Quo Vadis? The Current State of German Theatre

German theatre is in a crisis which might be summed up as follows: how to remain up-to-date and "relevant" to an audience whose perceptions and attention spans have been fundamentally shaped by the speed of cyber- communication in a world of constant flux. Theatre has traditionally provided a live forum to enable us to come together to look at images of ourselves onstage, reflect on our personal, social, and political dealings with one another and, as an added bonus, gain new insights on how best to regulate our conduct to the benefit of each and all. But over the last few years in particular, our neo-liberal society has become so fragmented and individualized by the power of computerized media that it is legitimate to ask if society as we knew it in the twentieth century has practically ceased to exist. Interpersonal communication seems to take place, if at all, primarily in the form of SMSs, blogs, emails, and twitters, the only physical contact being between a person's eyes and fingers and the computerized gadget in question.

Whether people are walking down the street or stuck in a train or bus, the majority of them–even those travelling together–seem to have their heads bowed over their smartphones and iPads, with the result that any communication with other persons in their direct vicinity is reduced to the briefest of telegrammatic snippets. On the one hand, the internet has isolated and atomized us; on the other, it has made us more globally aware. Individual knowledge once meant individual power. But now the three Big Uncertainties–climate change, terrorism (religious, urban, and nuclear), and the global economic instability resulting from the deregulation of the banking system–are ever-present in our consciousness, and all of them seem to be beyond individual control. This is further aggravated by the awareness that every cyber activity we make exposes us to global government and corporate surveillance.

In this context we are compelled to ask ourselves to what extent individual freedom still exists? And if, as Margaret Thatcher once famously claimed, society no longer exists anyway, can theatre have any social function over and beyond providing "events" and "spectacles" for individuals in a social void? Circuses indeed for those who have the "bread." For people who have grown up in the Anglo-Saxon theatre tradition whose staple diet has been good commercial shows spiced with an occasional smattering of experiments, such questions might appear outlandish if not to say utterly irrelevant. But in Germany and the Eastern European countries, they are germane to the whole idea of what theatre should be about. In a paper published by Friedrich Schiller in the 1780s he famously asked, "What can a theatre in good standing contribute [to society]?" and suggested that it had to function as a "*moralische Anstalt*" (moral institution). Looking at current developments in German theatre, is this still the case?

One of the first dramatists to try to pin down the features of middle-class society was Carl Sternheim, the son of a banker who was born in the revolutionary year of 1848, lived through the heyday of the middle-class and died in 1942 in the middle of the Second World War at a time when Hitler's star was about to plummet. Sternheim's comedy *Die Hose*, usually translated as *The Underpants*, is possibly his best-known play. Although seldom performed today, it came to public to attention in New York in 2002 in an adaptation by the comedian Steve Martin. *The Underpants* (along with two later plays, *The Snob* and *1913*), forms part of a satiric trilogy *The*

Heroic Lives of the Bourgeoisie. Because of their length the plays are usually performed individually, but at the Bochum Schauspielhaus–one of the most respected theatres in Germany outside Berlin–the Swiss dramatist Reto Finger was entrusted with compacting them into a single evening, the idea being to provide us with a broad through-line tracing the rise of bourgeois individualism and its effects. The opening scene in *The Underpants* is as unforgettable as it is–or was–at the premiere in Berlin in 1911–outrageous. For the underpants in question belong not to a man, the low-grade civil servant Theodore Maske, but to his wife Luise, who loses them among the crowds gathered in the streets to cheer the Kaiser as he passes by. Maske is so outraged by his wife's display of immorality that he fears for his reputation. But what at first appears to threaten his status turns out to be the trigger to his rise in society.

In his desire to earn a little extra money to top up his salary Maske has advertised a room for rent, and in no time two witnesses to the scene, both of whom have been heart-struck by the sight of his wife clutching her underpants, are begging to become tenants. One is a failed poet by the name of Scarron and the other a sickly hairdresser called Mandelstam, each of them in his own way as false as Maske himself (Maske is German for mask. The name says it all). Theodor Maske is, on the one hand, a conventional and highly conservative member of the lower middle class who would never openly contravene conventional morality, but who at the same time dreams of doing so clandestinely. His new source of income not only ensures a regular Sunday roast, but also gives him the material wealth and confidence to take a mistress in the form of the woman next door and simultaneously start a family of his own. Hypocrisy is the order of the day and anything goes in terms of personal satisfaction and private profit as long as appearances can be kept up. In Bochum the leading role of Theodor Maske was taken by a well-known television star, Dietmar Bär, whose corpulent presence and comic talents matched the role perfectly. Luise Maske (Xenia Snagowski) is usually played as an extremely attractive young woman oozing innocent eroticism. Here the director of the play, Anselm Weber (who is also the theatre's Intendant), chose to present the character as a dowdy, downtrodden housewife in an apron and conventional haircut, thereby emphasizing the gap between her decidedly unerotic aura and the fevered fantasies of the two gentlemen who had caught a brief glimpse of her underpants before she stuffed them in her pocket.

While *The Underpants* provided a highly entertaining prelude to the evening, the second " act, " *The Snob,* was several degrees nastier in its effect. The play is set some quarter of a century later in the drawing room of a villa, here vulgarly furnished with a stag's head, a zebra skin, and an elephant's foot serving as a waster-paper bin. Maske's son, Christian, (Felix Rech), a successful businessman, is ruthlessly intent on abandoning his nondescript background and moving up the social ladder To do this, he has paid off his parents for the costs incurred by his upbringing–with interest, of course!–and dispatched them to live in Zurich. Having pumped his mistress Sybille Hull for money and lessons in etiquette he casually discards her in favor of marrying the daughter of an impoverished aristocrat. In order to further increase his aristocratic status, Christian now claims that he is the product of an affair between his mother (recently deceased) and a member of the French nobility. Could there be a better recipe for social status than entrepreneurial success and an aristocratic background?

In the third play, *1913*, the aging Christian Maske von Buchow (as he is now known) is the head

of a large industrial concern involved in arms manufacturing. Although in his seventies and in frail health, he still insists on keeping the reigns in his own hands despite the intrigues of his eldest daughter Sofie. His son Ernst Philip has no interest in the family business and prefers to spend his life in Bohemian circles, while his favorite daughter Ottilie turns her back on the cold financial world in favor of a more idealistic life. In many respects *1913* has a contemporary resonance: the economic élite, unregulated financial capitalism, wheeler-dealing, brute exploitation, and contempt for the needs of society at large. We are not far from the vampire world of Goldman Sachs. To drive home the parallels Reto Finger chose to write his own updated version of the play, *2013*. Finger has clearly done a lot of research and reading. This shows not only in his copious program notes and analysis but also (alas) in his text, which turned out to be little more than a short primer in modern capitalism divided into lengthy monologues interspersed with spoken choral dialogues showering us with such revelations as "Privatize profits"/ "Spread losses" / "More for us, less for the masses"/ “ Too big to fail!" (repeated three times just in case we don't get the message). These statements, as banal as they are forgettable, sadly provide the audience with no fresh insights.

Sternheim's 1913, directed by Anselm Weber. Photo: Thomas Aurin.

The only theatrical image that remains in the mind is that of the ghost of Theodor Maske observing the proceedings unnoticed until the final scene when he accuses his son of betraying his aspirations and capitulating to the selfish attempts of his daughters to take the business into

their own hands. "You aren't a Mask(e), it can't be true. A Mask(e) would have put up a fight." An evening which had started with the promise of a rich satirical investigation into human behavior motivated by individual greed and a desire for power generated by wealth-creation, finally petered out in a recitation of ideas by mouthpieces. Masks indeed. But what's a mask without a face beneath?

The theatre in Bochum must at least be congratulated for its attempt to provoke a debate on the dangers inherent in uncontrolled individualism. Even more so, because the evening consisted of plays with stories, characters, conflict, and dialogue. What else, you might object, does one expect to see in the theatre? But in German theatre at least, over the past few years completely new forms of presentation have been relentlessly seeping into the repertoire, not only on the fringe, but also into large subsidized mainstream theatres. All this is theoretically fine because good theatre must forever be in a process of renewal. The problem comes when the so-called alternative forms begin to dominate to such an extent that any forms of "traditional" theatre are dismissed out of hand as being out-of-date, and to bring them up to date and make them "relevant" to contemporary audiences it is essential to dispense with any form of realism and psychological interpretation. Much of this has to do with a phenomenon which has become increasingly conspicuous in German theatre over the last quarter of a century; mixed-media shows. The intermixing of different art forms on stage and the dissolution of the boundaries between live and recorded performance (recorded music, film, and videos) and even between amateur and professional performers, has led to new flights of unregulated artistic expression. Might there be artistic parallels here to the social and economic global developments following the collapse of communism?

Whatever the case, most people agree that Frank Castorf, director of the Volksbühne in Berlin, was the moving force behind the introduction of video cameras and transmissions on stage alongside a rebellious new aesthetic which paid scant regard to the text and traditional characterization and more to a performative approach which might be summed us as "I'm not acting in this play because that would be a lie, so just experience the real me as I am in the present moment and forget about theatre." This might sound great. The problem is that it's a contradiction. For "experience the real me as I am" is an impossible demand. Whether I like it or not, once I am presenting "me" before an audience, I am no longer "the real me as I am" but a "performative theatrical me." And this is just as inauthentic as it is authentic.

How has the current situation come about? For some years after the Second World War, Germany's heavily subsidized state and municipal theatres were considered bastions of conservatism. Their repertoires mainly consisted of a blend of "classical" texts (Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe, Lessing, Greek tragedies, etc.) and new plays (Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss, Botho Strauss, Franz Xaver Kroetz, George Tabori). The directors were by and large men who were dedicated to using the texts to put over "moral" messages to their audiences, and most of the productions were what is known in Germany as "*texttreu*" (faithful to the text). In fact "texttreu" productions of Shakespeare, for example, had more to do with following a nineteenth century tradition of Shakespeare interpretations than with what was presented to the audience in Shakespeare's age. Nonetheless, "texttreu" generally meant playing the text as it was written (with or without the usual cuts) in the way the director imagined the author would have wanted it. Of course there were the occasional outrageous interventions in the sixties and seventies, but

in retrospect even these now look conventional and even extremely "texttreu."

The real revolution began after 1989, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the global development towards a media-dominated world in which first video and then the internet began to intrude into theatre. Since then, directors have slowly become the undisputed "authors" of the show, and any text there may be is used as little more than a basis for the director's visions. You only have to take a look at the daily theatre website www.nachtkritik.de to see that directorial designations are now an integral part of the critical headlines. Practically all of them speak about, for example, Peter Stein's *King Lear,* David Bosch's *Orestes,* Nichola Stemann's *Faust*, Thomas Ostermeier's *Doll's House*, Michael Thalheimer's *Jungfrau von Orleans,* and even Frank Castorf's *Götterdämmerung*, as if Shakespeare, Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, Goethe, Ibsen, Schiller, and Wagner did not exist. Tellingly enough, the text used by David Bosch in his *Orestes* production (which begins with an obligatory video!) was an adaptation by a modern dramatist, John von Düffel. I once saw a production of the play in Bochum which opened with a twenty-five minute dialogue taken from a film by Mike Leigh. I was so perplexed I thought for a moment I had come to the wrong theatre. Was the director booed off the stage and sacked? Not on your life. She was promptly engaged to do a show in one of Berlin's major theatres.

The inflation of the director's status in Germany is mirrored in the increasing lack of regard–some would even say respect–for the work of the author. Back in the 1980s I can remember Peter Stein saying that the job of the author was to leave his text at the stage door and not be seen again until the first night. Even in his collaborations with Botho Strauss, Stein would sometimes take interpretations and approaches which were radically different from Strauss's written instructions. Nonetheless, as in all Stein's work, there was a huge degree of respect for the author. By contrast, almost all the latest generation of directors think they have a right, even a duty, to change and cut texts at will without regard to the author's intentions or prior consent as long as this chimes with their own vision. Just a few days ago the well-known novelist Daniel Kehlmann (*Measuring the World*) walked out of a theatre in Frankfurt after witnessing all the changes and substitutions made in the first ten minutes of "his" play *The Mentor.*

Most reactions on www.nachkritik.de were unsympathetic to Mr. Kehlmann and agreed with the idea that, whether the author likes it or not, directors have the ultimate right to decide what finally goes on stage because in the end theatre is not literature. True enough. But when productions are based on a literary text, authors (let alone audiences) might reasonably hope to be able to recognize their play as it was written. Unfortunately that is not the practice of the exclusive circle of directors, both male and female, who now dominate the theatre scene in Germany. Düsseldorf recently witnessed an all-male (wouldn't all-female have been more revolutionary?) production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The Forest of Arden consisted of little more than dung-filled straw on which the actors rolled around to get themselves equally stinking dirty, while continually grimacing, waving, and putting their tongues out at the audience. And when it finally came to Jacques's famous "All the world's a stage" speech, instead of Jacques we were presented with a group of children reciting the monologue as they marched around the stage in a line. Not to be outdone, the Schaubühne in Berlin, is currently offering a production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that is little more than a series of nonstop coupling to new-wave rock in front of trashy cardboard sets. During the famous ball scene Lady

Capulet appears dressed as a vagina, Juliet wears a rubber mask and an all-body skin-colored costume and when the two lovers meet for the first time they cling to each other like two octopuses covered in tinsel. The wonder is that audiences endure and often even seem to enjoy such presentations.

It is of course possible to conceive an utterly new angle on a play while miraculously retaining the spirit of the original. We only have to look at Peter Brook's legendary versions of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear* to see the truth in this. And the most amazing version of Goethe's *Faus*t I ever saw was a version by Jan Bosse for the Hamburg Schauspielhaus in 2004 that began, not with the usual prologue, but with an image of Mephisto as a black-winged Lord of Darkness tumbling through the heavens to lie broken and almost inarticulate on the stage, and in which Faust himself sat unrecognized amongst the audience until his first appearance. I would argue here that such truly authentic reinterpretations succeed because they manage to conjure up and get behind the spirit of the original text. Anything else quickly reveals itself as superficial sensationalism masquerading as originality.

Irrespective of directorial styles, however, if we look at German theatre repertoires in the current season, the trend seems to be going quite against dramatists and written plays. Instead we have an epidemic of "projects" and adaptations. The projects mostly consist of documentary examinations of contemporary life, mostly in the town or city in question, and related to the sordid underbelly of urban life, whether this be prostitution, homelessness, unemployment, or drug addiction. The usual procedure is for the people in question to be interviewed, upon which their statements are edited and pasted together to form an evening of monologues. In some cases actors get to play these monologues. But in others, the protagonists themselves, most of whom have never been inside a theatre, let alone performed on a stage, are invited to speak to us in person. Thus, as in the outside world, full-time expensive professional skills can be dispensed with in favor of temporarily employed untrained workers paid at the lowest rates. This is truly a case of theatre mirroring neoliberal capitalist society. The justification for such social projects seems to be that audiences, especially the elusive "new, younger" audiences will be (or should be) more eager to experience "authentic" life than a theatrical vision of reality as in plays like Gorki's *Lower Depths* or Edward Bond's *Saved*. A less obvious reason might be that directors are no longer interested in traditional storytelling, or that both they and the actors no longer have the necessary tools to tackle the complexities of characterization. A more cynical explanation might be that projects and adaptations are an easy way for the directors to increase their not inconsiderable fees by creaming off royalties as the creators or even writers of the show. Professional skills are ignored in the interest of personal profit. But do audiences really prefer such shows? Isn't theatre more about escaping the banalities of everyday life and showing us the world from more visionary and imaginative perspectives?

The other disturbing trend in this season's German repertoire is the massive amount of new adaptations of books, most of all by Kafka, and films. As a result, dramaturgs have been inundating play agents, not for plays, but with requests to acquire the dramatization rights to adapt a novel or movie and sometimes even a work of non-fiction. If new plays are to be ignored in such a way, one might reasonably expect an agent to insist that, as a quid pro quo, the theatre in question uses one of its writers to adapt the work. I have yet to hear of such a case. All this might be acceptable if the results made exciting theatre. But more often than not,

the outcome is a series of unstructured, overlong, tedious, out-front narrations and commentaries with little dialogue, sometimes dressed up with avant-garde clichés. Indeed sometimes the adaptations are so obscure and associative that audiences have to have studied the original work in detail to be able to get anything out of the evening at all.

FC Bergman's 300 el x 50 el x 30 el. Photo: Silbermann. Courtesy of Ruhrtriennale.

The Ruhrtriennale in North-Rhine Westphalia is famous for being at the cutting edge of performance art, and over the years I have seen some truly remarkable productions there. So I thought I would take a look at a selection of this year's shows to take the temperature of the latest trends in theatre. The Intendant responsible for the current three year cycle is the renowned avant-garde composer and director Heiner Goebbels. It was therefore no surprise to see how much the program was biased towards music. The much publicized highlight of the festival was the European premiere of a piece of music theatre, *Delusion of the Fury*, by the US composer Harry Partch (1901-74). Partch was one of the great outsiders in twentieth century American music. Nevertheless during his lifetime he was rated on a par with John Cage by musicians as far apart as György Ligeti and Frank Zappa. Not only did he reject the Eurocentric canon of music in favor of the richer polyphonies of Eastern tone systems, he lived for many years as a hobo travelling the freeways and railroads of the States and writing a diary on his experiences.

Not content with declaring his utter dissatisfaction with conventional instruments and notation–a Partch "octave" consisted of a forty-three tone scale–he proceeded to construct a whole armory of huge, mostly percussive alternatives including Cloud Chamber Bowls, the Chromelodeon, the Quadrangularis Reversum and the Zymo-Xyl to take account of his compositions. Given the need for such instruments, it is no wonder that his works are so seldom performed. Thanks to massive funding the Ruhrtriennale was able to commission Thomas Meixner and a team of instrument builders to reconstruct no less than thirty-two percussive instruments, and give the musicians from the excellent musikFabrik ensemble in Cologne the necessary time to learn to play them. At the premiere the different oversized instruments made up an integral part of the set. At times their partially lit silhouettes stood out against the background like colliery winding-towers and miners' washroom hangers. Flanked by the instruments, winding steps led down towards a small pool reminiscent of a Japanese garden. Huge black inflated pipes protruded onto the stage like gigantic tree roots, giving the impression that the musicians were in some sort of hellish cave far below the surface of the earth.

Forced Entertainment's The Last Adventures, directed by Tim Etchells. Photo: Courtesy of Ruhrtriennale

My coal mining associations were confirmed by the twenty-one musicians, many of whom appeared to be wearing protective helmets. No bowties and coattails here: rather shirt sleeves and jeans and hard-working musicians dashing up and down from one instrument to the next. Deliberately so, for Partch envisaged his musicians as playing roles "in a visual or acting sense": theatre had to combine with music so that the theatre embodied the music. Hence Partch's term for his art: corporeal music. As with his music, Partch took his theatrical influences

more from the East. Ancient Greek theatre and Noh theatre in particular influenced him greatly. Indeed the first of the two stories in *Delusion of the Fury*, that follows an eighteen minute instrumental prelude is solemn and Japanese in tone, whereas the second is African and farcical in spirit. Both are non-realistic and each is characterized by a sparse text mainly consisting of short arias, some of which are spoken rather than sung. In the first we witness a pilgrim in search of the shrine of a man he murdered. The ghost of the murdered man appears and sees his own son searching for a vision of his father's face. The ghost relives his torment but at the end finds reconciliation. The second play also involves reconciliation–but this time with life. A young hobo is cooking a meal on some rocks when he gets into a brief dispute with an old goatherd looking for a lost kid. Villagers force the two to appear before the local justice of the peace who is both deaf and near-sighted. The judge hands out his sentence and the chorus sings "How did we ever get by without justice?" Given the ludicrous condition of the judge it is not clear whether this is meant to be ironic or not.

Devoid of any real conflicts, the action is more epic than dramatic, while the music, a mixture of oriental sounds and percussion effects, is at first fascinating in its bizarre freshness. But as the evening continued, its relentless rhythms and minimal tone changes finally proved too much to hold my attention. The director Heiner Goebbels does his best to provide the slender narratives with some theatrical effects. But whether *Delusions of the Fury* is more an interesting piece of twentieth century musical history than an eye-opening discovery depends on subjective reactions. The night I was there the majority of the audience were highly enthusiastic. The ninety minute show is scheduled to play at the Lincoln Festival in New York. Try to catch it for its maverick uniqueness. As a post-script I talked to some of the performers after the show about my visual associations thrown up by the set and none of them could confirm this was the designer's intention. Nor could any of them enlighten me as to what the piece was about. Who knows? In his insistence on non-realistic, privately encoded presentations which elude any definite interpretation Partch might finally be coming into his time.

Delusion of the Fury by Harry Partch. Photo: Wonge Bergmann.

A few days earlier I had gone to a playing space in the disused coking plant at the Zollverein colliery (a UNESCO "World Heritage site") to see *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*, a show put together by a young Belgian ensemble called FC Bergman, whose name combines team spirit with the filmic charisma of Ingmar Bergman. The presentation had been a surprise hit at the Klepper Festival in 2011 in Antwerp–where the company is based–and as a result the group had been catapulted into festival prominence. The events take place in a ramshackle village in a forest of inverted conifers, consisting of five or six dilapidated huts surrounding a leaf-strewn open-space at the center of which is an angler sitting alone in front of a pond. Normally one would expect the play to proceed with the entrance of more characters onto the realistically leafy space. But here there is a cinema screen hanging above the angler's head and, thanks to a camera on a track circulating the stage, the events we see mainly take place inside the huts. In other words, we are asked to be voyeurs at second hand. And voyeurs we are, as we see an old man in bed remove blood transfusion tubes from his body before exiting across the stage and disappearing into the woods forever.

Other scenes show a man full-frontal, masturbating in a bed behind which is a painting of a naked woman, while his wife sits on a toilet trying to solve her constipation problems. A group of drunken rowdies play darts and later revel in a bloody replay of a William Tell shooting. A lonely soldier practices war games with his pistol and then makes love to a woman from one of the

other huts. A child captures a living pigeon and hacks its head off. The camera continues to move round and round in increasingly faster circles. At some point, the performers begin to gather on stage and the angler finally catches something: not a fish, but the decomposing corpse of a dead lamb which is then hoisted above his head to drip relentlessly through the rest of an eighty minute evening which contained not a single piece of dialogue. In the end, the lonely soldier appears to blow himself up and the stage is covered in debris and dust. The cast then appear onstage to be joined by no less than eighty local children who proceed to jump around to loud pop music.

What does it all mean? Nobody was even able to explain to me the meaning of the title. Even its subtitle "a theatre play about things we don't see" was a misnomer. Firstly, it was nothing other than a filmed performance, and secondly, we did indeed see everything in close-up graphic detail. The program notes provide little help: "We are working in images because words are never enough to tell what we want to tell," or "I like the way of storytelling when people have to fill in their owns words and thoughts." And most depressing of all, "We know that it [theatre] is useless ⋯ like everything is useless⋯ in this world⋯Things happen and in the end they are all gone." Too true. The performance happened and then was gone.

The third show I saw at this year's Triennale also arrived with a fanfare of trumpets and drums. This was another eighty minute nonstop show called *The Last Adventures* performed by the British group Forced Entertainment under the direction of Tim Etchells and with computerized music by the Lebanese composer Tarek Atoui. Forced Entertainment usually uses a lot of text in their shows. But here what text there was (written by Etchells) was all concentrated at the start of the show when the sixteen actors (five permanent members of the company and eleven so-called guest performers) gathered on stage like a school class sitting on chairs to repeat in rote a series of absurd phrases spoken by two "teachers" opposite them. "A door cannot remember." "A hand cannot see." "A river cannot sing." After about ten minutes the actors began to disperse with their chairs to the side of the stage and each picked up a large emblematic tree. There then followed a ten minute sequence where they walked back and forth and between each other to the bangs and crackling of computerized music. The tree sequence was then slowly replaced by the actors marching around with mops and golf clubs across their shoulders and saucepans on their heads playing war games, with some of them dying swathed in long red strips of cloth. People in skull and skeleton costumes encounter courtly ladies and robots meet dragons. An axe chases a tree and then the tree chases the axe.

Delusion of the Fury by Partch. Photo: Wonge Bergmann

I'm sure this was all great fun in improvised rehearsals, but at the performance I saw, there were no lighting effects, the musician was not Tarek Atoui but a man called Uriel Barthélemi, and worst of all, the performers seemed to be totally bored by what they were doing. And who can blame them? I had plenty of associations, but that's the trouble with shows in which there is no definable subjective position from which the productions emanate. They can mean anything you like. Etchells clearly had a well-paid commission before he started work on the show, and I guess he had to produce something or hand back the loot. Heiner Goebbels can surely do better than this.

Interestingly enough, there has also been a similar trend towards associative performances and projects in Poland over the past few years. But in 2012 this led to a vehement reaction from the Modjeska Theatre in Legnica who launched a three year program in favor of a return to "storytelling theatre." Supported by a group of prominent directors (Leszek Bzdyl, Andrzej Celi ń ski, Piotr Cieplak, Łukasz Czuj, Agnieszka Gli ń ska, Paweł Kamza, Marcin Liber, Lech Raczak, Ondrej Spišák, Piotr Tomaszuk, Adam Walny, and Linas M. Zaikauskas), the theatre issued a manifesto that claimed that the current crisis of communication between one human

being and another has led to… "the breakdown of interpersonal relations and a commercialization of culture" and that these are equally painful to people irrespective of where they live in the world. "This is the reason we wish to stress that our theatre will be a theatre of universal tales, open to everyone. We want to follow individual lives, tell stories about humans that portray both the beauty of differences between people and the value of unanimity. This is the only way for a theatre to be authentic and sought after… We believe that the replacement of the ancient model of storytelling by loose collages of images, clichés, and performances is detrimental in its results because it denies the audience any deeply-rooted reactions, an identification with history, and a confrontation of viewpoints. It breaks the bond between the present and the past, between generations and between contemporaries. By contrast, we are not afraid of emotions in the theatre… We believe there is a direct connection between storytelling and emotions. We do not want to and will not build a theatre that considers it banal to present stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, that have a protagonist and a rationally discernible meaning… Art as a mirror of reality practically does not exist today: it is easier to mirror the shallows and kitsch. We want to reflect more beautiful, varied, and ambiguous worlds. Not those that are plastic, garish and already downright boring…"

For anyone ignorant of the theatre in Legnica, it might be tempting to assume that it is an insignificant small-town conservative playhouse. Far from it: over the past fifteen years, Legnica has built up an extremely challenging, radically unconventional repertoire of classic and new plays. Indeed its status within Poland is so great that its shows are regularly invited to the prestigious annual Warsaw Theatre Meeting and other festivals in Eastern Europe. In autumn 2013 the theatre is even touring to Argentina with a sensational new play, *The Three Furies*. Might a similar return to "storytelling" theatre–however reactionary this may sound–provide a way forward out of the crisis currently affecting German theatre?

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