

Singing in Dark Times

Report from Berlin

Matt Cornish

THEY LIVE

It was early October in Berlin, cold and damp, but not uncomfortable, as I rode my bike from Kreuzberg into Mitte, across the Spree and under the S-Bahn to the Berliner Ensemble. Outside the Theater am Schiffbauerdam, I parked near the Brecht statue and walked over to wait in a long line. When it was my turn, I showed an usher my certificate of full vaccination, my picture identification, and my ticket; he gave me a paper armband, like what you would get to enter a club, and I walked through the BE's big wooden doors. It was not my first time back in the theatre since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic; here and there I'd seen performances, mostly outside. But this was different. In a crowded auditorium watching Nico Holonics as Mackie Messer in Barrie Kosky's show-biz spectacle *Die Dreigroschenoper* [The Threepenny Opera, 2021], I felt back. We were alive, together.

VACCINATED, BOOSTED, TESTED

For the academic year, I have been living again in Berlin, for the first time in seven years. It has been strange. The pandemic waxing and waning, the German parliamentary elections, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have interrupted everyday life such that it has scarcely had a chance to feel quotidian. While there were no full lockdowns in Berlin this fall and winter, the threat of one loomed for months, and one critic I know estimated cancellations of performances at around forty percent. There are productions I have tried to see three or even four times, with each performance cancelled due to illness in the ensemble.

Sometimes a production is switched on short notice: scheduled to see Brecht's *Der Hofmeister* [The Tutor, 2021] at the Deutsches Theater one night in January, I received an email that the DT would instead play *Die Pest*, an adaptation of Camus's *The Plague* directed by András Dömötör as a one-man-show. It had

premiered in November 2019 and was now performed in entirely different circumstances. I wasn't pleased to live yet deeper in a pandemic for ninety minutes, but I went anyway, and I was glad to watch Božidar Kocevski's patient and explosive performance as Dr. Rieux, tipping over chairs as the people of Oran died. But the specificity of these entirely different circumstances made Camus's existential conflict less powerful. And I'm still waiting to see *Der Hofmeister*.

Despite (and in large part because of) the cancellations, the delays, and the switches, the 2021–22 season was packed. Premieres that had been delayed by a year or more emerged like a swarm of cicadas beginning in June 2021, when lockdowns loosened and productions were able to be performed in the open air.

The continuing survival and vibrancy of the German theatre is due to billions of euro in emergency funding for the performing arts during the pandemic, and also in large part due to the system's ensembles: to the actors, technicians, and other artists who have long-term contracts and are paid regular salaries. The deep bench of the public theatres allows them to sometimes tag in actors instead of cancelling performances: when Jeremy Mockridge fell ill in April (the dramaturg told us he was scheduled for five performances that week), Kocevski stepped in on twenty-four hours' notice to play Melvil in Anne Lenk's production of Friedrich Schiller's *Maria Stuart* at the Deutsches Theater (2020). If you ignored the sides he was holding, you could easily believe he'd been performing in the production for a year—all the more amazing because Judith Oswald's set is made from eleven stacked boxes, separating the actors from each other and preventing Kocevski from interacting face-to-face with Franziska Machens's Maria. This was an "IRL" Zoom, built for a premiere between lockdowns in October 2020, during the peak of social distancing.¹

The situation is imperfect of course. The words of 2021 were "Premierenstau," a traffic jam in getting premieres onstage, and "Publikumsschwund," disappearing audiences. Too often, productions opened and then quickly disappeared from the repertoire, making room for the premieres waiting behind them.² Meanwhile, audience numbers are down, though the full percentage of the decrease cannot yet be tallied. Speaking anecdotally, when a production has gotten poor reviews, the empty seats in a house can be brutal—in the past, I think, audiences took more chances on marginal productions. Arguments can be made (and have been made) that really too much theatre premiered this year and audiences can't keep up—or that the Covid regulations and cancellations have kept people away, or that people are still too afraid to gather, or that the theatre has become even more postdramatically self-obsessed, or that habits have changed and many people are happier at home with Netflix.³

Such arguments do not apply to me. Riding across town for *Die Pest*, such a dreary evening, to see the wrong play, I thought to myself: how much happier I am going

through all this to see a live performance than I would be on my couch watching something canned on a laptop. And even if overall audience numbers are down, I'm not alone. Despite ever changing regulations with ridiculous acronyms—3G, 2G, 2G+⁴—many performances I attended were sold out, and I felt palpable joy from the actors and audiences.

PANDEMONIUM

Onstage, the pandemic was seldom directly addressed, but often there, haunting the place. For productions that rehearsed and premiered between lockdowns, like *Maria Stuart*, as well as Ibsen's *Gespenster* (Ghosts), directed by Mateja Koležnik at the Berliner Ensemble (2020), you watch the actors keep separate. For *Gespenster*, Raimund Orfeo Voigt and Leonie Wolf designed sliding cubes, a fractured box set rearranged in a wing-and-shutter system: small dark rooms with aubergine velvet walls, electric torches shining flickering light on dark wood furniture. Ibsen's characters spy around corners, listen to secret conversations, and, throughout, stay horribly alone as they confront a terrible fate. Conceived to keep actors safe, *Gespenster* and *Maria Stuart* were well chosen, raising the stakes of the plays, while also exceeding the times in which they originally premiered.

In productions that premiered after vaccines were widely available in summer 2021, I watched actors wanting, and achieving, an intense intimacy. In Frank Castorf's *Fabian oder Der Gang vor die Hunde* [Fabian or Going to the Dogs, Berliner Ensemble 2021], adapted from Erich Kästner's 1930s novel, Marc Hosemann and Wolfgang Michael eat and drink beer together—potato salad spraying from their mouths. I reacted viscerally, with disgust at the flying spit, leaning way back in my seat.

Watching Florentina Holzinger's *A Divine Comedy* at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz (it premiered at the Ruhrtriennale festival in August 2021), I wondered how they ever managed to get the thing onstage during the pandemic: an ensemble of twenty-plus women, fully naked for two hours, performing all of the grotesque art actions of the twentieth century—painting with freshly drawn blood, masturbating, shitting. Not to mention riding dirt bikes, jumping hurdles, chopping wood, rolling down stairs, and playing cellos. It both reveled in checking off a list of gross stunts and superseded that list, becoming a third-generation feminist spectacular made by and about a self-sufficient community. No, there was no fear here.

ALL RIGHT?

The most devastating response to Covid, though thematized only abstractly, and for me the brightest aesthetic moment of the year, was a new performance by Helgard Haug of Rimini Protokoll, *All right. Good night.* (Hebbel am Ufer, 2021), an excerpt of which is included in this issue of *PAJ*.⁵

Five musicians sit onstage, lounging in beach chairs, reading in the sand, playing cards under an umbrella. They ignore their music stands and instruments, and all is silent but for the frothing of waves, projected against the back scrim and onto the beach. It's a peaceful moment, but the text that scrolls across the scrim and proscenium, slowly, allowing time to read and think, tells a different story: of the sudden and mysterious disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 against the slow loss of a father to dementia. Directed and written by Haug and composed by Barbara Morgenstern, *All right. Good night.* (subtitled "a play about absence and loss") investigates, through music, stillness, and text, disruptions in the order of things. The production meditates on catastrophes that are personal, the death of Haug's father; large, the loss of 239 souls into the Indian Ocean; and world-historic, the absences that were the Covid-19 pandemic. How can something so big, just disappear?

All right. Good night.—supposedly the banal last words of the pilot of Flight 370—is mostly a concert, haunting contemporary classical, performed with a clarinet, percussion, violin, saxophone, and double bass by the Zafraan Ensemble. Then again, it's mostly a monologue, but with the monologist always absent. Or perhaps it is an opera without singing. Haug's projected words, shifting back and forth between father and flight, lap against the scrim like waves, often gentle and melancholy, occasionally violent and angry. It is a series of *tableaux vivants* picturing death in eight parts, or "years," plus a prologue and epilogue, over 150 minutes: an airport terminal, the beach, a concert stage. Holograph-like images of a larger absent band are projected on top of the onstage band. This was like no other production I've seen by Rimini Protokoll, known especially for bringing "experts of the everyday" onstage, non-performers who tell their own stories in productions such as *Karl Marx: Capital, Volume 1* (2006). *All right. Good night.* is more playful, more theatrical, more grave, and less interested in facts.

In the beginning, the musicians walk on stage and form a line: they carry luggage, scroll through their phones, and open a book, waiting to board their plane as announcements reverberate in the background. Slowly, they unpack instruments from their luggage and begin to play Morgenstern's spare music. "In the spring of 2014," Haug's text opens, "The father gets on a plane. // A Boeing 777. / A big machine." Soon, the plane will disappear. Slowly, the father will as well. We, in the audience, are back: we have returned. But we have returned with so much lost, and *All right. Good night.* understands and performs both. When I left the theatre, I nearly sobbed, my breath ragged and uneven.

MUSEUMS AND ART

Elsewhere in Berlin, galleries and museums also reawakened after Covid with a backlog of pictures and objects to show off. Especially noted this year was the seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante Alighieri's death, with exhibitions, and performances, arranged around the themes of plague, hell, purgatory, and paradise.

The 2021–22 Transmediale art and digital culture festival, presented at the Akademie der Künste in January and February, was titled “abandon all hope ye who enter here,” with projects by nine artists and groups from around the world exploring “the various circles of hell that exist in our digital modernity.”⁶ With non-fungible tokens, images generated by artificial intelligence, and a “methodology” (*Queering Damage* by the collective Underground Division), this was art as knowledge production, or knowledge production as art. The texts that accompanied the exhibits referenced Karen Barad, Lauren Berlant, and Judith Butler, among others, and read, to me, like a mélange of academic theory-speak: lots of zombie nouns adding up to few ideas. Still, some of the exhibits themselves created experiences that went beyond surrounding verbiage, especially Tianzhou Chen’s *The Dust*: three large screens showing videos of prayer wheels, skulls, and vultures on a mountainside, interrupted or supplemented by animations as well as by lights to the sides of the screens. Chen uses the videos and the experience of watching them to reflect on death, Buddhist traditions, and nightlife culture, identities clashing and synthesizing.

Two major exhibits displayed art from the theatre: photographs by Ruth Walz (at the Museum für Fotografie) and the designs of the late Erich Wonder (at the Akademie der Künste). Walz’s photographs, taken beginning in 1976, are intimate and epic, personal and documentary, and the exhibition showed images from some of the most important productions and directors of Walz’s time period, especially from the Schaubühne Berlin.⁷ In Walz’s photograph of *Die Fremdenführerin* [The Tour Guide] by Botho Strauß, directed by Luc Bondy in 1986 at the Schaubühne, Bruno Ganz crouches on a bed in his boxers, staring into space. For *T/Raumbilder für Heiner Müller* [Sets of Wonder for Heiner Müller], curator Stephan Suschke collected paintings, drawings, models, costumes, photographs, and film excerpts illustrating the collaborations of Wonder and Müller from 1987 until 1995. Focusing on three productions, including *Der Lohndrucker* [The Scab, Deutsches Theater Berlin, 1988] and *Hamlet/Maschine* (Deutsches Theater Berlin, 1990), Suschke exhibited the abstract and allegorical images Müller and Wonder created together, such as a monstrous war-machine Fortinbras costume, and the melting ice set for the first act of that same production.⁸

The most anticipated (and dreaded) opening of the year was the Humboldt Forum, a restaging of the eighteenth-century Berlin Royal Palace on the rubble of much history, including the Palace of the Republic, the seat of the German Democratic Republic. Criticized as a neo-imperialist, neo-colonial project—an opulent Prussian facsimile exhibiting objects collected (stolen) during the German Empire—the Humboldt Forum in the Berliner Schloß is both exactly what its objectors most feared and the opposite.⁹ On Unter den Linden, the building has a colossal Baroque façade including cupola: the cleanliness of the brick, sandstone, and stucco make it look Las Vegas, but too life-size and too earnest. From the eastern



Kathrin Wehlisch as Beckmann and Jonathan Kempf as Death stand amid Olaf Althmann's landscape of lights in *Draußen vor der Tür* [The Man Outside] by Wolfgang Borchert, directed by Michael Thalheimer at the Berliner Ensemble (2022). Photo: © Matthias Horn. Courtesy Berliner Ensemble.



The finale for Barrie Kosky's *All Singing, All Dancing Yiddish Revue*, director Barrie Kosky's last production as *Intendant* of the Komische Oper Berlin, 2022. It is everything, all at once—and in Yiddish. Photo: © Monika Rittershaus. Courtesy Komische Oper Berlin.



From the upper left moving clockwise: Enno Trebs, Julia Windischbauer, Jörg Pose, Jeremy Mockridge, Paul Grill, and Alexander Khoun in Friedrich Schiller's *Maria Stuart*, Deutsches Theater, 2020, directed by Anne Lenk, set by Judith Oswald, costumes by Sibylle Wallum. Windischbauer as Queen Elizabeth in the central box wears a large papier-mâché mask of her own head. Photo: © Arno Declair. Courtesy Deutsches Theater Berlin.



A rain of blood on Çiğdem Teke (center) and Yanina Cerón (right) in *Dantons Tod/ Iphigenie* [Danton's Death / Iphigenia], directed and adapted by Oliver Frlijić from the plays by Georg Büchner and Euripides (Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin, 2022). In front of the actresses, on the slippery floor, are busts of Heiner Müller, Büchner, and Bertolt Brecht; in the background a long row of Robespierre heads face microphones. Photo: © Ute Langkafel. Courtesy Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin.

Spree side, the building is ... what? With four layers of large windows encased by off-white architectural concrete, long and tall and flat and minimalist, the façade here could be the front of an office building just about anywhere in the world. The two styles meet at the southeast corner of the building, clashing without purpose at a service entrance covered by a black grate and not meant to be looked at. Heiner Müller could make of this a monstrous poem.

Inside, you feel like you are in a conference center or an airport terminal. There's lots of space, long escalators, towering ceilings, randomly situated gathering areas, unstaffed bars. Up one set of escalators, there is a permanent exhibition titled "Berlin Global," along with temporary spaces devoted to science exhibits and workshops. Up the second set of escalators, on the third floor, you will find the collections of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, along with temporary exhibition space.

The museum has devoted itself both to presenting colonial objects and to acknowledging the history of Germany, the history of its own location in Berlin, and colonialism. The Berlin Global exhibit must have been created alongside a team of diversity consultants, for better or worse: a kind of non-chronological story of the city, Berlin Global guides visitors through all kinds of stories of migration, exile, division, and displacement. Black Germans, Jews, Muslims, and Sinti and Roma; artists and creatives and bicycles and gentrification; colonialism and post-colonialism; the Berlin Wall, the Berlin Palace, the Palace of the Republic. All integrated into a participatory walk organized by themes, with lots of media to watch and interact with and a few historical objects in glass cases. Meanwhile, many of the events scheduled this year have been devoted to postcolonial themes: tours on Black histories in Berlin; a talk on climate change in Oceania; a keynote speech by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie.

These events and exhibits at the Humboldt Forum are, as Katrin Sieg writes in her recent book *Decolonizing the Museum*, part of a serious and ongoing movement in European museums "to investigate colonialism as part of an unprocessed past, confront its presence, and urge repair."¹⁰ They are also, frankly, an attempt to have one's proverbial cake and keep it (in Berlin); though most of the collection's Benin Bronzes should be returned to Nigeria soon, many other objects are disputed.¹¹ Ideas that once felt radical in an academic context—multiple, conflicting stories subjected to postcolonial critique and open to personal interpretation—feel, in this context of a large state museum, like attempts to alleviate feelings of guilt and placate locals while attracting tourists and developers.

Cynicism aside, I do think some of the programming at the Humboldt Forum is lovely, and some excellent thinkers and artists have been invited (and paid) to contribute to the museums. There is a regular story time for children, with picture

book cinema; theatre, dance, and music for all ages in one of the bright courtyards; and, more recently, tours of the exhibits given in Ukrainian. Judging by conversations I've had, the hurt felt at the tearing down of the Palace of the Republic in 2006, and its replacement with this new palace, will not simply disappear because that history is "acknowledged." Many artists and individuals want nothing to do with the place. But the Humboldt Forum in the Berliner Schloß will gradually be incorporated into the city's landscape, will get older and dirty and gradually look less awkward, and a generation will grow up with memories of reading books and watching clowns there. It will always be an odd, ugly place, but so is Berlin.

AFTER MERKEL

While Covid colored everything this past year, the gel through which we watched our world, our lives also continued, for those of us who lived. The German federal parliamentary elections portended major change in both the nation's policies and its understanding of itself, as Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had provided leadership for her nation and also for Europe at large since 2005, stepped down from power. Her party, the moderate conservative CDU/CSU, could not replace her. Olaf Scholz, a longtime politician without specific personality, formerly Finance Minister under Merkel, who had modeled himself explicitly on her, managed to put together a coalition of the Green Party, the FDP (classic liberals, somewhat like American libertarians), and his own centrist liberal SPD.

So we have environmentalists alongside the party of business alongside centrist socialists, splitting the cabinet ministries among themselves. The coalition politics of Germany mean that major, sudden changes seldom happen—everyone has to be prepared to collaborate—so the turn from Merkel to Scholz has felt like a moderate shift in tone, not a major change in policy or identity. The Scholz coalition's focus, as Merkel's was, has had to be on the pandemic; their negotiations in October and November on joint governance occurred while the delta wave gathered strength and forced increasingly strict social regulations. Other than Covid rules, the coalition's first major contribution to daily life in Germany has been the "nine-euro ticket," a monthly ticket during the summer months for city and regional public transportation that costs only nine euro—for Berlin alone such a ticket normally costs eighty-six euro. It's a great deal, an S-Bahn jubilee that is already leading to more riders—but no one is talking about increasing public transportation options or cutting car infrastructure, long-term changes that would necessitate real conflict.

In Berlin, the major result of the September election was a *Volksentscheid*, an advisory vote on a particular subject, in this case whether the state government should forcibly purchase apartments from large real estate companies, under the motto "Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen" (the graffiti is everywhere). Theatre artists were involved, including andcompany&Co's Alex Karschnia, and the campaign's tactics were playful and marketable. Rents continue to rise and developers continue

to take over the anarchic, occupied spaces that have long defined Berlin: Köpi Platz, a collection improvised mobile homes in Mitte, was cleared in October to make way for new buildings; the Berliner Ringtheater, a *freie Szene* space, helped to reimagine Ostkreuz, but their neighborhood became too cool and too expensive and the owner of their building forced them to move locations in January. The *Volksentscheid* passed by a large margin. This latest attempt to address rents and gentrification in the capital is more an expression of anger than an action; it must now be considered and debated—though not implemented—by the Berlin Senate.

Back on the national stage, Scholz has tried to govern quietly and fairly. Yet history has, as it will, intervened. Since the February invasion by Russia of Ukraine, Scholz has made a slow, grudging, pushed-more-than-pulling movement away from Russia. He halted the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. He gave way on the SWIFT blockade. He announced a major turn (a *Zeitwende*) in German foreign policy, budgeting much more money for the military while finally, for the first time ever, living up to Germany's NATO obligations. And he eventually agreed to send "offensive" weapons to the Ukrainian army, meaning weapons that will be used to kill Russian soldiers. These decisions have happened only after European Union and NATO allies, and his coalition partners, have persuaded him. Scholz himself has decided not to lead. Meanwhile the implementation of several loud pledges regarding military budgeting and aid have been quietly slowed; they may never actually come into effect, while many of the promised German weapons have yet to be delivered. Germany's partnership with Western allies should be sharply questioned.

NIE WIEDER KRIEG

On the streets and in cultural institutions after February 24, shock, terror, and disgust reigned. Ukraine can feel a world away from Germany—there's all of Poland in between. But the Ukrainian border is less than 900 kilometers from Berlin, about the distance between Boston and Richmond, Virginia. A land war, with tanks and guided missiles and fighter jets, in the geographically largest nation in Europe? Bombs hitting Kyiv, which had been gaining a reputation with its club scene as the next Berlin? Unimaginable, and actually happening.

Within a couple of days, there were major protest marches in Berlin, and the Ukrainian flag, sunflower yellow and blue-sky blue, became ubiquitous, hanging outside federal government buildings, state museums, and the public theatres. At schools and daycares, tiny handprints covered signs: *Wir brauchen den Frieden* [we need peace] and *Nie wieder Krieg* [never again war]. The Ukrainian embassy sits just a few houses away from the Deutsches Theater—you go right by it on your way to and from the theatre, now passing piles of flowers and candles and heavily armed federal police officers and a television screen showing Russian bombs hitting Ukrainian apartment buildings. Ukrainian anthems were played before and after classical music concerts, and ushers gathered donations in collection boxes.

As happened after corona, art and performance took on new meanings beginning in February. For their May issue, *Theater der Zeit* put an image of the destroyed Mariupol theatre on its cover, the Russian for “children” in huge letters still clearly visible in front of the building. An attack on children, an attack on families, and an attack on Ukrainian culture. “What should the theatre do now?” *Theater der Zeit* asked twenty-two artists, all of whom gave different, contradictory answers.

Michael Thalheimer has been known for his adaptations of classic plays for two decades now, reducing texts to their bare essentials. For the Berliner Ensemble this spring, premiering in March, he directed Wolfgang Borchert’s 1947 expressionist drama *Draußen vor der Tür* [The Man Outside]. The play chronicles, in several stations, the return to Hamburg of an everyman-soldier, Beckmann, after several years in a Siberian prisoner-of-war camp. Working with Olaf Altmann, his usual set designer, Thalheimer mostly ignored the play’s original setting, placing it in a gorgeous field of colored lights: the night sky, a river to drown in, a circus. As Beckmann, Kathrin Wehlisch is always onstage, both lit and obscured by Altmann’s hanging bulbs. References to the Second World War are not cut entirely, but they are less important for Thalheimer’s story, that of a soldier who has killed and suffered and been abandoned by his loved ones. Who refuses to kill or be killed any longer. Who takes his own life, giving himself over to a corpulent, over-fed Death (Jonathan Kempf in rolls of fat atop bare, skinny legs).

Esther Slevogt, writing for *Nachtkritik*, found the production’s politics wanting, pointing out both its deliberate lack of context and its presentation of only a single viewpoint, that of a German *Wehrmacht* soldier, without showing anyone else’s pain and grief.¹² But Wehlisch’s silent screams—palms out and mouth ripped open in pain and terror—made the story, for me, specific and universal at once. In war, everyone suffers and ultimately suffers alone. Soldiers, partners, parents, children, the dead, the living. Only we who sit in our comfortable apartments away from the battlefields suffer not, like the petty bourgeois Frau Kramer, who turns Beckmann away from his childhood home, which she now owns; and we who sit in our comfortable apartments starting wars and forgetting about them, we are to blame.

Oliver Frljić’s *Dantons Tod/Iphigenie*, which opened in April, giving the director time to respond to the war, let us steep in suffering and fear. Frljić, who was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and grew up in Zagreb, stopped the action during the final fifteen minutes of his adaptation of Büchner and Euripides. Not speaking, only reacting, the productions’ four actresses sat in bloody clothes on white upholstered armchairs. Sirens wailed and bombs exploded somewhere in the distance, while maniacal laughter interrupted mournful Baroque music. A baby cried. The actresses winced and ducked and broke out laughing—and stayed seated, as did we in the audience, left to contemplate war. *Nie wieder Krieg*.

INTO THE SUMMER

It is a credit to the theatre here that it can respond to these many crises, some of which, like climate change, I haven't even been able to mention, without being enveloped by them. To sing of the darkness all around but remember the light. Alex Karschnia can both help lead a political movement and co-create an abstract performance about ants—which is also about climate change—with the group and-company&Co. (*global swarming: the science of the antz*, HAU2 2022). The Berliner Ensemble can collect donations for a bus service offered to people living on the streets in winter and host a conversation with Angela Merkel, while programming an extensive repertoire including *Draußen vor der Tür*, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, and *Fabian*.

When I last wrote a letter from Berlin for *PAJ*, in 2015, I ended by reflecting on the coming changes in leadership at the major state theatres.¹³ The Berliner Ensemble is newly vibrant under Oliver Reese, now *Intendant* since 2017, hosting classic directors like Thalheimer along with many young artists, like the director Christina Tscharyiski and the actor Stefanie Reinsperger. There's not much to say about the Schaubühne, still being led by Thomas Ostermeier. At least, there's not much to say that you couldn't have said about the institution back in 2015, or even 2005; it maintains a clear aesthetic identity, making art for and about upper-middle-class audiences in Berlin, London, Paris, and New York, cities to which their productions often tour. Ulrich Khuon, originally a critic and dramaturg, continues to lead the Deutsches Theater (since 2010) with an emphasis on acting and playwriting; the ensemble there is the best in Berlin, and the production quality the most consistently great. The Gorki is thriving under Shermin Langhoff, despite allegations of abuse of power in spring 2021, an event mocked this past fall in Yael Ronen's vivid, under-developed *Slippery Slope*.¹⁴ Alongside this anti-cancel-culture musical, the Gorki's repertoire includes earnest documentary productions about children who came to Germany as refugees (*Futureland*, directed by Lola Arias, 2019) and a wild *King Lear* adaptation that satirizes both the New Right and American-style identity politics (*Queen Lear*, directed by Christian Weise, 2022). Like the Volksbühne of old under Castorf, the Gorki under Langhoff is increasingly a theatre against itself, much to its benefit. In the opera and musical theatre world, Barrie Kosky is stepping down as *Intendant* of the Komische Oper after ten years, during which he reestablished the operetta as an artform in Germany with enormously fun productions such as *Ball im Savoy* (2013). As a departure gift to himself, the Jewish, Australian-born director made *Barrie Kosky's All Singing, All Dancing Yiddish Review* (2022)—nearly three hours of Borscht Belt and queer humor, starring Kosky's favorite performers. It was all a bit much (so many mothers missing so many sons in so many songs), but worthwhile even just to watch Barbara Spitz sing about making wicky wacky and crack jokes about stiff ... drinks.

The catastrophes at the Volksbühne since 2017 have been well-reported as the institution cycled through several leaders.¹⁵ This season was the first with René Pollesch as *Intendant*; a long-time director there, he had been Castorf's heir-apparent before Chris Dercon was unexpectedly appointed to the role. It has been, to put it mildly, a slow start for Pollesch, who claims to be leading a co-*Intendanz* with a group of collaborators, including Martin Wuttke and Kathrin Angerer.¹⁶ Instead of launching with a huge new repertoire, the season has been built slowly, with a program heavy on Pollesch's own productions. The slow start is perhaps humane, but the work they have staged has been disappointing. Almost every new production at the Volksbühne has felt sclerotic, even self-parodying, without energy and without ideas. (*The Divine Comedy*, which I wrote about above, was an exception—but it was not an in-house project.) While the seventy-year-old Castorf continues making theatre like *Fabian* that confronts you no matter where you are, Pollesch's attacks haven't hit their mark for ten years, criticizing a politics and aesthetics that are no longer relevant. Meanwhile, the institution has been slow to develop a relationship with the community around them, slow to develop a website and marketing materials, and on many evenings this past fall and winter, their spaces simply sat empty.

Pollesch, I hope, will be given the time to try to develop the institution. His *Geht es Dir gut?* [How are you doing?], which opened this spring starring Fabian Hinrichs, finally brought light to the Volksbühne mainstage, filling the too-often quiet house: a playful and life-affirming satire of masks and two meters distancing, alongside break-dancing as well as singing by the Afrikan Voices and Bulgarian Voices Berlin. *Geht es Dir gut?* made me laugh at my Covid quirks—why do you keep a disposable mask so long, it's five weeks old and dirty!—and so much else from these past two years. A large, mirrored rocket (set design by Katrin Brack) lands slowly, fog spilling out.

For the international visitor, Berlin is ever more accessible, in ways both good and bad. You can see entire productions staged in English, even if sometimes you can't be sure why exactly they're in English. The Gorki still has English supertitles for all its productions, many of which are partially spoken in English anyway, and the other state theatres now use supertitles often, at least a couple of times a week. At some of the *freie Szene* spaces, such as HAU and Sophiensaele, you need English at least as often, if not more often, than you need German. I regretted at times this Anglophone-emphasis, the homogenizing international theatre, its lack of terroir. But that flat, globalized scene (of which I too am a member) is often extravagantly fun and disturbing, as for *Under Bright Light* by Tim Etchells and Forced Entertainment (HAU2 2022), in which six figures in blue overalls hopelessly move objects around a small stage, from one corner to the other, for a nearly unbearable ninety minutes. [see review in Art & Performance Notes] There is so much art happening in Berlin, in so many different spaces and places. Despite Covid, gentrification, increasing rents, and neo-Prussian museums, plenty of strange land remains in Berlin. May it always be so.

The research for this article was conducted with the support of a Humboldt Fellowship. Many thanks to Matthias Warstat for hosting me at the Freie Universität during 2021–22, and to David Savran for conversations on theatre throughout the year. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

NOTES

1. Lenk's production of *Maria Stuart* is available to stream online for classrooms, and it works quite well as a video: <https://www.deutschestheater.de/programm/spielplan/maria-stuart-lenk/5904/>.

2. See, for example, "Theateröffnungsgymnastik," *Nachtkritik*, December 2021, https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20428; Christopher Rüping, "Theater in der Pandemie: Kaum auf der Bühne schon wieder weg," interview by Janis El-Bira, *Deutschlandfunkkultur*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/theater-in-der-pandemie-kaum-auf-der-buehne-schon-wieder-weg-100.html>.

3. Christine Dössel has summarized these arguments in the context of the 2022 Berliner Theatertreffen. Christine Dössel, "Schwundstufen in der Bubble," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/berliner-theatertreffen-besucher-schwund-schauspielhaus-bochum-christopher-rueping-claudia-roth-1.5582166>. In *Radio Eins*, Cora Knoblauch has provided evidence that major public theatres have not seen a loss of audiences, especially from regular theatregoers, but that many small theatres have. Cora Knoblauch, "Publikumsschwund an den Theatern – was ist dran?," *Radio Eins*, May 18, 2022, https://www.radioeins.de/programm/sendungen/mofr1013/_/publikumsschwund-theater.html. Both Dössel and Knoblauch point out that people are also buying tickets at the last minute, thus making it seem like premieres and other major performances will not sell out (causing much consternation), when in fact they do.

4. 3G: To enter a theatre (or other facility), you must show proof that you are either vaccinated, tested (that day), or recovered. 2G: To enter, you must be either vaccinated or recovered. 2G+: To enter, you must be either vaccinated or recovered, and you also must be tested (that day) and/or wear an FFP2 mask (roughly equivalent of a KN95) during the duration of the performance.

5. Available for streaming at <https://vimeo.com/696606711>.

6. "abandon all hope ye who enter here" visitor guide. To tour a digital version of the exhibit, see <https://202122.transmediale.de/de/almanac/guided-exhibition-tour-abandon-all-hope-ye-who-enter-here>.

7. See also the book, in German and English, which accompanied the exhibit. Ruth Walz, *Theater im Sucher/Theater Through A Lens* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2021).

8. For much more on this production, see Matt Cornish, *Performing Unification: History and Nation in German Theater after 1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, [2017] 2019).

9. For a summary of these arguments, which were made widely, see Graham Bowley, "A New Museum Opens Old Wounds in Germany," *New York Times*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/arts/design/humboldt-forum-germany.html>. For a summary of the museum's responses, see Elizabeth Grenier and Sarah Huca, "Humboldt Forum Tackles Colonial Issue with New Museums," *Deutsche Welle*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/humboldt-forum-tackles-colonial-issue-with-new-museums/a-59249590>.

10. Katrin Sieg, *Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 3.

11. For more on the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes, some of the most controversial items held by the Humboldt Forum museums, see Annabelle Steffes-Halmer, "Germany to Begin Returning Benin Bronzes in 2022," *Deutsche Welle*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-to-begin-returning-benin-bronzes-in-2022/a-59438275>.

12. Esther Slevogt, "Wohin sollen wir denn in dieser Welt?," *Nachtkritik*, March 26, 2022, https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20793.

13. Matt Cornish, "Between the Wall and the Future: A Letter from Berlin," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 37, no. 2 (2015): 64–75.

14. See Torsten Landsberg, "Allegations of Abuse of Power at Berlin Theater," *Deutsche Welle*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/allegations-of-abuse-of-power-at-berlin-theater/a-57443221>.

15. For an extensive discussion of Dercon and the protests in response to Dercon's *Intendantz*, see Brandon Woolf, *Institutional Theatrics: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021). For a summary of the scandal around temporary *Intendant* Klaus Dörr, see Torsten Landsberg, "#MeToo: Volksbühne-Intendant Klaus Dörr gibt Amt auf," *Deutsche Welle*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/de/metoo-volksb%C3%BChne-intendant-klaus-d%C3%B6rr-gibt-amt-auf/a-56878689>.

16. For an excellent and revealing interview with Pollesch, see René Pollesch, "Das Riesending in Mitte: Volksbühnenstart unter René Pollesch," interview by Susanne Burkhardt and Elena Philipp, *Der Theaterpodcast* Episode 40, October 20, 2021, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/folge-40-das-riesending-in-mitte-volksbuehnenstart-unter-100.html>.

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