

2018 Berliner Theatertreffen

Berlin's 2018 Theatertreffen featured a strong lineup of both classical as well as new theatrical works that commented on world politics, social mores, gender, and the way we deal with the past. This season's festival, however, struggled with issues of space, as several theatre facilities, like the Berliner Ensemble and Volksbühne, were not available to host productions as had been the case in the past. The ongoing issues at the Volksbühne were an underlying story of the festival as Frank Castorf's epic *Faust* was featured even as Castorf's successor, Chris Dercon, was forced to resign his post as Intendant of the Volksbühne in the same month that the festival took place. The unfortunate result was that many of the invited productions received as a few as two performances while the Volksbühne sat in darkness for the first May in decades. Despite the presence of background drama in Berlin, the onstage work was as thrilling and important as ever.

First it should be noted that only nine productions were shown at the 2018 Theatertreffen, as the massive Vegard Vinge work, *Nationaltheater Reinickendorf* was not shown at the festival. Given the scale of the work and the logistics of transporting the work from Vinge's native Norway (the production had been featured during the 2017-2018 season at the Haus Der Berliner Festspiele's immersion project) it was decided that it was not financially feasible to travel with the work from Bergen. Vinge, however, had created a ninety-minute "trailer" of the work that would be shown on multiple occasions, thus allowing it to participate as a festival competitor. However, adding to the drama of the 2018 festival, the Vinge work included scenes that the committee deemed politically and socially unacceptable and after Vinge's refusal to alter his work, the production was totally cancelled. Apparently, the events surrounding Vinge's work may have severed his relationship with several members of the Berlin theatre community so it may not be possible to witness his outstanding and unusual work in Germany for the foreseeable future.



Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's *Nationaltheater Reinickendorf*. Photo: Berlin Theatertreffen.

Frank Castorf's final staged work at the Volksbühne, *Faust*, was clearly the *Endspiel* of Castorf's Volksbühne oeuvre, and a work of great magnificence, passion and personal vision. Featuring an "all-star" cast of Volksbühne performers from Castorf's twenty year reign as intendant, *Faust* was a seven-hour tour-de-force that included texts from Goethe's *Faust* and *Faust II*, as well as texts by Arthur Rimbaud, Emile Zola, and documentary from the Algerian War of 1947. Castorf presented the character Faust (played by the incomparable Martin Wuttke) not as a drama of the European thinker, but as the tragedy of the European bourgeoisie who had set out in the late eighteenth century to free all people from European feudalism. However, Faust's journey showed the bondage of feudalism being replaced by the bondage of capitalism. Castorf's journey traveled from the literal "creation of man" scenarios (from *Faust II*) to the colonialism as seen through the Algerian War. Additionally through the female characters of Margarete/Helena (Valery Tschepanowa) and Die Hexe (Sophie Rois), a parallel narrative explored female subversion in European history. Characteristic of Castorf's work at the Volksbühne, the text of *Faust* only served as a reference point for many much more complicated ideas.



Frank Castorf's *Faust*. Photo: Berlin Theatertreffen.

The final scene of *Faust* deserves special mention. The scene featured Wuttke as Faust riding a tricycle around the stage while Marc Hosemann as Mephistopheles and the partially nude Tscheplanowa engaged in a lengthy banter regarding events of recent German theatre which included Hosemann's hilarious mocking imitation of several of ousted Intendant Dercon's statements and mannerisms. This scene was presented in a style reminiscent of the unmistakable GDR aesthetic with its harsh, ironic delivery of lines, stark lighting, and broad physical gestus. Castorf's final Volksbühne collaboration with designers Aleksandar Denić and videographers Andreas Deinert and Mathias Klütz was among his most impressive, and the final curtain call signaled the end of a major chapter in the history of the theatre of Berlin as well as Germany.

Theater Basel's production of *Woyzeck* made a strong statement to emerge as the Theatertreffen's strongest production. Directed and designed by Ulrich Rasche, the world of Franz Woyzeck was imaged as an inescapable machine; a social structure from which there was no escape. An impressive sixty foot diameter steel rotating disc served as the production's setting, which, along with an eight piece orchestra, produced an effective metaphor for the world that both traps and controls Woyzeck. The minimalist score by Monika Roscher powerfully underscored the reconfigured Büchner script, which was expanded to almost four hours duration. The music, text, and disc rotation speeds and angles were perfectly synchronized to create a boldly chaotic and often hysterical "walk of doom" as Woyzeck (Nicola Mastroberardino) and Marie (Franziska Hackl) paraded toward their final inescapable ultimatum. Given

the nature of the production, vocal inflection and quality played a key role as tone and pitch of the characters' voices were clearly an important element of the direction. The most unique vocal quality belonged to Thiemo Strutzenberger as the Captain. His pleading, wailing voice seared through the theatrical space with the quality of rock singers such as Robert Plant or Bono and made each of the scenes between Woyzeck and the Captain unforgettable. Rasche's textual reconfiguration also included a lengthy scene that interwove the Captain, Woyzeck, and the Doctor (played by Florian von Manteuffel); Woyzeck flanked on either side by each of the two tormenters as they shepherded him toward his inescapable fate.

Die Odyssee, presented by Thalia Theater Hamburg, was something of an anomaly to the Berliner Theatertreffen. Conceived and directed by Antú Romero Nunes the work was basically a "sketch comedy" performed in a "Monty Python" style by two actors who delivered the work in the fashion of comic improvisation, a style that may have been foreign to both the audience and adjudicators of the Berliner Theatertreffen 2018. Utilizing a strange language made from a mixture of Swedish, German, and English, *Die Odyssee* was a comic world of two actors, Thomas Miehaus and Paul Schröder, as Odysseus' sons Telemachus and Telegonous who are left alone with nothing but their jokes. The setting, conceived by Jennifer Jenkins and Matthias Koch, was that of a mortuary chapel recognizing the deceased Odysseus, represented by a picture of American actor Kirk Douglas, the most famous cinematic representation of Odysseus. The brothers ceremoniously gather around a coffin that supposedly contains their father but that, in actuality, only contains a white balloon. The two brothers set out to tell their story despite the absence of the father's body. They tell the story of their fatherless journey, and each of the boys has his own view of Odysseus and the incredible story of his life. Each recounts the story of the Cyclops, the forces of the sea raged by Poseidon, the blind seer Tiresias, and other stories all told in post-dramatic, narrative format. As the boys recreate Odysseus' many trials and tribulations the comedy advances to the final scenes when they pull out chainsaws and cut the coffin in half, then carving shapes into the two halves and standing inside the to deliver a unified postscript to the work. Music from Sweden's ABBA and Austria's Bilderbuch underscored the fast paced work that told the entire story in a mere one hundred minutes.



Falk Richter's *Am Königsweg*. Photo: Berlin Theatertreffen.

Elfriede Jelinek's controversial *Am Königsweg* included one of the festival's most overt political statements, as it was a direct attack on the power of rulers but especially the presidency of Donald J. Trump in the USA. The work, directed by Falk Richter, was presented as commentary on scenarios of ruling domination ranging from Oedipus, to Abraham and Issac, to the United States. Jelinek's work explored the archetypal longings behind the concept of the king, the leviathan who champions right wing and nationalist views in order to advance their particular country and status as a ruler. The text featured a collage of quotes, images, and video sequences by artists Michel Auder and Meika Dresenkamp that chronicled numerous rulers and their actions throughout history, all told from the standpoint of a group of

“blinded” Oedipus figures whose eyes had been gouged out. Katrin Hoffmann’s setting included references to a number of places—Trump Towers and the pop art debris of the remains of the American dream all set in the playroom of a deranged child. Portrayed as a self-important narcissist, Benny Claessens stepped into the role of the “tweeting king of the playpen.” His stand up comedic moments were somewhat undermined as he began to embody the character of the “screaming liberal,” seen worldwide after the election of Trump in 2016. Stand-up comic interludes were provided by Ilse Ritter who considered the racism of the past and present as images of the Ku Klux Klan, football (soccer) games, and the blindness of educated society were exposed. The text of Jelinek combined with Richter’s sharp direction emphasized the global problem of the “us versus them” ideology espoused by the Putins, Trumps, and Orbáns of the world and set forth a bleak prediction for future collapse due to these individualist ideologies.

Brecht’s *Trommeln in der Nacht* (*Drums in the Night*) was presented by the Munich Kammerspiele at Deutsches Theater Berlin. The work leaned heavily on narration as the opening scene featured a detailed narrative explanation of the play’s historical background, detailing the works success in Munich as well as its horrible failure in Berlin. Directed by Christopher Rüping, the basic premise for the work was an overview of Brecht “past and present” as act one featured a complete remodeling of the original 1922 production by Otto Falkenberg. The original theatre setting from Falkenberg’s production was recreated and much of the original staging (as recreated from existing production photographs) was duplicated. Original cartoon-like set pieces were included and the acting style featured imitations and reenactments of the original speaking style and movement style of the original production. The actors were basically appearing as puppets of theatre history. Act two featured updated approaches to Brecht that included many contemporary theatre-distancing effects including neon lights, microphones, dry ice, and contemporary musical selections in addition to Berlin Cabaret music. Songs such as “House of the Rising Sun” were played and sung by the character of the narrator whose story was told from the standpoint of a journalist during the time period.



Christopher Rüping's *Trommeln in der Nacht*. Photo: Berlin Theatertreffen.

The final moments of *Drums in the Night* were similar to those of *Die Odyssee* as the actors brought out a huge “wood chipper” and fed the entire original set into the device, leaving a huge pile of nothing but sawdust on the stage. The moment undoubtedly represented the destruction of historical approaches to Brechtian performance as replaced by contemporary interpretations and stagings. The demolition of the setting was carried through by members of the technical crew who arrived on stage and in a complete “worker fashion” dismantled the set using hammers, crow bars and other tools to break the settings into manageable pieces, then feeding them into the wood chipper that finally reduced the set pieces into sawdust. The huge pile of sawdust was left on the stage presumably to comment on archaic stagings of Brecht and the need for their ultimate destruction.

Directed by Thomas Ostermeier *Rückkehr nach Reims (Returning to Reims)* was presented by the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, and the production had the distinct advantage of being presented on its “home court,” the Schaubühne’s Globe Theater. Based on the novel by French sociologist Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims* (pronounced Rey-ohms) is the autobiographical exploration of a homosexual writer returning to his working class family hometown in France. The story is incredibly timely as it explores the politics of liberalism versus tendencies toward nationalism and those who turn away from the left and liberal policies. The ideas of right wing populism undermining democratic systems are analyzed and critiqued in the production of *Returning to Reims* .

Ostermeier set the production in a sound recording studio, as an actress (Nina Hoss) rents the space to record the project of her return to her roots. As she explores the biographical issues of her childhood and the post-WWII issues of French nationalism, workers rights, socialist tendencies, and other issues, the crew of the recording studio that include the producer (Bush Moukarzel) and the technician (Ali Gadema) argue about issues such as gender, money, and other trivial issues rather than the textual issues that involve the working class. Moving beyond a mere critique of right versus left politics, Ostermeier criticizes the present day cultural elite and their inability to accept their origins. In the second part of the work, Hoss moves into an exploration of the world from the standpoint of her father, Willy Hoss, with whom she (he, in the original) never had a strong relationship. A staunch trade unionist, the production utilizes multimedia—slides and video—to document the elder Hoss' work as a fighter for the German Green Party who took up the cause of fighting for rights of the Amazon indigenous people in Brazil. With film direction also provided by Ostermeier, Marcus Lenz, Sébastien Dupouey and Marie Sanchez, *Returning to Reims* was able to enhance many aspects of the novel by providing a visual narrative that included extensive historical footage from all of the many cities and scenes represented in the novel. It was clear that extensive dramaturgy and research had yielded much exclusive and authentic video footage from this complicated period in European history.



Jan Bosse's *Die Welt im Rücken*. Photo: Berlin Theatertreffen.

Die Welt im Rücken (*The World at Your Back*) was a tour de force one-man show staged by the Vienna Burgtheater, and also played at the Mainstage of the Berliner Festspielehaus. Based on the best-selling novel by Berlin-based author Thomas Melle, the play follows the life of the protagonist (Melle) played by Joachim Meyerhoff. Meyerhoff's journey takes the audience through the journey of bipolar disorder class one—the most serious variety. The work is conceived in three phases: the manic one (the thug), the depressive one (the corpse) and the partially restored one (suspicious, a stranger to himself). Jan Bosse's imaginative staging was co-created with Meyerhoff, who spent his childhood on the grounds of the psychiatric hospital where his father was Senior Consultant. A specialist in one man shows of all kinds,

Meyerhoff's world consists of his interaction with various objects—the ping pong table “base” that becomes his office and work area. He experiments by pulling the tape off of the table and making numerous artistic works involving ping-pong balls and other found objects. Obsessed with ping-pong balls he practices balancing them in different ways, pours dozens of them onto the floor just to hear the sound, and performs other various activities to occupy his soaring mind. Also obsessed with a photocopy machine he makes a photocopy of his face, studies it at length, wears it like a mask, and then engages in a brief relationship with it that involves subtle sexual moments. Later he makes an extended set of photocopies of his entire body and arranges them into a giant “Christ image” that he poses inside of with a crown of ping-pong balls.

Though extremely simple in its overall scope, Stéphane Laimé's scenic design was one of the most functional and effective seen at the festival. The simplicity of Meyerhoff's working area combined with the literally unlimited found objects he was able to utilize in his manic states of disillusion were carefully planned and designed to reveal the purest elements of stage design: minimalism, balance, and use of space. However, as the disorder became more pronounced, a huge “blob” appeared that allowed Meyerhoff/Melle to explore “the womb,” his primordial past and other interior journeys. *Die Welt im Rücken* clearly displayed why the Burgtheater Vienna is one of the world's most prolific theatre companies and earned Meyerhoff a special performance award at the Theatertreffen.

As a whole, perhaps there was an overall sense of loss that emerged from the fifty-fifth rendition of the Berliner Theatertreffen. The absence of the highly anticipated Vinge production along with the dissolving of Castorf's Volksbühne and the questions about the future of that institution left the event with many questions about the future of the Theatertreffen and of Berlin/German theatre in general. The proposal for a 353 million Euro increase in arts funding by Minister of Culture Monika Rütters in Germany for 2018/2019 has brought new hope and perhaps a new vision for the German artistic world in general. A possibility that the Berliner Theatertreffen might move back to a model of greater cooperation with the major Berlin theatres that would allow for a greater number of productions and stronger resources is perhaps on the horizon, and would be a positive step for this cherished cultural institution.

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