

Introduction

A Dialogue on
Contemporary German Theatre

Matt Cornish and David Savran



MATT CORNISH: A dramaturg and theatre historian who wishes to apply theatre ruthlessly to its own ends. His taste was shaped by impressionable years in Berlin. Now living in Ohio.

DAVID SAVRAN: A theatre historian addicted to playgoing who is deeply invested in his opinions, prejudices, and tastes, which remain wildly eclectic. Now living in Berlin.

This dialogue took place in March 2021. Theatres were closed, cities were locked down, and meetings were all held on Zoom.

DAVID SAVRAN: I know this issue focuses on German theatre since 2010 and that we are trying to give readers a sense of its innovation, breadth, and diversity. Nonetheless, I remain preoccupied with questions of tradition and continuity. I suspect this is in part because for many years I knew German theatre much better on the page than the stage. When I first started coming to Berlin, I was surprised to discover that Brecht, both playwright and theorist, is not a major theme in German theatre. These days, in fact, I get impatient with Brecht and his acolytes and prefer a more oblique view, so I keep being drawn back to Friedrich Schiller, who is, after Shakespeare, the most widely performed playwright in Germany.

Schiller remains relevant for me because of his lifelong project of trying to align the aesthetic and the political (or moral). Even today, with the incessant debate about political theatre, I'm surprised by the predominance of aesthetics in German scholarship—Schiller's ghost.

MATT CORNISH: I think that even as artists consider race, gender, climate change, and politics, aesthetics remains the highest priority in the German theatre. Yes, external forces shape performance, and external forces are themselves performed—in, for example, Yael Ronen's *Winterreise* [Winter's Journey, Maxim Gorki Theater, Berlin, 2017]. In his article for this issue, Christopher Balme writes about “postfictional” theatre—using as primary examples Rimini Protokoll, Hauptaktion's *Situation with Spectators* [2017], and *Lebenszeit* by Lola Arias with Raed Al Kour [2018]—where artists and artistic directors eschew the illusion and mimesis of theatre and instead present nonfictional—and often autobiographical—stories and people. Still, even in postfictional German theatre, I believe, most performances want to be judged by aesthetic criteria in addition to political, social, or ethical criteria. This is an example of the continuity you speak about, and it is a continuation not just of Goethe and Schiller, but also of Brecht and Müller. Repetition with the possibility of revision, one might say.

SAVRAN: Tradition is not only aesthetic, but also institutional.

CORNISH: What is this “German” tradition that we've been talking about? We've mentioned institutions and aesthetics, but some of the individuals who have come up are not German citizens.

Figure 1. (facing page) Tansel Akzeybek as Ito the spy (played by Richard Tauber in 1933) and Vera-Lotte Boecker as Lydia in Barrie Kosky's production of Frühlingsstürme, 2020. (Detail of a photo by Iko Freese / www.drama-berlin.de)

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Yael Ronen for example, the subject of Maria Litvan's essay, is Israeli. Balme writes about Raaed Al Kour, a Syrian artist seeking refuge in Germany. Might "Germanic" be a better word, making the idea of Germanness an adjective, an idea that modifies but requires a noun to complete its meaning?

SAVRAN: I prefer German and German-speaking world as designations because we're focusing on artists much of whose work has been produced in Germany—and in the German-speaking world—and mostly in the German language. Artists who are, in a sense, part of the German system, whatever their nationality and background. That's why I'm willing to count as German Barrie Kosky, an opera and operetta director from Australia who is discussed in this issue by Kevin Clarke. Or Milo Rau, who is Swiss, or Yael Ronen. I, like the Theatertreffen jury, very much think that both Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland—i.e., most of it—are part of this German system. So I understand German not in terms of ethnicity, citizenship, or residence, but in terms of a cultural economy. And secondarily I suppose language.

CORNISH: Kosky, Rau, and Ronen, among others, not only produce in Germany and mostly in German, they also interrogate through their productions what it means to be German. Now, what is this German cultural economy? What makes it unique?

SAVRAN: For those of us from countries without publicly financed theatres, the most important fact about the German stage is its scale: its vast size and the billions of euros that cover 90% of the budgets of the roughly 130 *Staatstheater* and *Stadttheater*, the subsidized state and city theatres. The *Freie Szene* [independent arts community] is also impacted, both through state grants and because more and more independent work is being made in collaboration with publicly funded theatres. Moreover, because most theatres invest sizable sums in performances for children and students, the German public is familiar with theatre-going as a cultural practice from an early age, as well as with the dramatic canon. Hence, the importance of tradition. Even in the *Freie Szene*, where most of the performances are collaboratively devised, and are generally noncanonical and nonnarrative, the canon is well known and serves as inspiration. We see the dialogue of tradition and the new in several of the essays collected in this issue, especially Nikolas Müller-Schöll's contribution; and in Andrew Friedman's essay on the *Ibsen-Saga* of Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller.

CORNISH: A German might respond by comparing today's system and its budget to the past—to the massive reductions in numbers of theatres and their budgets after unification in 1990. As Brandon Woolf points out in *Institutional Theatrics: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin*, the pre-1989 theatre subsidy from the Federal Republic in Germany was the highest per-capita in the world, and the German Democratic Republic was not far behind [2021:8]. In the early 1990s, Germany experienced a recession, and the cultural sphere underwent budget cuts and major reorganization: "the dismantling of long-standing theatre institutions, the advent of new institutions, and the refunctioning of older institutions with new purposes and orientations" [10].

SAVRAN: Nonetheless, the dense network of locally subsidized theatres in Germany means there are more intimate and spontaneous connections between performers and audience than in most Anglophone theatres. Because theatre in Germany is not a museum, one goes to a play to engage with what is happening here and now. Schiller is performed only because his work has something to say to us today. Almost any performance could begin with words to the effect, "Here we are tonight, sharing the same space, on this chilly evening, and we have something to tell you, to discuss with you, so we're going use *Mary Stuart* to ventriloquize, to take as our mouthpiece, medium, and plaything." This is always the unspoken subtext. This attitude strikes me as being symptomatic of a theatre that is profoundly socially contingent and humanist. Or as Schiller wrote in 1795, "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays*" [2007:246]. The act of playing, moreover, is never innocent. Adorno reads Schiller's concept of play as a blow against sovereignty, a blow that has the power to break sovereignty's spell [(1970) 2002:197]. These days, I'm not feeling quite as sanguine as Adorno—or Schiller.

But I'm fascinated by the centrality of Schiller's concept of play to the unfolding of even *Verrücktes Blut* [Crazy Blood, 2011], the play that put Turkish German theatre on the map, and more generally, new work by and about Germans with *Migrationshintergrund* [migration background]. The play, showing a bunch of rowdy Berlin teenagers being taught Schiller at gunpoint, suggests that aesthetics is still relevant, indeed, indispensable: "it is only through beauty that man makes his way to Freedom" [Schiller (1795) 2007:231].

CORNISH: *Verrücktes Blut*, along with earlier performances made for festivals and Freie Szene spaces, such as *Schwarze Jungfrauen* [Black Virgins, which premiered in 2006 at the Beyond Belonging Festival], inaugurated a decade of increasing visibility of theatre made by people of color. It's always been there, especially in the Freie Szene, which is still the main system through which Black Germans and other people of color produce, as Priscilla Layne discusses in her article for this issue. But before 2011, their work was seldom noted in the pages of *Theater heute*. Now some of it is being studied, even in English, especially *Verrücktes Blut* and the first couple of years of the Maxim Gorki Theater under the direction of Shermin Langhoff, beginning in 2013. But generational change is happening quickly. Ten years after the premiere of *Verrücktes Blut*, what are the most discussed issues in the German theatre today? From my perspective: climate change; what happens after Covid; and equity, diversity, and inclusion — often discussed in American English terms that have been *eingedeutscht*, made into German. In 2011, you could still see blackface on the German stage; now artists and critics call for quotas to affect changes in who gets opportunities to make theatre. The Theatertreffen, the major international festival of German theatre held in Berlin each spring, set itself for 2020 a "female quota of at least 50% in the position of directors" [Theatertreffen 2021], a mark it surpassed that year and again in the 2021 festival.

SAVRAN: Even after years of coming to Germany, I remain baffled by the differences between identity politics in the US and the proxies for it in Germany, where the category of race does not legally exist and sexuality seems condemned to an epistemological limbo. That's why I was stunned when I saw an article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* [Emcke and Fritzsche 2021] about 185 actors who were outing themselves as LGBTQ+. (Although most are more prominent in movies and TV than theatre, there is greater mobility between media for German actors than US American.) It's not that I find Germany more homophobic than the US, but (1) Germans are so concerned with security (*Datenschutz*, data privacy) that they do not like self-identifying, especially if that makes them feel vulnerable; (2) German theatre people have become a lot more conscious of and outspoken about *Diversität* (borrowing the US American word), but it is almost always code for race, *Migrationshintergrund*, or gender, not sexuality; and (3) although German theatre is notorious for sex and nudity, the sexual orientation of the performer is very rarely problematized, a notable exception being work at the Gorki. Which means the performer remains unmarked in terms of presumed sexual orientation, i.e., straight. Considering how much German theatre aims to shock or, at the least, defamiliarize, I have long been surprised by how straight it feels. The same goes for theatre scholarship in Germany.

CORNISH: Yes, I generally think only of Ersan Mondtag, Falk Richter, and Barrie Kosky when I think of prominent directors and playwrights who explore the potential of queer performance. Now *Diversität* really is expanding to include more and more voices and bodies, as Maria Litvan discusses in writing about Ronen's production *Roma Armee*. The Roma people, who do not fit with the nationalist scheme of the European Union's supposedly borderless zone, are still openly discriminated against and insulted in the public sphere. Seeing them onstage, telling their stories with playful nuance, seems like a notable change to me. An opening, perhaps. At the same time, you can count on the fingers of one hand the numbers of state-subsidized theatre institutions producing such work: the Gorki, which has already come up several times in this dialogue, the Munich Kammerspiele, and a few others.

What Anglophone critics have missed when looking at performances at the Gorki, and at other institutions producing work about sexuality, race, ethnicity, and migration, is the play between continuity and criticism. Too often we see either one or the other, damning the continuity and praising subversion, without thinking much about either. I hope this issue is something of a corrective to that, especially in Priscilla Layne's essay on Simone Dede Ayivi and Lily Kelting's on *Monster Truck*.

SAVRAN: I am so distrustful of the appeal of subversion, which I think is one of the most meaningless words in the English language. It is not only impossible to define, but also to measure. Anything and everything can be subversive if one wishes it to be. What it really comes down to is reception, a way of reading. But what does it mean to subvert when one does not effect change? I could say in fact that subversion requires things *not* to change, because if they did, one could no longer subvert. In my more hopeful moments, laughter is my preferred mode of subversion. I think of it as productive and corrective, often more so than tears.

CORNISH: Yes! German theatre is seldom noted for laughter, to state the obvious. But it's there, all the way back to Hanswurst on the popular stage, as well as Kleist's *The Broken Jug* or Lenz's *The Tutor*, for example—productive and corrective laughter, as well as ironic, even sarcastic, laughter. And then there's operetta, so joyfully queer in the 1920s and '30s, and again today, something I hadn't known about until I read Kevin Clarke's essay.

SAVRAN: These days, I am feeling much like the Actor in Brecht's *Messingkauf*, when he exclaims, "moralizing makes me sick!" [Brecht (1963) 2015:28]. I remain deeply skeptical about the political effectivity of committed theatre. If changing the world is your primary goal, why choose theatre? You're better off committing yourself to macropolitical activism—politics with a capital P: economics, law, urban studies, or another field with a direct impact on public policy.

Although I think moralizing works more to soothe the conscience than produce real change, theatre can be astonishingly powerful and effective on a micropolitical level. I go to the theatre to have intense emotional and intellectual experiences, the kind I do not have in my daily life. And yes, sometimes that includes a change in my understanding of the political settlement. Good theatre provides me with what Kenneth Burke calls "equipment for living" [Burke 1974].

I get annoyed by theatre (in both the US and Germany) that is so intent on conveying an admittedly relevant political message that it ends up being preachy, one-dimensional, and pretentious. I could name some German theatre scholars who, in fact, are so suspicious of beauty—and entertainment *tout court*—that it nauseates them. When I go to the theatre, I want to be shaken up, thrilled, moved, swept away, devastated, not have my political principles boringly and self-righteously reaffirmed.

CORNISH: What excites me is exactly the imaginative power of the German theatre, enabled by the aesthetic tradition artists can draw on, the well-funded institutions that support them, and the audiences who attend theatre in comparatively large numbers.

SAVRAN: When I go to the theatre in Germany, I still sometimes feel like a lovestruck teenager overwhelmed by the sheer size and beauty of what I see—conceptually, scenically, and most important, musically, as David Roesner explains in his essay. That is why I so treasure the prodigal theatricality of directors like Herbert Fritsch, Ulrich Rasche, Barrie Kosky, and Ersan Mondtag who realize their visionary fantasies on a scale unimaginable to US American theatre-goers or -makers. Most important, their work is not just spectacle. These directors are using live theatre to rethink the ontology of performance, to reexamine political and aesthetic histories, and to expand the reach of theatre experientially. In the time of Covid, this is what I miss so desperately.

Yet the situation for performing artists under Covid was and is much better in Germany than in the US because theatres and personnel continue to receive subsidies. This has allowed theatres and

ensembles to stage work in empty houses, with all the trappings of a generously bankrolled system, and to experiment with Zoom performance and different kinds of live/Zoom hybrids. The Zurich Schauspielhaus, Festspiele, and Opera, for example, produced a cycle of seven short “filmic essays” entitled *Revue 2020*, based on the Roman Catholic mass, which was shot in the streets and parks of Zurich and the backstages and empty auditoriums with singers, actors, musicians, and, on Zoom, a 46-person choir, each on their own screen. Or the Cologne Theater im Bauturm, which produced *Quarantänetheater*, composed of 47 video miniatures made between March and May 2020. The series starts as a succession of short video journal entries of shell-shocked company members and gradually morphs into a cello- and trombone-accompanied folk song sung on a city street; a fully masked, socially distanced, one-minute *Julius Caesar*; and finally a rehearsal of *Hamlet*, reduced to “To be or not to be,” in the Bauturm’s junk-strewn theatre [see Theater im Bauturm 2020].

CORNISH: I keep thinking about *werther.live*, which we both watched a couple of weeks ago. The production, made by young theatre artists—the director, Cosmea Spelleken, completed her *Abitur* [graduated high school] in 2015!—is a livestreamed performance for our digital lives. This *werther* translates Goethe’s epistolary *Werther* into WhatsApp messages, voice recordings, and Instagram posts, among other forms of Covid-times communication. Werther, played by Jonny Hoff, is a part-time Instagram artist who makes collages; he meets his Lotte (Klara Woerdemann) through eBay Kleinanzeigen, a popular way to buy and sell small items in Germany. Werther buys from Lotte an old book with drawings of antique pistols, which he will later cut out and use in a collage to signal that he has chosen the time and place of his death. The actors are pretty and the technology slick. Spelleken uses both to tell a story about being very young and very lost. We watch through Werther’s screenshares as the performers click between tabs and apps, playing YouTube videos and meeting for wine on Zoom, their cursors always on the move.

SAVRAN: I was really moved by Gob Squad’s 12-hour *Show Me a Good Time*, which was part of the 2021 Theatertreffen. Watching it in my Berlin apartment, looking out at the same dull, gray sky and the same quiet streets from which they were livestreaming, I felt an utterly novel and uncanny intimacy and relevance. And a deep sadness at seeing the empty Berliner Festspiele—which is usually hopping during Theatertreffen—standing utterly desolate.

CORNISH: Leaning back in my big wooden chair staring at my university-issued laptop for *werther.live*, I felt nostalgic for the streets and theatres and cafes of Berlin, where I could overhear people chatting on phones in the bright *Umgangssprache* [everyday language] that the production captures so well. Absolutely, *werther.live* is the future of something, perhaps something great. And the production felt close to the theatre. But it never quite got there for me. It’s not theatre. Yes, I grant you, theatre cannot or should not be defined by its liveness, but still it is something other than the “digital theatre” of *werther.live*. Had this production played at HAU3, that small upstairs theatre off Tempelhofer Ufer, with its tight lobby and tiny bar and spiral staircase down to the bathrooms, had it played on a projection screen in HAU3 exactly as it was, with actors sitting in their apartments around Germany: then I think *werther.live* would have been theatre! A young person’s reimagining of Gob Squad without the autobiography, playfully putting Goethe onto our bodies and screens.

For me, sitting in my bright sunroom in southeast Ohio, what I missed of the theatre, what was lacking in the digital, was: putting on particular clothes; grabbing an early dinner with friends; traveling by bike or U-Bahn; walking through the dark courtyard of Tempelhofer Ufer 10 (the first time you go there, you think, where the hell am I?); and waiting with all those other bodies in that tight lobby before filing into the auditorium. For better or worse, that was my primary reaction to watching *werther.live*: nostalgia for the gathering together that is theatre.

SAVRAN: I too desperately miss the sociality of theatre, despite the creativity of some directors’ live/video hybrids. I saw Sebastian Hartmann’s *Lear*—which uses Wolfram Lotz’s *Die Politiker* as a thrillingly dissonant epilogue—live at the Deutsches Theater a couple years ago and then watched his video reconceptualization of his already radically reconceptualized Shakespeare. Given the

Deutsches Theater's resources, Hartmann was able to use the theatre's stage and physical plant and even its location in Berlin—near the Reichstag—to think about how theatre thinks and how politicians politic.

CORNISH: Now we wait until after the pandemic, when digital experiments can coexist alongside evenings out at HAU3, to see what digital theatre can become. To see what German theatre will become next.

Postscript

January 2022. Omicron threatens but, in most of Germany, theatres are open. Both Cornish and Savran are in Berlin.

CORNISH: The other night, outside the doors to the Maxim Gorki Theater, I presented my QR-coded proof of vaccination, the results of an antigen Covid test performed 30 minutes earlier, a photo ID, my K95 mask, and, eventually, once inside, my ticket for that evening's sold-out performance: *Berlin Kleistpark*, by Hakan Savaş Mican.

SAVRAN: I feel a lot more secure in Berlin going to see live theatre than I did a couple months ago in New York, where the enforcement is much less meticulous. And in New York, that insecurity seems oddly to have spilled over onto the stage. I noticed a curious reticence on the part of the performers in many of the shows I saw, as if they feared contagion from the audience. But I have detected no fear here in Berlin, just gratitude and joy that we are all able to come together again.

CORNISH: It is remarkable how well the German theatre and its audiences have adjusted to Covid, even as the virus continues to adjust to us. Despite, or perhaps because of, the strict safety precautions—my favorite new word, *Infektionsschutzmaßnahmenverordnungen*—the auditoriums, in Berlin at least, are mostly full.¹ But have there been—will there be—lasting changes to the German performance scene? In a sense, it is too early to say. The precautions I just enumerated, imposed by the governments of Berlin and the Federal Republic of Germany, are likely to remain in place only for a limited time, modified to meet circumstances. Perhaps we won't need a test, or it will need to be a different test, or we will need proof of a booster, or the right kind of booster. In the spring I wager we will be allowed to remove masks, though I fear some precautions may prove sticky, unacknowledged, and unnecessary performances of safety similar to taking off one's shoes at airport security. Institutional programming changes seem likely to continue, I'm happy to say: online video screenings of old and contemporary productions (for which one generally buys a ticket), alongside some performances made just for the internet, as with the "digital stage" HAU4, newly opened and which presents podcasts, theaterfilms, and live streaming of online games.

But what about on the stages? My answer is: No. Covid has not changed performances. We both saw *All Right. Good Night*, by Rimini Protokoll—written and directed by Helgard Haug. A magnificent performance that was part monologue—presented as text, absent the live performer—part Musiktheater, through-composed by Barbara Morgenstern with a live band, it tells the story of the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight 370 alongside a harrowing account of the dementia and death of Haug's father. It was made during Covid and premiered late 2021 at Hebbel am Ufer 1, as we awaited Omicron's arrival in Berlin. *All Right. Good Night* could exist as it did without Covid—it would be just as beautiful, original, and sad. But Covid, which absented us from our families, our friends, our art, even ourselves, gave *All Right. Good Night* a resonance it would not have otherwise had.

1. Cornish is speaking anecdotally here. Final audience numbers are not yet available for the 2021/22 season, but *Intendanten* have noticed a decrease in attendance, especially among patrons over 70. Ulrich Khoun, *Intendant* of the Deutsches Theater, expects there will be a 10–15% fall among those audience members (see Dössel 2021).

SAVRAN: And even small Freie Szene ensembles still have the wherewithal to experiment. Last August [2021], Kevin Clarke took me to see a wildly creative, queer-feminist mash-up of two operettas, *Lysistrata* and *Die schöne Galathée*, produced by a fledgling company, tutti d'amore, in a circus tent in the wilds of former East Berlin. Cheek by jowl with soloists, chorus, and a chamber orchestra, and a hundred or so young, hip Berliners, we drank wine and joined in singing the chorus of the hit tune from *Lysistrata*, "Glowworm." It was a blast. And it proves that when you have generous state funding, almost anything is possible.

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