

## Theatre in Berlin, Winter 2015

During December 2015 Berlin was facing numerous socio-political situations that included the Syrian migration crisis, economic instability due to the decline of the Euro as well as internal political crises brought about by immigration, religious suffrage related to Islam, and the radical changes in the city itself due to the many impending changes in several notable arts institutions. Not yet affected by these impending long-term problems, the Berlin theatre scene featured an outstanding output of plays and a growing number of musicals with work by major international directors, numerous premieres and challenging re-imaginings of classic works seen throughout the city. Many changes were on the horizon both in the realm of funding for state theatres as well as leadership at many major theatres like the Berliner Ensemble and Volksbühne am Rosa Luxembourg Platz. Unfortunately, many would involve programmatic changes that would fundamentally change the nature of certain companies as increased box office revenue had emerged as a larger priority. Given the climate of German State funding in 2015-16 it was clear that the future landscape of the city's vibrant theatre scene would be much different than that seen over the past fifty years.

### *Bella Figura*

Under the leadership of Thomas Ostermeier, the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz continued as one of Berlin's most prolific theatre companies. The Schaubühne's strong international profile and continued relationship with the nation of France had yielded a strong base of touring works between the two entities and partnerships (that amounted to around thirty percent of the company's annual funding) with various French State organizations had been solidly formed. These partnerships led to the company's commission of Yasmina Reza's newest work, *Bella Figura*. Directed by Ostermeier, *Bella Figura* was Reza's latest comic treatment of the dynamic of human relationships as revealed during the course of tense situations. *Bella Figura* considered Boris (Mark Wascheke), a married businessman who is having an affair with Andrea (Nina Hoss) and the long evening that happens after their car backs into the elderly female character, Yvonne (Lore Stefanek), in a parking lot. Boris and Andrea then agree to go to the elderly woman's house where they meet another couple that ironically know Boris's wife and berate Boris for his affair. As is typical with Reza, truth tellers emerge after alcohol (champagne in this case) is introduced and the "truth serum" quality of alcohol drove much of the play's action. As the five characters got drunk the situation broke down; Boris and Andrea attempted to have sex in a bathroom, a knife was pulled (furnished by Yvonne), and sexual tension emerged between the younger couple, Françoise (Stephanie Eidt) and Eric (Renato Schuch). As Françoise, Eric, and Yvonne departed for a birthday dinner, Boris and Andrea returned to their car in the parking lot, their lives and illicit relationship ruined.



Yasmina Reza's *Bella Figura* directed by Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne. Photo credit: Arno Declair.

An interesting aspect of *Bella Figura* was the video footage shown between the six major scenes of the play. The footage featured insects, reptiles, and crustaceans in highly stylized sequences that demonstrated the passive indifference of the animal world with regard to relationships and events. Created by video artists Guillaume Cailleau and Benjamin Kreig, the video sequences presented abstract views of these creatures and the combination of sounds and images uniquely defined the action of the play as being a unique, yet uncontrollable force of nature. Ostermeier's work again emerged as among the most prolific in Berlin.

### *Ophelia's Zimmer*

Another German world premiere at the Schaubühne was *Ophelia's Zimmer*, a work written by Alice Birch, a prolific young British playwright named in 2016 to the Creative England 50, a short list of England's most inventive, innovative and creative minds. Co-produced by London's Royal Court Theatre, the work was directed by Katie Mitchell, another major figure in Britain's vibrant theatre scene. Mitchell, hailed by *The Guardian* as the "closest thing Britain has had to a true *auteur* in many years," has created a number of recent works described as "live cinema" or works that exist in a mixture of both onstage and videotaped or live video capture environments. *Ophelia's Zimmer* was basically a contemporary, or at least nondescript retelling of the story of Ophelia's lengthy wait for Hamlet to make a decision regarding their anticipated relationship and future. Chloe Lamford's set included two basic playing areas—Ophelia's room on stage left and a combination "sound stage and holding area" on stage right for the three men in Ophelia's life, Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes. The format of the play was extraordinary; hundreds of sound, lighting, and visual cues marked this production that had very few lines of text but was instead rooted in Ophelia's daily routine of receiving and writing letters, receiving flowers and throwing them away, working on various croquet projects, changing dresses, folding bed sheets, and many other repetitive activities that defined her life as a woman waiting for a man. Destined for death, Ophelia finally

realized her end and committed suicide by shooting herself in the head. The death happened in a pool of water, as the apartment had been flooded moments before she pulled the trigger. The production was characterized by lights, sound, and movement and is perhaps best described as a work of physical theatre.

### **The Season at the Deutsches Theater**

The Deutsches Theater's winter 2015-16 offerings were perhaps more rooted in traditional German theatre than those in other companies, including such offerings as *Woyzeck*, *Don Carlos*, and *Despoiled Shore/Medeamaterial/Landscape With Argonauts/Mommsen's Block*. Unfortunately, *Woyzeck* was something of a casualty as director Sebastian Hartmann decided to re-envision the work as a two-character play in post-dramatic style as Franz and Marie relived the play's text via narrative stories and jokes from their past. This approach was entirely unsuccessful, as the combination of the two actors, Katrin Wichmann and Benjamin Lille, seemed to dismiss their history as frivolous occurrences commented on by two "matinee idol" performers. Wichmann and Lille seemed to have been cast due to their model looks with little regard for their acting ability. The painful ten-minute opening dumb show consisted of the two actors rolling down the raked stage around six times each and then reacting to how each landed. Overall, *Woyzeck* was a hugely disappointing effort at one of Berlin's favored houses. On the other hand, Schiller's *Don Carlos* was given an extraordinary contemporary, youthful treatment that was successfully realized. Director Stephan Kimmig set the story in a contemporary high-end residence owned by (King) Philip, a ruthless, cold Mafia-like boss played by Ulrich Matthes. The mutual disdain and mistrust between Philip and his son Don Carlos (Alexander Khuon) were displayed through various physical activities—Philip continually doing pushups and Don Carlos shadow boxing—as well as the obvious tension contained in the text itself. As Philip refused Don Carlos's wishes to go to Flanders as Spanish Ambassador, Carlos was incensed and exploded in anger. Carlos was faced to deal with Philip's henchmen, who attacked him and held his crotch till he relented his angry retaliation. Central to the story was the character of Rodrigue (Andreas Doehler) who both seduced Philip's wife and then turned on Don Carlos, eventually arresting him for treason. Unfortunately, Kimmig and the production team chose to cut the sensational scenes of carnage as dissidents are burned at the stake during the Spanish Inquisition. Roderigue's death served as one of the final major developments of the play, leaving out the finale contingent scenes.



*Don Carlos* by Friedrich Schiller, directed by Stephan Kimmig. Photo Credit: Arno Declair.

*Despoiled Shore/Medeamaterial/Landscape With Argonauts/Mommsen's Block* had been playing at the Kammerspiele since 2011 in a stunning production directed by the late Dimiter Gotscheff. The production was presented in classic Gotscheff/Müller style, meaning a virtually bare stage, heavy emphasis on lighting and a few highly emphasized scenic elements. Gotscheff's 2009 production of Müller's *Anatomie Titus Fall of Rome* also followed these basic principles. A review of that production appeared in *Western European Stages* 20 (2008).

Three actors presented the text and the successful results were clearly a result of their and the production staff's trust of Gotscheff's extraordinary command of the Müller aesthetic. Margrit Bendokat, Wolfram Koch, and Almut Zilcher presented a great deal of the text as a speaking chorus, however entire sections (for example the entire text of *Mommsen's Block* as well as most of *Landscape with Argonauts*) were presented by solo actors who spoke the text with or without scenic elements. Koch's presentation of *Landscape with Argonauts* was characterized by his manipulation of a twelve foot yellow pole that he held and rotated throughout the delivery of the text. The visual choice of revealed lighting as well as the emphasis on the interior machinery and architecture of the Kammerspiele were the most striking elements of the production, which actually featured nothing else other than the delivery of Müller's text. The result was an amazingly authentic production of several of Müller's most important "synthetic fragments" presented in an incredibly cohesive form. Gotscheff's productions of Müller in Berlin (and in other European cities as well) have been extraordinarily well received and his death in 2013 robbed the world

of the Bulgarian's director's incredible insight into the world of the theatre of Müller.

### *Das Kohlhaas Prinzip*

The smallest of Berlin's ensemble theatres, the Maxim Gorki Theater, has remained a major institution in the Berlin Theatre scene throughout the privatization landscape and has retained state funding due to its mission of presenting new interpretations of classical German works. Seating around only six hundred patrons, the theatre played to many sold-out audiences during December 2015. Two productions by classic German playwrights were included in the repertoire—*Das Kohlhaas Prinzip*, based on the short story by Heinrich von Kleist and *Je Suis Jeanne D'Arc* from Friedrich Schiller. *Das Kohlhaas Prinzip* was directed by Yael Ronen and featured a radical multimedia approach that included references to the migration crisis, Christian/Islamist relations and terrorism in general. In the original version Kleist dramatized Kohlhaas crossing the border into another province and being treated unfairly while attempting to sell horses. Faced with illegally imposed surcharges and his stock being held for ransom, Kohlhaas would later return in vengeance, burning the city and killing dozens in revenge. Viewing Kohlhaas's raging attacks as acts of terrorism, Ronen's production, which transposed Kohlhaas's selling of horses into that of his ownership of a high-end bicycle store, included references from the movie *V for Vendetta* (mainly the heavy violence and the classic white smiling masks) as Kohlhaas's violent return and attacks on the city included interrogation among "borders" as defined in the production as well as references to the border between Palestine and Israel. Convicted to death in an unfair trial, Kohlhaas was allowed a posting to a contemporary social media site through which he was able to raise enough money to gain his release. Instead of meeting with Martin Luther, as happened in the original Kleist work, images of Martin Luther King and Ghandi aided in the raising of the funds to secure his release that ultimately failed. Kohlhaas was sentenced to death and executed, as is depicted in Kleist's short story.



*Das Kohlhaas Prinzip* by Heinrich von Kleist, directed by Yael Ronen. Photo courtesy of Maxim Gorki Theater.

In a similar way, *Je Suis Jeanne D'Arc* considered ideas of immigration and open borders, using the theme of French nationalism to demonstrate that society should be comprised of a nation and not just a group of people. Played by Marina Frenk, Jeanne emerged in the work as a figure that would save the nation from ruin following numerous threats—Americanization, Disney culture, immigrants from Syria, Albania and Senegal—that had been introduced into French society. Most profoundly, the work also commented on Islam and the 2015 Paris attacks as being brought about the poor decisions of a weak ruler. Undoubtedly, director Mikaël Serre was commenting on Germany under the leadership of Angela Merkel and the decision to allow roughly a million Middle Eastern refugees into the country the previous fall. The end of *Je Suis Jeanne D'Arc* was marked by the appearance of an angel who stated: "When I see the naked women who sell your cars, I want to put on a birka," a reference to advertising and the use of swimsuit clad models that are used to market automobiles.

### ***Baumeister Solness***

Finally the Volksbühne is perhaps the greatest tragedy in the entire overhaul of the Berlin theatre system. The impending departure of Frank Castorf in 2017 and the installment of former museum director Chris Dercon as the new Intendant of the Volksbühne brought about huge concerns of the intended new direction of the theatre. According to dramaturg Sebastian Kaiser, the new season consists of "more mainstream works that are more in line with the traditional theatre of Berlin." It is true that not all visitors to the Volksbühne have appreciated Castorf's radical re-workings during his insurgent tenure at the theatre, but it cannot be denied that some of the most exciting, innovative work of the past twenty years in Berlin has been received at that theatre. During his final season, Castorf's directing efforts, both premieres and other productions in the repertoire included *Der Spieler*, *Baumeister Solness*, and *Die Brüder Karamazov*. Also, included in the winter 2015 season was the premiere of Rene Pollesch's *Service/No Service*, a work that commented directly on the Volksbühne and the new direction being taken by the company due to state and city directives.

As with many of his previous treatments of classics, Castorf virtually annihilated the Ibsen text; yet the director managed to faithfully convey the essence of the story with an exciting, energetic, and quite beautiful visual style. One curious element in the production was the inclusion of numerous puppets in the action. These puppets had been placed in the entire front row of the theatre prior to the performance and began to be incorporated into the production throughout—to the point that at one time there were over ten puppets (all identical) placed in a pile. As it was unclear to me as to how this helped tell the story of an aging architect infatuated with a younger, teasing woman, the dramaturgy staff at the Volksbühne supplied an intriguing, comical response to the inclusion of the puppets. Evidently, as part of his last two years in the role of Intendant, Castorf was keen on bringing back to the Volksbühne several famous former members of the company. For *Baumeister Solness*, Castorf was intent in bringing back the famous East German actor Henry Hübchen, known for his Lola (the German equivalent of the Oscar) Award winning performance in *Go For Zucker* (2004). While Hübchen initially agreed to perform the role he eventually turned it down, citing the difficulties of the physical activity required by Castorf's work. Evidently Castorf was angered by this, and vowed to include Hübchen in the production anyway. He then created twenty Hübchen puppets that he incorporated into the production along with commentary about the actor and his history at the Volksbühne.



*The Master Builder* by Henrik Ibsen, directed by Frank Castorf. Photo credit: Thomas Aurin.

The production featured a scenic environment that included the architect's office on stage left (best characterized by a painting of a young nude woman in the room's center) and stage right included a kitchen. There was a larger projection/playing area above the two lower level spaces that could be accessed by ladders both stage right and left. Unlike so many previous Castorf productions at the Volksbühne, video technology was employed only minimally in *Baumeister Solness*. However, the acting styles were very typical—Castorf employs three basic styles of acting. First, a very realistic, filmic style of acting is characteristic of his work since it so often involves cameras onstage. Second, there is an extremely "over the top" style of acting that roughly approximates *Reichskanzlerstil*, the style of acting utilized during the Third Reich by actors who attempted to approximate the delivery style of Hitler. Actors scream for extended periods of time and use exaggerated facial and arm gestures in a distinctly heightened style. Finally there is a direct, presentational style (delivered to the audience mainly) that comments on certain moments in the play, asks for the audience's responses to certain textual moments, and basically steps outside of the story to involve the audience and comment on the text, society, or some other element.

With the Ibsen text reduced to a minimum, certain elements were emphasized and exaggerated. The production was around five hours long (typical of Castorf) but a great deal of the performance included material and scenes that were largely improvised or interpolated from works outside of the text. For example, the major Hilda/Solness scene that reveals their past relationship was extended to a time period

of almost forty-five minutes by the inclusion of numerous external texts and songs including the Rolling Stone's "Sympathy for the Devil." Emphasized in this production were ideas about love relationships where the generation gap is great; ideas of the older man and younger woman were commented on by videos, images and music, and a number of folk "love songs" were included in the production.

The strongest images in the production came near the end, as the plentiful resources of the Volksbühne were utilized to create the scene where Solness climbs to the top of the newly completed building and falls to his death. The entire set was lifted in pure German fashion as the incredibly large interior of the Volksbühne was revealed, with Solness alone being flown to the top. It was an amazing theatrical scene, due to the immense scale of the Volksbühne and the power of a huge bare stage with technical capabilities beyond what is offered in most of the world. As Solness was flown upward in exhilaration, the power of the scene was accentuated by his combination of fear and excitement of the heights as contrasted with his eventual demise. David Bowie's "A Space Oddity" was played as Solness fell to the earth.

*The Brothers Karamazov* was staged in a typical Castorf format; onstage theatre action combined with videotaped scenes captured live from offstage locations revealed via onstage projection screens. However, considering the extended scale of the lengthy novel and the numerous locations required, two film crews were included in the production instead of the normal single crew. Each crew consisted of a camera operator/director of photography, sound crew, and lighting crew. Because about seventy percent of the play's action occurred offstage and was seen via three large onstage screens, audience members were forced to construct much of the world of the play in their own minds and to consider offstage movement from location to location as the play progressed. Locations included the family house, a lake, a monastery, a sauna, a dining room, a bedroom, the streets outside the Volksbühne, and the roof of the theatre itself as well as other passageways and connecting areas. The number of locations and the scale of the presentation of the story in this work were truly epic.

Castorf's works have typically been heavily driven by voyeurism, and many of the offstage scenes had the feel of a "peep show," with the actors acknowledging the cameras and reacting in various ways to the idea of being discovered. At times they were embarrassed; other times saw them welcoming the intrusion of the camera into their offstage world. As Castorf has advanced the techniques involved in this blended form of film/theatre over the years, the styles of performance, attitude to the camera and representation of playing space have evolved and become quite refined. For example, much of the action in the story surrounded the aging father Fyodor Karamazov and his struggles against his son Dmitri for the love of Gruschenka Iwanowna, a much younger woman. As the tension between Fyodor and his middle son escalated, he became more engrossed with the camera, staring into it as if pleading for his life. An ongoing visual dialogue between characters and the audience is one of the camera techniques developed by Castorf over the past two decades at the Volksbühne.

### ***The Brothers Karamazov***

The non-linear, montage-based nature of Castorf's style of storytelling can confuse even native German speakers. Clearly, this production of *The Brothers Karamazov* treated the story in a far different way than would be encountered by a reading of the novel or a viewing of one of the many cinematic versions of the work. The largely autobiographical story of Fyodor Karamazov and his four sons, the familial struggles and his eventual murder by one of his sons (possibly Dmitri) is well known in the literary canon.



However, into this story Castorf inserted material about the rise to power of Vladimir Putin and the mass human destruction brought about by Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Castorf also managed to include musical works by Johnny Cash and Frank Sinatra, particularly the song "My Way," into a work that in its totality commented heavily on two main themes. The first had to do with a statement by East German playwright Heiner Müller, who wrote in 1989 that there were two Europes—one from the tradition of Rome, the second from the tradition of Byzantium. This idea was particularly important in Berlin, which has seen two dialectical systems—the more liberal ideas and systems from the West as opposed to the more orthodox systems from the East. These ideas were particularly important in the text of *The Brothers Karamazov*, however, Castorf's work took a much more critical/dialectical view of organized religion as the monastery was slowly transformed into sauna, where churchgoers sat naked or in towels, sweating through the pressure of the hysterical sermons captured via video. Ivan introduced a guitar into the sauna, singing the modern American works by Johnny Cash and Frank Sinatra.

As one of the world's great theatre cities, Berlin once again delivered an amazing palate of plays, musicals and theatre works that defy categorization in December 2015. With questions regarding state funding and leadership present at many theatres, it was clear that changes were on the horizon, but that the climate of theatre in the city had maintained its fundamental quality of excellence. Theatre companies such as the Schaubühne, the Volksbühne and the Komische Oper were still performing at an extraordinary level and the work in Berlin was still representing the best that Germany has to offer.

---

Steve Earnest is a Professor of Theatre at Coastal Carolina University, having received a PhD in Theatre from the University of Colorado, Boulder and an M.F.A. in Musical Theatre from the University of Miami, Florida. Dr. Earnest has published articles, reviews and interviews in *Theatre Journal*, *Western European Stages*, *Backstage West*, *Ecumenica*, *The Journal of Beckett Studies*, *Theatre Symposium*, *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Theatre Studies*, among others. In 1999 he published a book entitled *The State Acting Academy of East Berlin* and is currently working on projects dealing with the theatre system of Iceland.

---



**MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER  
PUBLICATIONS**

**Editorial Board:**

Marvin Carlson, Senior Editor, Founder

Krystyna Illakowicz, Co-Editor

Dominika Laster, Co-Editor

Kalina Stefanova, Co-Editor

**Editorial Staff:**

Elyse Singer, Managing Editor

Clio Unger, Editorial Assistant

**Advisory Board:**

Joshua Abrams

Christopher Balme

Maria Delgado

Allen Kuharsky

Bryce Lease

Jennifer Parker-Starbuck

Magda Romańska

Laurence Senelick

Daniele Vianello

Phyllis Zatlin

**Table of Contents:**

1. *Hamlet* in a Curious Nutshell by Maria Helena Serôdio
2. Alvis Hermanis Productions in Latvia and German-Speaking Countries by Edžte Tisheizere
3. The Unknown, the Unexpected, and the Uncanny: A New Lorca, Three New Catalan Productions, and a Few Extras by Maria M. Delgado
4. 2015 Dance Week Festival and Contemporary Croatian Dance by Mirna Zagar
5. Archives, Classics, and Auras: The 2016 Oslo International Festival by Andrew Friedman
6. The Stakes for City Theatres: Linus Tunström's Farewell to the Uppsala Stadsteater by Bryce Lease
7. Life is Beautiful? or Optimistically About Bulgarian Theatre? by Kalina Stefanova
8. The Multiple Dimensions of the Bulgarian ACT Independent Theatre Festival 2015 by Angelina Georieva
9. Theatre in Berlin, Winter 2015 by Steve Earnest
10. Musical Theatre in Berlin, Winter 2015 by Steve Earnest
11. Gob Squad's *My Square Lady* at the Komische Oper by Clio Unger
12. New Productions in Berlin by Yvonne Shafer

13. Manifest for Dialogue: *Antisocial* by Ion M. Tomu?
14. A Fall in France by Heather Jeanne Denyer
15. *The Iliad* as an Oratory: A Warning to a Civilization by Ivan Medenica
16. *Escaped Alone* by Caryl Churchill at the Royal Court Theatre by Rosemary Malague
17. *Bakkhai* at the Almeida Theatre reviewed by Neil Forsyth

[www.EuropeanStages.org](http://www.EuropeanStages.org)

[europeanstages@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:europeanstages@gc.cuny.edu)

**Martin E. Segal Theatre Center:**

Frank Hentschker, Executive Director

Marvin Carlson, Director of Publications

Rebecca Sheahan, Managing Director

©2016 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center

The Graduate Center CUNY Graduate Center

365 Fifth Avenue

New York NY 10016

---