

56th Theatertreffen: the German theatre in search of a new identity

'Society-sensitive' theatre

"Berlin is condemned forever to becoming and never to being" wrote art historian Karl Scheffler in 1910 for a city that still bears naked the scars of recent History. The word 'gentrification', as well as issues of identity, gender and representation in the German scene dominated the creative talks at the 56th edition of Theatertreffen, which I attended along with 19 amazing colleagues from all over the world, as a guest of the German Embassy in Athens to the Visitors' program of the Federal Foreign Office. What was really striking to me from the very beginning is how 'society-sensitive' is theatre in Germany, as it addresses on stage the burning social and political issues, functioning as an open forum of ideas that continues, expands and triggers social dialogue and self-reflection. And this point is definitely linked, I believe, with the pivotal role of the Dramaturg in the German stage. Indicative of this, after all, is that many Artistic directors of state theatres in Germany are indeed Dramaturgs.

How is the audience responding to this reality? One truly impressive figure is that, according to a recent study, there are more people attending performance arts events in Germany than there are attending soccer games, as shared by Susanne Traub, Deputy Head of Division Contact for Dance and Performance at Goethe Institut in Munich. Another equally impressive reality is the height of annual subsidies secured to the performing arts in Germany: 2 billion Euros(!) that come from three sources: the cities, the regions and the state. Considering these factors, one can understand theatre's crucial role in German social and political life and how it can be used as a tool of communication, collaboration, self-awareness or potentially propaganda.

Let's start from the beginning though. Theatertreffen is the most important festival of the German-speaking world and one of the great theatre festivals in Europe staging the 10 most remarkable performances of German-speaking theatre every year. Performances are not selected by the Artistic Direction of the Festival or a group of curators, but by a Jury of 7 honorary theatre critics, serving three years in succession. The Jury watches approximately 400 performances per year to select the 10 most "remarkable". The Artistic Direction of the Festival neither participates in the Jury's meetings nor has any say on the final selection. Nevertheless, it appoints the Jury together with the Director of the Berliner Festspiele and can put forward quotas or selection criteria. For example, Artistic Director Yvonne Büdenhölzer has boldly initiated a female quota of at least 50% of directors in the selection of the ten most remarkable productions for the next two editions of the festival. No surprise that in her opening statement for the 56th edition of Theatertreffen she is wondering: *"What do women and Germany's East have in common? They are both underrepresented"*. In this line of thought, it is interesting that a festival-affiliated conference under the title "Burning issues Meets Theatertreffen" explored issues of unequal treatment of men and women as well as structures of the theatre apparatus that obstruct diversity, aiming at suggesting ways to change these conditions (for example suggesting structures which could support women artists when becoming mothers).

Postdramatic theatre and what comes next

The discussion regarding issues of gender and identity becomes part of the performances themselves. My impression is that German theatre is in transition, in search of a new identity. As society changes, theatre changes. Transitions always carry an uneasiness, but also many wonderful or completely crazy ideas, which sprout out of the ground, even if they might not find the way to a truly innovative scenic proposal. At least not yet. A phrase by Christian Rakow, Jury member sums up this period of transition in the German theatre: *“The decades of irony are over; pathos has returned”*.

The notion of theatre as a participatory experience or ritual runs across almost all performances I watched. From the extraordinary idea of She She Pop who turned the audience into a kind of speaking chorus at *Oratorium*, a performance about the hot topic of Berliners who are forced to leave the center of the town due to gentrification, to *Coming Society* by Susanne Kennedy at Volksbühne, where the audience turns gradually into performers, theatre in Germany seems to take a shot at new ways of approaching and engaging the spectator, based on the idea that every night theatre is co-shaped by the audience itself.

Performances that stood out

Persona, based on Ingmar Bergman directed by **Anna Bergmann**

A co-production of Deutsches Theater and Malmö Stadsteater

A fresh, female look on Bergman's masterpiece. In a stunning scenic space like a shell reminiscent of a womb, this common beginning for all of us, with a lot of water and dazzling reflections, Anna Bergman re-tells the seminal work as a story about longing for and rejection of motherhood, about haunting life choices. The performance explores the boundaries between identity and socially accepted roles, the conscious and the unconscious, the distance between different aspects of the self. The power of silence, self-flagellation, painful memory and female solidarity are all there, with the audience indulging in the undertakings of two great actresses: Corinna Harfouch and Karin Lithman. Depending on the country where the performance is staged, the two actresses alternate in the two roles of the silent Elisabeth and the speaking nurse Alma (in Berlin German actress Corinna Harfouch plays Alma and Swedish Karin Lithman plays silent Elisabeth, while in Sweden they reverse), a choice leading in a more sneaking existential twist.

Coming Society directed by **Susanne Kennedy** at Volksbühne

The performance-installation by Susanne Kennedy reminded me of a meditation exercise, a personal ritual where every spectator creates their personal dramaturgy, just as he/she takes decisions on his/her life. A rotating stage, turning just as the earth is turning, awaits the spectator. Various micro-performances in a colourful, seductive environment on the verge of kitsch (Markus Sleg), attract the spectator's attention. The audience experiences the event/the spectacle in different ways: at times walking, then sitting, lying on the floor or taking a step off the rotating stage to notice what is happening from a distance. As the performance progresses, the boundaries between spectators and performers blur: the spectators become the players of their own story. Theatre as an videogame, where you are the player. In my game, this experience was a psychedelic trip about accepting death. And a very personal reflection on life-changing decisions. The quietness the last minutes of the

performance and the way the stage gradually stops moving –in my own “reading” life itself– constitutes a tranquil acceptance of pain, physical or psychic. And loss. A moment I still carry with me.

Italian night by Eden von Horvath directed by **Thomas Ostermeier** at Schaubühne

After five performances where the implementation of some completely crazy ideas, which would utterly justify the use of the phrase “weird German theatre” –to paraphrase a term with which the Greek cinema has conquered the world cinema–, I felt the need to watch a more “orthodox” performance. *Italian night* by Eden von Horvath directed by Thomas Ostermeier –considered now in Germany by quite a few critics and creators as a “conventional” theatre-maker– was a performance that had a healing effect on me like that of a good old red wine: realism, amazing actors/actresses, and a text striking sensitive cords, putting forward the failure of the left to confront the rise of the extreme right, especially in small regional cities. In Ostermeier’s show, the fascists-neonazi are trendy, convincing and devious, managing to talk about their toxic ideology with a surprisingly natural attitude. While the neo-Nazis are doing their dirty job, the leftists organize frivolous gatherings, renounce one another, turn a blind eye to the rise of the extreme right rhetoric, which conquers the conscience and invades the youth. Without any eccentric directing gags, this is a thought-provoking performance, placing a mirror opposite society. A simple, classic, crucial show.

Money makes the world go round

In the context of Theatertreffen we have attended a series of presentations, seminars, masterclasses, some of them regarding the funding system of theatre in Germany: a system which is highly the matter of local society and not the central state, following a model of decentralization. This form of funding relates to the country’s Nazi past: the Nazis had used culture and education as major tools of propaganda. Thus, after World War II, the German Constitution does not allow the implementation of a national strategy in these two domains, allowing the local authorities to play a major role. Of course, there is now a growing concern that in certain regions in Germany there is a possibility that as the extreme right rises, this local power concentration might contaminate freedom of thought and expression.

The largest share of the subsidies is distributed to big theatrical institutions with the independent scene receiving approximately 10% of the total funding. There are voices in the German stage demanding a restructuring of this distribution, claiming that 90% of innovation theatres get only 10% of the total funding. As a result of this distribution, the subsidies in the independent scene cover only maintenance costs, leaving no money for artistic creation. The artists working in the independent scene need to apply to secure funding separately for every project. Of course, there are also those who believe that this distribution is fair and totally necessary for the state theatres to be able to maintain their ensemble and preserve their identity, as a stable ensemble allows states theatres to maintain their repertoire system as well as a sense of continuity and tradition.

A festival as a celebration of diversity and friendship

A festival, however, is not only about the performances. The seminars. The lectures. The places. It is above all about the people you meet. I have experienced the festival along with

a dream-team of creative people –some were directors, other writers, dramaturgs, artistic directors of theatres or festivals. Together we met with artists who shape the theatre scene in Germany. We exchanged views, learned from one another, celebrated our diversity. The dynamic cannot be expressed in words: creative talks, ideas for common future projects and collaborations and the sense that you are not alone. There are other people who struggle, facing the same difficulties you face. No matter how much different the context or challenges in every country.

And after a week I dare say that I met not only future collaborators, but most importantly 19 new friends from 19 different countries. From Argentina, Peru, the U.S.A. to Nigeria, Russia, Israel and China. And this happened in Berlin thanks to this great Visitor's programme of the German Federal Foreign Office. How difficult is it really that something similar is organized in our country in the context of the Athens & Epidaurus Festival with the collaboration of the Greek Ministry of Culture? A programme that will boost the festival indicators, promote contemporary Greek theatre creation and function as a start line of new international partnerships and co-productions? Just wondering...

At this point, I would like to share with you several thoughts of some of my colleagues on the experience of this edition of Theatertreffen, as I strongly believe that the dynamic of this article is beautifully enhanced by further reflections, views, intakes.

"I feel what we gained most was something we needed from each other and the group, including our guides. German theater, structure, while interesting unto itself, seemed to be more of a catalyst than an end. The German engagement is so strong, perhaps even more than the content, I think we were fully engaged as a group. I felt people pretty much came hungry, full of promise, and perhaps left feeling affirmed from the innate support and uplift of the group. Without being showy, everyone shined. Without bravado, it was clear this group has major talents and gifts to share and take. Personally I left with perspective and resolve. Resolute for my work at home and resolve to go new places and see what everybody's working on: Nigeria, China, South America, Middle East, through the eyes of real people I hope to call my friends.

Hope lies in the collective will to keep creating. And that collective connectivity makes it possible to try and change the world. And isn't that what we are all trying to do in our work? Change the world?"

Susan Feldman, Artistic Director of St. Ann's Warehouse in New York, USA

"Berlin, this beautiful city where you can glimpse the prints History left at its passing. Here Germany's cultural politics harbour and support contemporary drama, by focusing in a most accomplished system on training and support to drama and independent culture. The plurality of the international voices is here given full value and it is considered a treasure upon which to build our future, no matter what is their age or origin. The artists and all who create beauty become ambassadors of a cultural system whose strategy is to trespass the Middle-European boundaries. I wish to thank all the superb travel companions I had in this journey, the Goethe Institut team and the German Embassy in Italy, who has given Napoli Teatro Festival Italia the chance of participating in it. In Berlin, as in the Volksbühne, all seats are good seats".

Brunella Fusco, International Relations-Cultural Manager at Fondazione Campania dei Festival based in Napoli, Italy

“Being part of this experience reconnected me with theatre and gave a vision for the future, reflecting on what it is to be a theatre professional. Each of us came from different backgrounds and life experiences, but that wasn't an obstacle or border, as we could understand and see through the stories and the individual perspectives of each participant. Collectivity and Theater were there all the time. I take with me the talks and reflections about text-based plays, fringe theater, tradition and future, all based on the performances and lectures we attended. Finally, I have been so inspired by the female producers, playwrights, and directors from my group and from the German Theater scene. All this travels with me and it's a flame to keep working in Lima”

Moyra Silva, Actress-Dancer-Professor based in Lima, Peru

“In 6 days in Berlin, I saw plays so experimental, there was no barrier between stage and audience, entertainer and spectator, fiction and reality. I saw a play that lasted 10 hours and another where we left our seats and mingled with the actors on stage from start to finish. It is the nature of creativity, you see, to wake up in the morning and run with the wind. Like this, we grow. Like this, Berlin has grown into an incredible cultural space. But by far the most beautiful thing I found –all travelers know this– was not the intriguing mosaic of concrete and green spaces or the old buildings and beautiful theatres or the Federal Parliament spanning a canal that once separated East and West. No. It was the people. Every traveler knows this. Always the people”.

Dike Chukwumerije, Performance Poet and Writer based in Abuja, Nigeria