Report from Berlin, April 2022

By Marvin Carlson

Prevented from visiting Berlin, my favorite theatre city, by the pandemic, I hoped to return early in 2022, but an upsurge in Covid struck the city early in the year and it was not until the first week in April that I was finally able to visit. I found several major changes, beginning with my arrival. For more than half a century I arrived in West Berlin at the old Tegel airport, and took the bus into the area near the Zoo, the center of the city in Cold War days, where I had always stayed. This time I arrived at the new Brandenberg airport at the opposite corner of the city, and took a train into Friedrichstrasse Station, where I once crossed into East Berlin and which has again become the center of a united city.

This put me much closer to the theatrical heart of the city, with the Berliner Ensemble just across the River Spree and the Deutsches Theater only a few blocks up the street. As it happened the shows I most wanted to see were at these two theatres, and so my visit was for the first time concentrated into a small area. I began at the Deutsches Theater with the American classic*, Death of a Salesman,* a central offering in the repertoire since 2017, when it won the Friedrich Luft Prize for the best Berlin production of the year.

Deutsches Theatre with Ukranian flag. Photo: Marvin Carlson

As I approached the Deutsches Theater I was sharply reminded of the new international crisis that was now added to the ongoing pandemic~~the~~ Russian invasion of the Ukraine, which had begun just a bit over a month before. Nothing in that war had so far more shocked the German theatre community than the Russian bombing of the theatre in Mariupol, in which more than a thousand civilians had taken shelter. The Deutsches Theater had become a makeshift tribute to beleaguered Ukraine. Across the monumental façade was stretched a huge yellow and blue Ukrainian flag bearing the words in English " We Stand United. " Even more poignantly, huge white letters on the pavement in front of the building spelled out the Russian word д е т и (children) recalling the same letters painted on the pavement in front of the Mariupol theatre shelter in a futile attempt to prevent the bombing. This memorialization was all the more appropriate as I realized for the first time that the Ukrainian Embassy was only a few steps from the theatre, now of course covered with flowers, torches, flogs, tributes, and messages of support.

Entering the theatre was very similar to what had become standard practice in New York~~ob~~ligatory wearing of face masks while in the building of course, and proof of vaccination demanded at the door. Once inside, except for the ubiquitous masks, the theatre seemed largely unchanged. The downstairs bar was open and busy, although the refreshment area upstairs remained closed. The auditorium was, as usual, well filled by an expectant crowd.

Death of a Salesman. Directed by Bastian Kraft. Photo: Deutsches Theater

Jo Mielziner ’ s iconic setting of the original Broadway production with its skeletal frame and multiple playing spaces, has haunted the imaginations of designers of the play ever since, so that the setting of Ben Baur in Berlin came as a distinct shock. The cavernous stage of the Deutsches Theater stood almost empty, surrounded at the rear by high, neutral whitewashed wall, containing a single upstage door. On the stage itself was only simple wooden table, four chairs, and a modest chandelier. This sort of scenic minimalism has been popular on the German stage for the past twenty years, but Bauer, director Bastian Kraft, and lighting designer Cornelia Gloth create special expressive possibilities through the use of two devices. Most importantly Gloth throughout the production relies heavily on a bank of large footlights, which cast huge shadows on the back walls behind the actors and secondly the large turntable of the theatre revolves almost constantly, so that the minimal furnishings themselves contribute to the continual play of light and dark behind the action.

Gloth adds to the complexity of this visual design by occasional film clips and, even more effectively by silhouettes not generated by the actors on stage, but apparently by Willie ’ s happier memories—games of home baseball with his boys, or passing bicyclists.

Most importantly the giant shadows serve both to emphasize the darkness that hovers over Willie and his doomed attempt to escape the impending fall into the nothingness that he fears and yet cannot acknowledge and also despite the superb acting of Ulrich Mattes, one of Germany ’ s most gifted actors, constantly reminds us of the diminutive psychic scale of the protagonist. Director Kraft emphasizes the hopelessness of Willie ’ s dreams and aspirations by beginning with Miller ’ s closing scene—the sparse and pitiful funeral of the protagonist, with his wife ’ s (Olivia Grigolli) almost desperate plea for sympathy and understanding of this tragic common man. Although Matthes dominates the production, the famous ensemble work of the Deutsches Theater continues to impress. Even so, Benjamin Lille as Biff and Moritz Grove as Willie ’ s younger boss stand out, especially in their confrontation scene with Matthes.

Maria Stuart. Directed by Maria Lenk. Photo: Deutsches Theater

I returned again to the Deutsches Theater the following evening to see Maria Lenk ' s production of Schiller ' s *Maria Stuart.* It was an unusual experience for me, the first time I had attended a live performance of a production I had previously seen on live streaming. The previous spring the annual Berlin theatre festival, the Theatertreffen, had presented several of its offerings in this form, the Covid epidemic having made a normal presentation impossible. On the whole, I found the streamed versions of live productions I watched during the lockdown of the theatres disappointing, but *Mary Stuart* was an exception. Its particular staging, although conceived before the pandemic closed Berlin ' s theatres, produced what I considered to be the most effective theatrical use of zoom performance I had seen.

In the original production, the proscenium opening was divided into twelve small stages stacked atop each other, rather in the manner of TV ' s *Hollywood Squares.* For German audiences, however, the visual reference was more likely the common practice of the past two decades of leading directors like Thalheimer and his designer Olaf Altmann to embed one or more mini-stages like this within a dark façade filing the proscenium. Maria Lenk and her designer Judith Oswald ingeniously adapted this device to their own interpretation of Schiller ' s classic. Essentially each character has his or her own box, a stylish pink enclosure, rather like a gift box, devoid of any furnishings. Only rarely. And rather shockingly, does a character enter another ' s box, nor do they normally interact with others even in adjoining boxes. Much of their

dialogue is directed toward the audience, again a practice popularized by Thalheimer and others, but unexpectedly appropriate to zoom performance. When one character passes on to another a letter or document (there are a lot of these), they slip it into a fold in their costume, and the recipient draws it from a similar fold. This gets a chuckle from the audience when it first happens but is then quickly accepted as a workable convention.

The costumes by Sibylle Wallum are basically simple and modern, with effective and often faintly ironic touches—bouffant puff sleeves to fill out the rather slight Julia Windischbauer as Elizabeth and a modern Elisabeth fan sweater beneath Mortimer’s period tunic. Mary (Franziska Machens) in a full, flowing white gown. While all the rest, including Elizabeth, wear rather dark and detailed costumes. Mary seems almost like a restless moth on display in her pink cube. Her simplicity is accentuated in the first part of the play when Elizabeth appears in a large puppet head that reproduces her rather sharp features. The majority of Schiller’s play is composed of one and two-character scenes, and this arrangement suits the selectivity and intimacy of zoom very well. Rarely do we see more than one or two cells at the same time, and herein lies the particular power of Zoom viewing. I have never within the live theatre seen a production of Schiller’s powerful play that so clarified the fact that not only Elizabeth and Mary, but everyone in this small university is isolated and in a very real sense imprisoned by their role and circumstances. One may be aware of this in the physical theatre, but the awareness goes to the very heart of the zoom experience, where physical isolation is the defining element of the form itself—not only between the performers but between the performers and the public, each of which occupies their own separate space. It was this almost perfect congruence of metaphor and production that made this for me the most memorable theatre experience of the Covid era.

So much was my impression of this production tied to its internet form that I was delighted to have the opportunity to see and compare the live original with it. Of course, I already knew that digital reproduction simply cannot capture the vibrant presence of a living actor, especially of an actor as intense and skilled as those in the company at the Deutsches Theater. Despite the visual intimacy zoom offers, I still felt more emotionally drawn into the cold control of Julia Windischbauer. Elizabeth, the ethereal vulnerability of Franziska Machens’ Mary, and the scarcely controlled violence of Jeremy Mockridge’s Mortimer as live presences than I had experienced with their visual images.

Although rarely were more than two boxes illuminated at the same time, one obviously remained aware in the theatre of the setting as a whole as one was almost never aware in Zoom, which I cannot remember ever showing the entire stage, although I assume it did at some point. Of the twelve boxes, Elizabeth’s fittingly, is the largest, at the center, and this configuration constantly emphasizes her physical centrality in a way that the more selective zoom focus on her cell does not. Three slightly smaller boxes, for the major secondary characters, run from top to bottom on either side of this, while two small, almost-coffin-like boxes are placed above and below Elizabeth’s box and are used primarily by such marginal figures as Aubespine, the hapless French ambassador. Again, the distinctly comic situation of his cramped space is much more emphasized in the theatre, where we are much more aware of both his literal and his social position at Elizabeth’s court.

For me, Zoom performance has not yet, and may never develop enough significant aesthetic

features of its own to develop into an important separate artistic form, as the cinema has done, but at least in this instance I felt it had opened important dimensions of the production from the live original, and I was very grateful to have had the opportunity to experience both.

Birds of a Kind. Directed by Wajdi Mouawad. Photo Berliner Ensemble

My next visit was to another pillar of the German theatre, the Berliner Ensemble, to see the newest work by the Lebanese-Canadian dramatist, Wajdi Mouawad, probably the most popular contemporary author on the German stage at this moment. *Birds of a Kind* premiered in 2017 at the Theatre de la Colline in Paris, of which Mouawad is the director. It received its German premiere in Stuttgart in November of 2018, the opening production of the new administration of Burkhart C. Kosminski, who has a special interest in contemporary playwrights. In 2019-2020 Birds was spoken of as the " play of the year " in the German theatre, simultaneously offered in fourteen different cities. Obviously, the pandemic interrupted this growth, but with the reopening of the German theatres, productions continue to multiply. The first Berlin production took place on January 29, 2022, at the Berliner Ensemble.

Readers familiar with the Berliner Ensemble will doubtless recall the richly decorated interior, so seemingly unsuited to the spare, functional stage envisioned by Brecht. For decades the Berliner Ensemble, unlike most major German theatres, had no alternative stage, a situation changed as recently as the fall of 2019, when the Neues Haus (New House) was opened, a

large black box far more suited to the kind of functional staging which Brecht did much to inspire. This was the venue of the new Mouawad play and director Robert Schuster and designer Sascha Gross created in its flexible and open performance area a constantly shifting visual field, with minimal physical elements on a turntable and a large background screen which offered at various times newsreel type images of destruction and violence, abstract land and seascapes, and dissolving pixilated images only hinting at their content. The video designer was Bahadir Hamdemir, a leading German visual artist who has worked for a number of leading theatres.

Birds has many features in common with Mouawad's best-known work, the 2003 *Scorched,*--immigrant children in the new world, unable to free themselves of the trauma of the endless Middle Eastern cycle of violence that follows them like the curse on a classic Greek family, internal and external tensions between generations and layers of the self, and, again suggesting Greek tragedy, a hidden family secret whose revelation drives the action of the play and which leads to the tragic resolution.

Rarely has a drama dealt with intercultural tensions and negotiations so successfully on so many levels at once. This interculturalism is built into the very genesis of the play, which arose from conversations between the Lebanese-Canadian dramatist and the Jewish cultural historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who wrote a book on the 15th-century Persian historian Hassan Ibn Muhamed el Wazzan, who was captured by pirates and taken to the court of Pope Leo X who released him when he converted to Christianity. From Hassan comes the Persian fable of the amphibious bird which concludes Mouawad's play and resonates culturally in a manner that many German critics compared to the similarly central parable of the ring in Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*. The student of modern Arab drama might well also recall the utopian dream/fable surrounded by darkness that ends Jalila Baccar's *Trilogy of Future Memory.*

One of the most challenging multicultural dimensions of Mouawad's drama is in its use of language, since all of the characters speak the language they would employ in real life. The story begins with an encounter in a New York library with a meeting between two modern secular university students. One is of Jewish heritage, Eitan Zimmermann (played by Dennis Svensson). whose parents David and Norah live in Berlin with his grandfather Etgar, and whose grandmother Leah lives in Israel. The other is Wahida, a girl of Palestinian descent (played by Philine Schmölzer), who is writing a thesis on the sixteenth-century multicultural diplomat and author Hassan bin Muhammed el Wazzan. Although they speak jokingly of Romeo and Juliet as they are attracted to each other, they are convinced that in the modern world the conflict of their cultural background can have no significant impact on themselves. Eitan, a geneticist, seemingly clinches this attitude by insisting that we all share the same chromosomes. Although of course, we recognize the shadow of dramatic irony behind these confident words. Moving through the communities of each of these characters involves the extensive use of Hebrew, Arabic, German and English, with a constant underlining of the negotiations involved and occasional pointed references to the slippery meaning of "mother tongue." I found Mouawad's use of this heteroglossia powerful and theatrical, although I must admit that even though the program specifically listed a "dialect coach for American," the accents of Eitan and Wahida in the opening scenes were so far from American (or at least New York American) that I had enormous difficulty understanding them and had to join my German audience members in

following the scene with the aid of the German supertitles.

As they become more closely bonded, Eitan and Wahida decide to go to Israel to investigate a family mystery—why Eitan's grandmother remained in Israel when his grandfather and father left her to go to Germany. The quest is somewhat similar to that in Mouawad's previous *Scorched,* although much more specifically involved this time with the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and at the same time even broader in its cultural implications. Although Wahida originally goes to Israel to accompany Eitan on his quest and that quest remains the central structural element of the play, his project more and more draws her into a concern with her own background, in which she had little interest at the beginning of the play. Her parallel self-discovery adds significantly to the implications of the work, not least because of the gender and sexual tensions it involves.

In Jerusalem, Eitan is badly hurt in a terrorist bombing, and the other characters in the drama gather around his bed in a Jerusalem hospital, where the simmering tensions between the past and the present, the two cultures locked in inescapable conflict are played out among the family members assembled there and other figures summoned up by Eitan's liminal condition, most notably Muhammed el Wazzan himself, who serves as a kind of guiding angel to the action and the embodiment of a seemingly unachievable reconciliation of conflicting cultures. On a more earthly level, a powerful group of actors surround Eitan and struggle over how to relate to his forbidden love and his dangerous quest. Perhaps most powerful is Martin Rentzsch, as Eitan's formidable and devotedly orthodox father, David, the actual tragic center of the action, but the other family members create a formidable ensemble. Kathrin Wehlisch, Eitan's mother, is a shrewd but coldly analytic psychiatrist, whose devotion to analytic rationalism can be clearly seen in her son. Eitan's separated grandparents are both complex and highly engaging—Leah, played by Naomi Krauss, sharp-talking and cynical, made more so by carefully guarding the family's devastating secret for decades and Etgar, played by Robert Spitz, a warmly engaging figure whose deep humanity seems out of place in the bloody realities of the world in which he finds himself.

The production, running three hours with a single intermission, is a taxing one, and I felt that some of the scenes could have been somewhat reduced, but the interplay of the actors is so powerful and tension-filled, the cultural stakes so high, and the development of the symbolic structure so impressive, that I could hardly have asked for any serious cutting. The conclusion, like that of *Scorched*, is not an optimistic one, in keeping with the seemingly intractable political situation with which it deals, but the image of El Wazzan's amphibious bird hovers over the dark world of the play and offers the hope and vision of a world in which somehow, miraculously, even the most inconceivable reconciliation of opposing forces us still possible to imagine, and indeed may be our only continuing source of hope.

For my final Berlin production, I returned again to the Deutsches Theater, to see a German classic that I had not yet experienced on stage, Gerhart Hauptmann's *Einsame Menschen* (Lonely Lives). The work deals with a situation found a number of the dramas of Hauptmann's naturalistic contemporaries, a visitor from outside comes to visit a seemingly stable household, but one with serious but controlled tensions, and their presence wittingly or unwittingly brings these tensions to a crisis. The visitor from outside is in this case an

emancipated young woman from Russia, who arrives at the lakeside country home of a successful young novelist Johannes, his wife Kathe and their recently born baby. She comes to visit Johannes ’ childhood friend Braun, a young painter she met in Paris, and the hospitable Johannes invites her to stay for a few weeks.

A strong friendship quickly develops between Anna and Johannes, whose wife is a simple country girl who has never given him the artistic and intellectual companionship he finds in Anna. The growing intensity of their relationship arouses the concern of Johannes ’ religiously conservative parents, the neglected Kathe, and even Johannes ’ presumably liberal friend Braun, all of whom urge him to ask the distracting Anna to leave. Johannes resists all these pressures, but his relationship with Anna leads inevitably to physical expression late in the play, an adulterous kiss which created a major scandal in the original production, especially in view of Johannes ’ recent fatherhood. Anna, at last aware of the dangers of the situation, flees, and the distraught Johannes departs to drown himself in the nearby lake.

Today this 1870 drama seems sometimes banal, sometimes overwrought, but very much of another era. However, director Daniela Löffner, who gained a national reputation for her updating of another later nineteenth-century classic, *Fathers and Sons*, in 2016, felt that the Hauptmann play merited a similar fresh look. This updating was less successful, but one notable scene in it made it one of the most talked-about Berlin productions of the season. First, it must be noted that central to her reinterpretation and updating was the radical change of the basic romantic triangle of the play. Johannes (Marcel Kohler) and his wife (Judith Hofmann), although speaking and behaving as a contemporary upper bourgeois couple, do not depart essentially from their originals, but the disturbing outside is changed from a young liberal Russian woman student named Anna Mahr to an upwardly bound and attractive young American professor named Arno Mahr (Enno Trebs) from Stanford, devoted to the fashionable emerging field of “ feminist futurology. ” The faux trendiness of the field gets a deserved laugh from the audience, but Löffner does not develop the temptation to use Hauptmann ’ s clearly dated material for easy satire. She is clearly interested in trying to evoke the kind of emotional impact the original work had on the very different modern audience.

This becomes clear as the warm male camaraderie of the early scenes takes on increasingly homoerotic overtones, and reaches its dramatic climax in the opening of the final act, when the original shocking kiss is reinterpreted as a wordless but enormously athletic and graphic nude homosexual encounter between Johannes and Arno lasting almost twenty minutes. Despite its overwhelming eroticism, the scene is aestheticized in a variety of ways~~by~~ the grace and physical control of the two handsome actors, by the subdued bluish lighting, giving the scene a kind of dream-like quality, and by the fact that the cavorting bodies somehow set off an overhead sprinkler system so that jets of lightly illuminated water play continuously across their gyrating bodies. Frankly, I thought the water was a bit excessive, but director Löffner and her designer in fact used water as a continuing image in the production, doubtless in anticipation (as the audience presumably knows) of the unhappy Johannis ’ aquatic end. Most notably. A dominant element of the rather surrealistic set (designed by Wolfgang Menardi) is a glossy black staircase leading upstage to a freestanding pedestal bathroom sink, rather like an altar atop a ceremonial staircase. At one point in the production the sink taps are left open, so that water overflows the sink and cascades in a series of waterfalls, down the stair to the stage.

Unquestionably such moments, like the nude scene, are enormously theatrical but between them neither the director nor actors were able to successfully update the rather melodramatic and yet banal machinery of the original plot. The sex scene, daring even by liberal German standards in such matters, doubtless drew audiences to the production, but on the whole, it was a bold but not notably successful experiment. Still one must admire a theatre culture that encourages such experimentation, hardly imaginable in the highly conservative and conventional American professional theatre.

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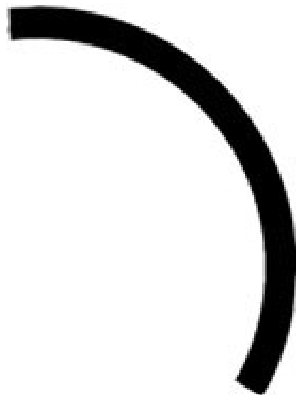

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