

## Theatertreffen 2017: Days of Loops and Fog

Berlin is feeling more and more like Avignon or Edinburgh. The Theatertreffen, the major theater festival for the German-speaking world, is structured around inviting the ten “most noteworthy” productions of the former year to Berlin, juried by ten critics. But these ten productions feel less and less like the backbone of the festival, which is over-crowded not only with the Stückemarkt playwriting program (since last year, the staged readings are also in competition for a full production in Karlsruhe) but also with productions from the Festspiele’s own Immersion and Circus production series. This year, the team added another nebulously-curated element, Shifting Perspectives, consisting of a series of Goethe-Institut coproductions with African partners, a conference on democracy, and commissioned smaller or site-specific works in and around the theater building itself on the second weekend of the fifteen-day festival. While the overall effect was overstimulating, the individual events were often thought-provoking or at least amusing. I arrived early enough for one mainstage performance to be ushered into a Shifting Perspectives one-to-one performance in the “Institute for Gastroacoustic Psychology” (one of the dressing rooms). I filled out a personality and lifestyle questionnaire and a “doctor” (actually artist Sebastian Hanusa) used these responses to create an audio portrait of my core personality and gut instincts based on a belly ultrasound. While it is more difficult than ever to get tickets to the ten juried productions, there are now so many auxiliary events that one finds them mostly empty.

Meanwhile two of the ten cornerstone productions were missing from the program this year. The Schimmelreiter from the Thalia Theater, Hamburg, was cancelled last minute due to an illness in the ensemble. “Some people are not replaceable,” apologized director Johan Simons in his speech: I am struck, once again, by the difference between American and German theatre not only aesthetically but in the very working conditions. As a replacement for ticket holders, the Festspielhaus offered a staged reading with the remaining actors and a concert from acclaimed pianist Igor Levit. The production of the Robbers from Residenztheater Munich was not able to attend for technical reasons: Ulrich Rasche’s production takes place on a series of giant treadmills, too heavy and complex to install in any Berlin theatre. A screening of the film version which will be aired on television was shown as the final premiere of the festival instead.

### Three Sisters

The festival opened with Simon Stone’s Three Sisters from Theater Basel. The most remarkable and winsome element of the production is the “house within a house” concept. The set is truly impressive, a little modernist chalet designed in realistic detail by Lizzie Clachan and within the play by some award-winning architect whose name the characters can’t recall. The wood and glass jewel-box leaves its inhabitants visible and vulnerable in the dark night. As the house rotates, the audience can trace the characters’ small lives as they play Playstation and get drunk and have sex and fall asleep. It bears more than a passing resemblance to some of Thomas Ostermeier’s cool “all the rooms of the house” scenographies, in particular Uta Gabler and Dämonen, though Stone’s version shows the super-realist interiors through the rotating stage, not live feed camera. The film-ready, precise, naturalistic acting heightens the comparison.



Simon Stone, *Three Sisters*. Photo: Sandra Then.

The novelty, then, comes from Stone's directorial praxis. As with last year's 2016 invited production, John Gabriel Borkman, Swiss-Australian director Simon Stone has also "over-written" this text by developing new dialogue for the play in collaboration with the actors in rehearsal. This brings a certain of-the-moment quality to the language; Irina's confession that she missed a protest for Syrians drowning in the Mediterranean because she was busy binge-watching Amazon's *Transparent* series was particularly on the nose. Natasha's threat to tear down the house and install a taller apartment with gilded windows, so it looks like Trump Towers, is a much clumsier update.

In one of the major changes in Stone's adaptation, this is the Prozerov family vacation home, where fireworks are set off in summer and a light, dreamy snow falls in winter. And so each of this production's three acts finds the family descending for a holiday to scatter their father's ashes in summer (which they never get around to doing—they are too busy gossiping and swimming), or to celebrate Christmas (when they find Andrey and Natasha living there, broke due to his drug and gambling addictions). In the final section, the characters pack up the home for its new owners, Natasha and her new husband. Because of these narrative shifts, the play seems to encapsulate pressure-cooker moments in the life of a family who rarely see each other rather than keeping as the emotional core the eponymous three sisters stuck at home while the world goes by. Masha, the most animated sister, is caught up in an affair with Alex (Vershinin), a local mechanic's son rather than a visiting soldier, and considering leaving her husband, the bottled-up schoolteacher Theo (Kulygin), who sacrificed his athletic scholarship at Stanford to stay in Switzerland with Masha. But in the end, she can't bear to pack up and make a new life in Brooklyn with Alex.

Inside the goldfish bowl set, there's not enough oxygen to set any of the women's hopes and dreams ablaze. Irina is a caricature of a millennial whiner, some kind of a college activist who doesn't know what she wants. Olga is written off as a lesbian hiding her private life from her family (and by extension the audience) very problematic, in my opinion. None of the characters seem to know what they want, and their non-stop, fast-paced, superficial banter is surely intended as a satire of this. The low stakes unfortunately carry forward into the third act, when the tense family ties begin to unravel. For example, Nicolai's death in a duel is transformed into a suicide after being rejected by Irina. Of course it's duly Chekhovian to end the evening with a bang and some fake blood spattered on the pristine set. But like almost all of the dramaturgical shifts in this production it feels unjustified and therefore un compelling. Perhaps the hours of mundane dialogue echoes the banality and talking-past-each-other of the original text, but the effect is less like Chekhov and more like overhearing the obnoxious table seated next to you at brunch. If Ostermeier's work is filmic, Stone's is reality TV.

Because almost all the action takes place within this fishbowl, the text is separated from the action, which comes from the actors' microphones via external speakers in a quickly flowing stream. Even with decent seats it was nearly impossible to determine who was talking. A colleague mentioned that from the Upper Rang, all the actor's heads were obscured by the walls of the house. How can this not matter in naturalistic actor's theatre? The very modern set, pop culture references, laugh lines and zippy pacing all make the classic text 2017-ready, but in the end, offer a sadly old-fashioned critique of contemporary life, a kind of knowing "kids these days!" condemnation of these bored and boring characters. The domestic screaming matches into which the second half devolves are no less conventional: "Cunt! Cunt! Cunt!" screams Theo at Masha after learning of the affair. Think *God of Carnage* written by a committee and you get the idea.

Conventional, I should say, to an Anglo-American audience. The performance received both strongly negative reviews from English-language critics and mostly-positive ones in the German press. A high-production value, filmically-acted living room family drama in which total superficiality devolves into screaming matches: this is familiar stuff for National Theater or American regional theater audiences. I, like some others writing in English, wondered what

these German critics saw in the work. But maybe it ' s this: something new.

### Borderline Procession

The next premiere required a field trip outside the Ringbahn to the industrial suburb of Oberschoeneweide. Kay Voges and his colleagues at Theater Dortmund have been recognized for their expansive, experimental work in a former Megastore outside Dortmund. This production, *The Borderline Procession*, is similarly large-scale. So I was full of anticipation on the forty-minute train journey, as I crossed empty parking lots, met other lost theatergoers, and finally entered the large warehouses of the Rathenau Hallen. Perhaps sensing the possibility of losing people both literally and figuratively, the artistic team takes great care to clarify all questions for the audience: for example, there is a pre-show explanation by the dramaturgs Dirk Baumann and Alexander Kerlin who explain that they “ mix ” the music and projected text in real time. Once we enter the space, instructions are projected onto three screens. They range from the genuinely helpful to the slightly condescending. The former repeated instructions to wear our heavy coats, for which I was grateful: it was 3 degrees outside and not much more in the cavernous hall. The final rule seems to be a redundant assurance in Berlin, “ there is nothing to understand, but much to experience. ” Inside the hall, the design team has constructed a borderline. On one side is a meticulously-constructed, long, thin strip of a house: whirlpool, garage gym, kitchen, living room, bedroom, and bath. The opposite side of the border is the outside: a red-light district, bus stop, parked van, the gate of the interior house, and late-night shop. I take a seat across from the living room. A camera on a dolly tracks the loop, projecting its view onto the three screens above the production is subtitled “ a loop, about what divides us. ” My view is then always partial and multiple only the camera can see both sides of the barbed-wire, concrete border-wall between the two sides of the set. The camera loops like this for the duration of the three-hour piece.

It ' s a little like Lola Arias ' recent piece about the GDR at the *Goethe-Institut*, in that the divided audience watches the side of the wall they can ' t see live as a projection. It ' s not just the Berlin Wall that ' s invoked here but also Donald Trump ' s wall proposed wall on the border with Mexico, Israeli-Palestinian borders, and the walls of Jericho tumbling down. The text sampled by dramaturgs Baumann and Kerlin throughout the production in projections and read by actors on the sides of the set comes from Genesis to Goethe, from Brecht to excerpts from the far-right German AfD party ' s election program. And so the stage images take on new resonances throughout the evening when collaged with the shifting music, spoken language, and projected text.



Kay Voges, Die Borderline Prozession. Photo: Marcel Shaar.

While there are some clear points of comparison to the surrealistic, imagistic scenes that follow David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, Sam Mendes' *American Beauty*, the visual art of Gregory Crewdson or Matthew Barney as well as to the popular use of live-feed film to focus the field of vision during live performance Kay Voges has hit upon something refreshingly new. The series of images that emerge throughout the evening are quite beautiful: a bride with bloodstains spreading across her lap, a small bald man in a frock in the window of a red-light district sex show, goose-stepping soldiers in gummy masks, an army of little Lollitas with red lipstick smeared across their mouths. The first section, "It Is What It Is," sets the tone. A procession follows the dolly, led by a brass band, like a holy week procession in Spain. The cast of twenty-seven spin out to various positions inside and outside the house. People go about their daily lives in repetitive slow-motion. A woman showers and brushes her teeth for an hour. A man comes home from work and leaves again. The action, which is already expressionistic, starts to speed up and warp, becoming weirder and weirder (this is when, for example, a moonman bounces through the rooms of the house to David Bowie's "Space Oddity") until another didactic/useful projection crosses the screen: "please change your perspective."

For the second section, called "crisis," the soldiers lead the parade. I watch the exterior facade this time, where a woman in a coral jumpsuit tries to scale the wall and is dragged down by guards. She is later raped in a van parked outside for more than half an hour. I am seated

directly in front of the van, and therefore watching her violent rape for most of the duration of this section. But she appears projected on the screen only a fraction of that time, raising questions about visibility, media, and “fake news” (to say nothing of the issue of representing graphic sexual violence onstage). This “crisis” section is more up-to-the-minute, with a “whereas” section of text updated nightly for each performance with current events both global and local. The premiere featured a live ticker of the LePen-Macron French election results. In one sequence, Rafaat Daboul climbs to the roof and reads Shylock’s “hath not a Jew eyes?” monologue from the Merchant of Venice in Arabic: powerful stuff.

In the third section, the shortest, the chaos which has threatened to overtake the internal logic of the performance since the beginning finally does. The cast is now many identical “little girls” in matching blue pinafore dresses that evoke Lolita, the Shining, and Alice in Wonderland—they follow the camera along its loop, making faces into the lens one after another, like a non-stop photobomb. But after a rousing chorus of eardrum-shatteringly loud “Oops, I Did it Again” from Britney Spears and flashing lights in primary colors, the Lolitas carry a small actor dressed as Napoleon off on their shoulders, lay him to rest at the bus stop, and shower him with white lilies. The piece ends triumphantly (to the tune of Mahler), an early highlight of the festival. The Borderline Procession is not only a powerful commentary on short attention spans and simultaneity in the political present, but on how to move forward all the same.

### Real Magic

In British company Forced Entertainment’s *Real Magic*, the logic of the loop is taken to the extreme. The basic set-up is easy enough to explain—it’s a kind of game show, or maybe magic show, set on a square of green astroturf with a mic stand and two folding chairs. Claire Marshall, Jerry Killick, and Richard Lowdon are on stage in various states of dress and undress. A contestant puts on a blindfold. The host asks some basic questions—“ready? Feeling safe?”—and explains the rules of the game. The contestant has to guess what word the third person on stage is thinking of. She guesses, in turn: Electricity, Hole, Money. The host patters on: “Shall we give her another chance? Let’s give her another chance!” She fails to guess the word that the third player is holding aloft on a piece of cardboard: it’s “CARAVAN”. They swap roles. Again, the guesses are the same: electricity, hole, money. The cardboard word changes between Caravan, Algebra, and Sausage. The pattern changes with small variations. Repeat, repeat, repeat. The actors change into and out of chicken suits. Some slapstick jokes are made while Richard is thinking of the word “sausage.” There is a dance interlude to the driving game show soundtrack. They guess and fail again and again. Claire, Jerry, and Richard ring the emotional changes—they’re frustrated and disappointed and hopeful and depressed and elated.

Some tube lights flash in rhythm to the game show music. Canned applause switches to Telemann. A woman behind me can’t take it anymore and yells out, “The word is ALGEBRA!” Still, Jerry doesn’t guess it. Later, Richard in a chicken suit tries to help Claire guess in a loud mock-whisper: “pppst: sssausssage.” But still she doesn’t get it. These willful ignorances are the strongest moments of the evening as painful as watching a character in a horror movie walk into a room where a murderer waits. Watching the performers fail over and over is the most gripping when it’s the most clear that they can’t do anything but fail, can’t help themselves or save themselves from guessing the wrong thing. But the whole evening is surprisingly



watchable even funny. The actors pick up the pace, they slow it down. They riff on “ hole ” and “ whole ” and brainstorm all the expressions that have to do with holes ( “ You mean, hole, like a rabbit hole? A bullet hole? A fox hole? ” ). After about half an hour, it becomes clear that in some sense we ’ ve seen what there is to see. But no one leaves.



Tim Etchell, *Real Magic*. Photo: Hugo Glendinning.

Hole, electricity, money, algebra, caravan, sausage. What does it all mean? In the program, Etchells, like Voges, offers the same tautological non-answer: “ it is what it is. ” In this sense, *Real Magic* evokes Beckett and Stein that repetition can wear away meaning in a way that exposes something else the futility of it all, perhaps? That the only happiness is ignorance that the game is stacked against you? All the questions raised by the problematic of the piece remain open only the simple structure is tightly fixed. The spectatorial experience makes it clear that this ceaseless repetition opens possibilities and possible meanings. Doing the same scene for over an hour doesn ’ t dull, it heightens. The piece ends without providing any answers, on a satisfyingly unsatisfying note: “ that ’ s all the time we have for today. ”

89/90

Claudia Bauer of Schauspiel Leipzig is the sole Regisseurin in the program. It ’ s disappointing, after last year ’ s near gender parity, to see massive inequalities that trouble the theater industry

worldwide reproduced at Theaterreffen. But as juror Shirin Sojitrawalla noted in the final jury discussion, “ you can only dance with someone in the room. ” More women directors ’ work needs to be produced in the first place to be invited. Bauer ’ 89/90, an adaptation of Peter Richter ’ s *Wenderoman* of the same title, might be the centerpiece of the festival after a week of post-dramatic (and fairly off-beat) performance, it ’ s a strong argument for strong texts. The production is as literary as it is theatrical, pairing long, moving spoken reminiscences about a childhood spent wasting time down at the government pool in Dresden with inscrutable stage images: six actors from the company wear giant puffy baby-suits with doughy, pointy-nosed full masks, towels draped over their necks. No explanation is offered, but the effect is powerful (especially when these babies take up cheap synthesizers and rock out to “ Kids in America ” toward the end of the first half). 89/90 compresses personal and historical memory—the unnamed narrator ’ s loss of personal innocence and the loss of the socialist ideal are seismic shifts compressed into two years—1989 and 1990. The play is epic in scope but specific and compact: a memory play about the *Wende* devoid of cheap *Ostalgie*.

1989: This is the last graduating class in the GDR to receive “ pre-military ” training. A long section of the first act takes place in such a setting. The play provides a fascinatingly atmospheric look at the East German education system for this outside viewer, but it is surely more complex for a German audience. The cast of eight sit among a chorus, conducted by the effervescent Daniel Barke, who sing punk songs of the period as classical motets, which punctuate, underscore, and drive the action of the first act in turn. The effect is that of a dramatic oratorio—Marthaler on caffeine pills. Anna Keil, as one of the group leaders, gives moral instruction and civics lessons to the students—and gestures explaining the socialist relationship between employer and employee are transformed into an abstract choreographic sequence repeated by the ensemble while the chorus sings slogan-like lyrics of teenage rebellion. The set looks like a wood-paneled rec-room, with a gauze screen masking a second story radio studio, onto which the backstage action is projected. The most arresting moment of the evening is when, just before the intermission, the set begins to turn. We see the scaffolding supporting the giant flat surface, and on the back, a pixelated screen. It shows advertisements for unnamed brands—cola, ice cream, sex, capitalism. The babies gape up at the screen, their faces bathed in the screen ’ s blue and red light. When we return after the intermission, it ’ s 1990.





Claudia Bauer, 89/90. Photo: Rolf Arnold.

As the schoolteacher, Keil expresses her appreciation for Prague, “ Why would anyone need to go to Paris? ” When the wall comes down, she heads to Paris straightaway. In the second half of the play, we see what's become of the crewideologue and love interest L, dressed in a GDR flag, has moved to St. Petersburg. A local transvestite has relocated to Ravensbrück, to everyone ’ s surprise. Some now run with neo-Nazis. Many of them. Those who were united in the halcyon days by the pool now fight in the streets: punks versus skinheads. There ’ s a repeated section where one character wants to go beat up a Mozambicananother counters, “ Wow, du Nazi. ” He responds, “ Du nicht? ” The impression is that the record skips, characters skip back a few lines and begin again. This loop stands in for other echoes. Every Monday in Leipzig, a crowd of far-right reactionaries gather to march against “ the Islamization of the Occident. ”Ostalgie is a hair ’ s breadth from current far-right discourses circulated by parties like the AfD or PEGIDA, discourses especially prevalent in the former East, of returning to a lost past. 89/90 shows without blinking that nature abhors a vacuumthe flawed promise of socialism is replaced by the clear evils of neo-Nazism. So many of this year ’ s selections use repetitive dramaturgies to suggest that we are doomed to repeat our mistakes, but 1990 Leipzig feels particularly present.

Traurige Zauberer (Sad Magicians)

If 89/90 turns the set as a commentary on borders and the shocking process of unification,

Traurige Zauberer from the Staatheater Mainz directed by Thom Luz turns the theater inside out for the sake of it. This gentle metatheatricality is Luz ' calling card for which he was invited to become the house director at Theater Basel. The audience is led through the dressing rooms and wings and onto the stage, where we sit on risers. Out in the house, there are 8-tracks on ladders playing laugh tracks. An actor comes through from time to time as a tour guide explaining the history of the building: it was burned down and rebuilt (this building, or Mainz, or a generic theater tour?). Eventually, the curtains close and we are stuck looking at the rigging the stage at the Berliner Festspielhaus is huge, but it feels claustrophobic. The tour guide passes through with the same stories until she is locked in a cage. British actor Graham Valentine prepares to give a magic show. He is, he informs us, " the talent. " But the magic show never takes place.

Traurige Zauberer is thin. This spaciousness lends the piece a melancholic air, which is perhaps its selling point. There is no narrative and very little happens in the unadorned space. There are other small bits in this " dumb comedy with music " (Luz ' generic label for the production): Valentine prepares a tray of coffee cups and they fall, clattering, to the floor; there is some stage business with a blazer. There is some talk about a historic rivalry between two great magicians, Nicola and Alexander. There is, indeed, a lot of music the stage is surrounded with pianos, played on and off from simple chords to Charles Ives. The goal is, perhaps, to lay bare the performative encounter, the hollowness of theatre magic. " Fly! " cries one of the magicians to his assistant; she stands still.

The other text, split between the performers, tells of a tragic shipping accident. At the risk of repeating typical English-language arrogance in a German-language space, it ' s worth noting that this piece was presented without supertitles. The lights are low and golden; the energy is low, even sleepy. I perk up at two beautiful moments Luz makes temporary clouds with fog machines and then they dissipate. One actor pumps fog into a bass drum, and beats it, pumping out circles of smoke into which an assistant walks they break over her face like waves. It ' s very beautiful. But it ' s hard for something like fog ephemeral, non-mimetic to carry an evening. In another section, four actors sit at dressing tables, the lights glowing softly in the dark space. Stage managers pass, counting off the time until curtain, but it ' s backwards. Five minutes, then ten minutes. Their faces are beautiful in the soft light. At the end of the piece, the performers play the audience. " I don ' t understand, but the music was nice, " one says. This kind of arch irony feels out of place in the dreamy atmosphere like a confession that the piece feels a bit thrown-together. I can ' t imagine that Luz wanted the audience to actually agree. Valentine narrates the rules of magic. The third axiom is, " in order to appear, you must first disappear. " But this is cheap philosophy. In order to disappear, of course, there needs to be something to begin with.

### Pfusch (Botch)

The atmosphere at the Volksbühne has been a combination of celebration and mourning at the least because Herbert Fritsch himself has been steadily accumulating prizes, including this year ' s Theaterpreis Berlin. Last year there was a unanimous decision to include die mann by the Theatertreffen jury; this is his seventh Theatertreffen invite. So while Pfusch is by no means Herbert Fritsch ' strongest work, one understands this invitation. Fritsch is a key player in

the ongoing Theaterstreit Berlin is an ideological controversy between the outgoing intendant Frank Castorf at the end of his 25-year tenure and the incoming Belgian-Brit Chris Dercon from the Tate Modern, a dyed-in-the-wool neoliberal, at least according to the open letters and statements from the Castorf Volksbühne. The new Volksbühne season announcement, scheduled ironically around the time of Pfüsch 's Theatertreffen premiere, does little to soften critiques that Dercon will turn the Volksbühne from a historic repertory theater into a touring house no different from the Barbican or BAM (or, for that matter, the Berliner Festspiele or HAU in Berlin). Fritsch 's colorful, musical neo-Dadaist romps may seem to have no place in these politics, but Pfüsch, too, intervenes.

Pfüsch is loosely organized as a triptych. At its best, it is a concerto for ten pianos played by the twins from *The Shining*, multiplied through a funhouse mirror to form an ensemble of fourteen grotesque and gaping little girls in frilly dresses banging away with their fists on standing pianos in atonal rapture, led by key Fritsch collaborator Ingo Günther in a mermaid-style cocktail gown and beehive. At its worst, Pfüsch is just some people pushing a giant metal tube around onstage. Sometimes actors are inside the tube as it rolls, arms outstretched, as in some kind of midcentury fitness machine. Other times it is simply rolled. Occasionally, the girls (the ensemble is, of course, mixed gender) cease their rhythmic banging and leave the pianos, assemble to face the audience, wide eyed, and peep, " schön! " In a final section, the actors enter in padded beige foam swim suits; the giant pit in the center of the stage is filled, apparently, with trampolines. They bounce across merrily and do a kind of synchronized swimming routine. The performers then fill the pit with blue foam cubes, a process which seems genuinely laborious. Wolfram Koch is the first to dive in. But he 's afraid, he feints, he showboats, he peers over his toes to the water below. A giant red arrow descends.



Herbert Fritsch, *Pfusch*. Photo: Thomas Aurin.

As with Fritsch's other work, and, indeed, with many of the post-dramatic performances at this Theatertreffen, it's tempting to make deeper claims that this fresh-from-rehearsal feel is a metaphor for postmodern life, social isolation, or the failure of language (*Pfusch* has even less text than Luz's 'dumb comedy.') But maybe these justifications are a tip that the work just isn't that cohesive. Still, after a strong final image of the swimming pool, the cast come to the front of the stage, each say "Tschüss" in turn, and an iron curtain descends. Applauding this closed door as the amplified sound of helicopters whirled felt less like celebrating the actors and more like an act of collective mourning. Joyous nonsense is a lot to lose.

### Die Vernichtung (The Annihilation)

The premiere of *Die Vernichtung* is met with a wintry mix of boos and bravos. The Theatertreffen is, after all, in some sense still in and of Wilmersdorf while more experimental off-site works like *Real Magic* or *Borderline Procession* were largely well received, this mainstage Saturday-night premiere may have simply been too much for the "over-60 subscriber set." The playwright of *Die Vernichtung*, Olga Bach, is twenty-six. It shows. The text is banal, repetitive, and episodic, a kind of kaleidoscope of the worst discursive traits of the young: the four unnamed characters—three men and one woman—are cynical, judgmental, callously sexist, insecure, hedonistic, and self-obsessed. Most of all, they whine: "I'm bored." They talk

about drowning a puppy and date-raping their passed-out friend. They rage against society, they size each other up ( “ how often do you work out? ” ), they wonder when the drugs will kick in, and they try to find more drugs.

Ersan Mondtag described his staging as “ a pedestal ” for Bach ’ s text. This image aptly describes the disconnect between what characters do and what they say—the actors ’ physical gestures run the gamut (sex in all positions, static athletic poses, child-like play), detached from the text completely. The characters stand around rather than illustrate, for example, when they find and play with and later drown the puppy in their first episode. The whole evening is like this—one imagines a whole other play based on the verbal descriptions. Yet perhaps making the text a pedestal for the performance would have been a wiser move.

Mondtag is a “ shooting star ” —he was invited to Theatertreffen last year with his first state theater production, *Tyrannis*, handily one of the most controversial invitations of 2016. This season, he made a Berlin premiere at the Gorki Theater; next year, he ’ ll present at the new Berliner Ensemble. In the staging of *Die Vernichtung*, Mondtag earns the hype. The evening begins with a flash of lights directed at the audience, presumably the annihilation of the title, then Brahms ’ “ Deutsches Requiem ” (earplugs provided). The darkness fills with billowing fog, a thick raft of it. Slowly the set is illuminated—it ’ s stunning, a painterly garden of Eden. A tree, a swing, a pool, and some off-kilter Greek busts (one wears sunglasses). There is a kind of chapel door or bunker or, more Berlin-like still, a nightclub in a former bunker lit from within. Four actors in body-suits wearily and tentatively emerge, painted all-over as expressionist nudes, as though they stumbled out of a Kirschner painting. The woman (Deleila Piasko) swings idly over the pond: this image, which was used this year to advertise the festival, is also a strong advertisement for the future of analogue, good old-fashioned live theater.





Ersan Montag, Die Vernichtung. Photo: Birgit Hupfeld.

But then Bach ' s text takes over. A long central section of the play is underscored by pulsing techno and a greyscale and red projection of digital static. The characters dance with fists raised as they repeat the same clichés and much of the same language from the beginning of the play: boredom, political impotence, apathy, rage. Sebastian Schneider swings as if the world is ending. After about half an hour, the fever breaks: the music stops. The audience sighs audibly. The characters are tired, too they retreat toward the chapel entrance and slump together as they bicker and trade one-liners and debate date-raping their friend.

But in the last five minutes one of the actors rips off his bodysuit. He is really nude. The lights come up. The set looks less expressionist and more like a middle school craft project. He dances, runs, jumps, smacks the branches of the tree. The giant foam penis on his body suit is replaced by a much smaller, real penis, flopping absurdly. He washes off his face paint in the pool onstage. His contagious and child-like joy at being alive cuts through the artificiality of the stage and text, the extreme self-absorption, even fascistic simple-mindedness, of young hedonists in Berlin, and even the cynicism rooting itself in my heart while watching. I ' m sorry for the people who left early. If the piece is a critique-by-replication of the façade of superficiality, then this coda is the knife that punctures it. It ' s a nice bookend to Three Sisters imagine if Stone staged the house burning at the end and you get the idea. Can five minutes of ludic freedom really pose a successful critique of eighty-five minutes of ironic, self-serving cynicism?



If so, *Die Vernichtung* deserves its bravos.

### Five Easy Pieces

Although *Die Vernichtung* was the last staged premiere of the *Theatertreffen*, I returned to the Haus der Berliner Festspiele for a Sunday matinee production of documentary theater director Milo Rau's touring production *Five Easy Pieces*. I begged for tickets. It seemed that everyone was buzzing that this piece was their favorite. Finally something gentle, something authentic, something to hang your hat on. Fair enough. Partially this grounding and nuanced effect is due to the prodigious child actors. It sounds sensationalistic, true: six actors between the ages of seven and thirteen, acting out the story of Belgian pedophile and child murderer Marc Dutroux, who was found keeping two girls in a small cellar in his basement. His other four victims were murdered. But *Five Easy Pieces* isn't just a strangely tender piece of theatrical true crime reportage, it's also a meditation on acting and ontology. The play is indeed divided into five easy pieces, a reference to Stravinsky's piano exercises for children. First, the children introduce themselves as themselves. Pepijn and Willem are brothers. Several want to become actors. Maurice Leerman wants a challenging role to play an old man. And so in the first section, he plays the 81-year old father of Marc Dutroux; his monologue, based on actual testimony, is projected on the screen above in a tight close-up. In the following section, Pepijn plays the father of one of the murdered children. It is a profoundly moving and intimate scene detailing the experience of losing a child to a violent criminal. Peter Seynaeve, the onstage director-cum-interviewer and only adult in the ensemble, urges him to repeat the final words of the scene while crying. Pepijn applies some tear-producing make-up and does it again, in tears.



Milo Rau, *Five Easy Pieces*. Photo: Phile Deprez.

The pathos of watching children display such mature emotions of loss and regret so superlatively well is one thing; the additional ethical level of manipulating children in real time on stage another. This escalates in the third section when Seynaeve asks young Polly Persyn whether she would kiss anyone on stage, it feels like all the oxygen is sucked out of the room. Everyone is still. He doesn't touch her. Later, Rachel Dedain plays one of the children found alive. When Seynaeve asks her to take her clothes off, the room goes still again. "Like we did in rehearsal," he urges. She complies. It is extremely uncomfortable. Seated with her legs tucked up to her chin, it's relatively tasteful, even as she describes, in character, her abuser telling her that "sex should be fun." The tone, though, feels more philosophical than lurid. As the play continues, the children take on the roles of the investigating policemen, Patrice Lumumba, the parents of the slain daughters, and themselves. Sometimes their live-feed film is cut with adult actors recreating the same material, while the children mirror on stage. They sing. They dance. Polly ends the play by describing her favorite movie, called *What Are Clouds?* In the film, characters have never seen the sky and are amazed, even frightened, when they finally step outside into the open air: a quiet and oblique way to end a trying performance. When I leave the theater, the sun outside is blinding.

Much of this year's Theatertreffen veered toward the nonsensical, the weird. Even the festival's most conventional evenings incorporated some expressionist theatrical turns (like the puffy babies in *89/90*) or a slick superficiality marked by inescapable iteration (the circular banter of *Three Sisters*). The final image of *Five Easy Pieces* represents a way out: the open sky. By the time the festival ends, it's finally spring.

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