaginaries of Belonging. Experiments in Networked Solidarity*.

16 The sessions of the *DAP* subgroup were co-moderated by Özlem Canyürek and Wanja van Suntum. The workshops about the *IDA* were co-moderated by Immanuel Bartz from *Collective Ma'louba* and Christopher Fares Köhler, formerly from *Maxim Gorki Theater*, now working at *Theater Dortmund*.

The preliminary version of *IDA* encompassed a list of demands and recommendations for the development of a new cultural policy perspective in the following five areas, which were discussed thoroughly during the second meeting: cultural education, consultation and advice, production, capacity building, and funding. In addition to the areas analysed in previous subsections, the group suggested the following (Bartz, 2019, p. 3):

- To protect all employees and freelancers from discrimination, the anti-discrimination clause introduced by Sonja Laaser and Julia Wissert should be included in all contracts.
- Mandatory courses and workshops for anti-discrimination literacy should be offered for staff at least once a year, in all hierarchies of power.
- There is no policy that acknowledges and rewards the work of part-time theatre-makers.

At the third meeting, the second cultural policy group introduced the platform *DAP* to the other members of *PostHeimat*. *DAP* was proposed as a tool to implement the clauses of *IDA* (Canyürek & van Suntum, 2019b, p. 4):

- At the base level, *DAP* is conceptualised as a virtual office for a future society resisting institutional structures and frames that maintain unequal access conditions for those marked as different.
- *DAP* acknowledges that we are a post-migrant society living in a transnational world. The nexus of performing arts is not just a neutral public space but an advocate for an inclusive society committed to cultural pluralism. Therefore, the performing arts scene should be a political actor and defender of the values of such a society.
- *DAP* believes that the performing arts field requires a new trajectory for engaging with difference without marginalising it. In order to breach the construction of otherness and to address unequal opportunities, *DAP* focuses on the vague and misleading use of the concept of “cultural diversity”.
- *DAP* recognises the individual elements of identity and perceives it as a dynamic, interactive, and intersectional entity that cannot be enclosed by national and ethnic frameworks.
- *DAP* aims to encourage theatres to realise how diverse (or not) they are and/or what steps are to be taken towards becoming more diverse.
- *DAP* is envisaged as a provider of services related to anti-discrimination, including various supportive and practical tools for performing arts initiatives and individuals who are struggling with(in) these institutions.
- *DAP* seeks to offer online information on anti-discrimination, access to consultation on diversity-sensitive management, and building competencies

and skills for developing multiperspectivity for performing arts collectives and practitioners.

*Encounter #3* was concluded after the feedback section, which determined the short and mid-term objectives of *PostHeimat*, including (PostHeimat, 2019, p. 9):

- to expand the network by inviting new participants and guests,
- to inform the members on what the working subgroups have achieved since the last encounter,
- to further pursue and develop ideas related to the identified topics by suggesting tools that would meet the need for more visibility and effectiveness, and
- to arrange a time and place for internal task groups to gather and advance the concepts they had been working on.

*Encounter #4* took place between March 5 and 8, 2020 at *Maxim Gorki Theater* in Berlin, and the working groups continued to concretise previously developed concepts and ideas. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, *Encounter #5* was hosted online by *Hajusom* in Hamburg between October 29 and 30, 2020. Network members came together once more online in March 2021 for *Encounter #5.5* to discuss the thematic focus of the previous *Encounter* and the future of the network after the funding round ended.<sup>17</sup>

## 6.6 Investing in Learning Spaces for Enhancing Diversification Processes

Both the findings of the casing analysis and the networking efforts indicate that the creation and cultivation of a new, pluralistic discourse for an equal, non-hierarchical theatre landscape are inherently linked to developing cultural policy strategies to support non-institutionalised structures. Such strategies, as shown in this empirical investigation, have a considerable potential to nurture normalising cultural differences in an intercultural society by introducing flexible methods pertaining to exploratory aesthetics and artistic formats, new narrativisation techniques, unconventional performative interactions, and multilingualism. More importantly, the frame of mind and actions of these strategies and examples of good practice, albeit with varying approaches and principles, is characterised by collective thinking. Incontrovertibly, such examples provide substantial know-how for institutionalised theatres on how to engage with a fairness-based diversity

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17 For the protocols of all *Encounters*, see <https://www.postheimat.com/>.

perspective. From another angle, these theatre initiatives and similar examples confirm that in providing equal opportunities as part of theatre reform, the discrepancy between high art and social work and the strict separation between professionals and amateurs in theatre is no longer valid.

An appropriate strategy for cultural policymakers and their funding institutions is to establish a support mechanism for collaboration between established theatres and theatre initiatives committed to the diversification of theatrical knowledge production and dissemination. Such theatre collectives operate under severe financial constraints. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened their precarious working conditions.

As suggested by Björn Bicker, one solution is opening the structural financial resources and infrastructures of municipal theatres long term to these theatre collectives, so that cooperation between the two can give way to a diversity-oriented direction for established theatres on the one hand, and facilitate independent groups to focus more on continuing to produce new ideas and artistic forms on the other (B. Bicker, personal communication, November 20, 2017). Promoting matchmaking between institutionalised and diversity-driven non-institutionalised structures (e.g., performing arts initiatives and networks) is also a vital aspect of the efforts to provide structural solutions for reducing access barriers for excluded and marginalised performing arts professionals, as well as stimulating the circulation of diverse stories of an intercultural society and making theatre practice appealing to new generations.