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THE PERFORMING ARTS IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

By Esther Slevogt



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IETM - International network for contemporary performing arts

October 2018

ISBN: 978-2-93087-38-7



IETM is supported by:



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

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The Performing Arts in the Federal Republic of Germany

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by Esther Slevogt

Esther Slevogt is an author and theatre critic living in Berlin. She is the editor and managing director of the theatre portal nacht kritik.de, which she co-founded in 2007, and architect of the Berlin conference Theater und Netz.

Published by IETM - International network for contemporary performing arts, Brussels
October 2018

Editing and general coordination: Nan van Houte (IETM)

Graphic layout: Milton Pereira on a template by JosWorld



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This publication should be mentioned as follows:

E. Slevogt, 'The performing arts in the Federal Republic of Germany', IETM, October 2018.
Link: <https://www.ietm.org/en/publications>

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01.

INTRODUCTION

The Federal Republic of Germany has the largest and densest network of institutional and independent theatres in the world. This range includes city, state and national theatres run by states and municipalities and commercially-run musical and entertainment stages, as well as a high density of independent theatres, dance companies and performance groups, which generally finance their work with funds from various state funding programs. The city and state theatres are the ideational and structural backbone of the German theatrical landscape, and their budgets are fixed items in the budgets of their respective cities or municipalities. These theatres are characterized by standing buildings, permanent ensembles, and the permanent presentation of artistic works, as well as by their employees who produce stage sets and costumes for the productions. The repertoire of the respective theatre exclusively contains these in house produced works. A special role is played by the state theatres, whose cultural-political mission also includes to perform in the surrounding regions that do not have their own public theatre. As a rule, therefore, fewer than half of the performances take place at the actual location of the respective state stage. The operation of theatres in the ensemble and repertoire system within the dense network in this country is an internationally unique selling point for the German-speaking theatre landscape.



Theater Freiburg (photo: © Marcel Korbel)

02.

STRUCTURE

This city and state theatre system also includes the well-known venues and production houses of the independent theatres (Freie Theater) which are operated with public funds. These programming institutions manage without standing ensembles but have permanent technicians and an administration. Independent groups and artists who want to work here must raise their project funds themselves. Normally, however, they are supported in this by the production houses. Works produced in these houses also tour through other houses of the network, which is not restricted to Germany but also associated with – in between others – Gessnerallee in Zürich. In addition, there are a number of institutionalized festivals in the independent scene, such as the Dortmund festival Favoriten, the Berlin Performing Arts Festival, the dance and theatre festival Rodeo in Munich or the festival Hauptsache Frei in Hamburg. These festivals are important structural pillars in the overall structure of the independent scene and ensure high visibility of productions, as long as they have reached

these distribution circles. In addition, there are firmly established festivals in individual venues, such as the International Summer Festival at Kampnagel in Hamburg or the international festival Tanz im August in Berlin, which presents international productions at the intersection of dance and performance. In addition, the various production houses organize smaller theme-oriented festivals again and again. This serves above all to bundle various independent productions in order to give them more attention as a package, as well as to enrich them with discursive and pop-cultural events and to contextualize them once again in a differentiated way.

The most important production houses of the independent scene:

- <https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de>
- <http://www.kampnagel.de>
- <https://www.pact-zollverein.de>
- <http://fft-duesseldorf.de>
- <http://www.mousonturm.de>
- <https://www.hellerau.org>
- <https://tanzhaus-nrw.de>
- <https://www.sophiensaale.com>
- <http://theatrerampe.de>
- <https://www.gessnerallee.ch>

Independent scene festivals

- <https://www.performingarts-festival.de>
- <http://www.hauptsachefrei.de>
- <http://rodeomuenchen.de>
- <http://www.favoriten-festival.de>
- <https://www.made-festival.de>
- <http://www.kampnagel.de/internationales-sommerfestival>
- <https://www.tanzimaugust.de>

Seven international co-producing houses in Germany have been united in an alliance since 2015. This association, which in the last three years has received €12 million in funding from the Ministry for Culture and Media, consists of the Künstlerhaus Mousonturm (Frankfurt am Main), the Forum Freies Theater (Düsseldorf), Hebbel am Ufer (HAU, Berlin), the European Centre of the Arts Hellerau (Dresden), Kampnagel (Hamburg), PACT Zollverein (Essen) and Tanzhaus NRW (Düsseldorf). The alliance thus unites the most important and largest production centres of the independent dance, theatre, and performance scene in Germany. The aim of this association is a more sustainable and substantial cooperation across states by independent artists and their productions, joint publications, and further development.

In 2018, for example, the alliance of international production houses offered further training for producers for the first time. Under the heading “Academy for Performing Arts Producers,” a series of advanced training events focused on imparting skills for producing in the

German and international context of the performing arts, including production manager, creative producer, company manager, producer and others. There are many designations for a job description that has become increasingly important for the independent scene in recent years, but for which there has been no training so far.

The umbrella organisation of the individual independent groups and artists working in Germany is the Federal Association of Independent Performing Artists (Bundesverband Freie Darstellende Künste, BDFK), founded in 1990, which is one of the largest theatre associations in the country: whether theatre and dance houses, collectives or individual actors, the BDFK represents the interests of around 20,000 theatre and dance professionals in the country at the federal level, organised in a total of 16 regional associations and three other associated organisations. An example of these is the Berlin Federal State Association of Independent Performing Artists (Berliner Landesverband Freie Darstellende Künste, LAFT), which was founded in 2008 to support Berlin's independent performing artists with increased networking, training and lobbying through representation, generating public interest and offering services. The LAFT advocates, among other things, for lower limits on fixed payment in the assessment of project funding.



Göttingen - Deutsches Theater (photo: Dietmar Schwanitz)

03.

SUPPORT

Project funding can be applied for at the Cultural Foundation of the Federation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes, KSB). Above all, the KSB supports major projects with innovation potential that also have an international impact or are co-produced internationally. State cultural institutions such as museums or theatres also apply here with special projects that they cannot finance from their regular budgets.

For the performing arts, the KSB has launched the “Double Pass” (Doppelpass) programme (until 2021), which promotes cooperation projects and partnerships between institutional and independent theatres. The aim of the fund is to encourage the independent scene and theatre institutions in Germany to try out new, tour-ready forms of cooperation and artistic production.

According to the last published report, the KSB distributed a total of around €18 million in project funds in 2015, with projects in the performing arts accounting for almost 24 percent. (Source: KSB Annual Report 2015)

The Performing Arts Fund (Fonds Darstellende Künste) was set up especially for independent theatre and dance productions and is endowed with €1.1 million annually by the state. The fund supports all fields of work and forms of the arts in professional independently produced theatre and dance, and with its support would like to make a substantial contribution to the further development of a diverse theatre, performance, and dance landscape in Germany. Here, too, the innovation potential of a project is an important selection criterion for funding.

For projects to be realised in Berlin, funds can be applied for from the Capital City Cultural Fund (Hauptstadtkulturfonds, HKF).

In addition, there are regional cultural foundations in individual federal states, including the NRW Artistic Foundation (Kunststiftung NRW), the Danube Swabian Cultural Foundation of the Federal State of Baden-Württemberg (Donauschwäbische Kulturstiftung des Landes Baden-Württemberg), the Hamburger Cultural Foundation (Hamburgische Kulturstiftung) and the Lower Saxony Foundation (Stiftung Niedersachsen). Occasionally, projects in the field of theatre / performing arts are also supported by non-governmental foundations such as the Heinz and Heide Dürr Foundation or the Rudolf-Augstein Foundation.

Supra-regional state foundations and funds:

- <https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de>
- <https://www.fonds-daku.de>
- <http://www.hauptstadtkulturfonds.berlin.de>

Regional state foundations and funds:

- <http://www.kunststiftung-nrw.de>
- <http://www.stnds.de/>
- <http://www.dsksbw.de>
- <https://www.kulturstiftung-hh.de>

Non-gouvernemental foundations:

- <https://www.heinzundheideduerrstiftung.de>
- <http://www.rudolf-augstein-stiftung.de>

At present, the situation of the performing arts in Germany is marked by a paradox: on the one hand, since the financial crisis, public funds for financing have no longer been made available as a matter of course. Over the past decade, this has led to considerable losses in the substance of the German theatre landscape. In the meantime, theatre has become increasingly subject to economic legitimacy constraints and culture as a whole is no longer a self-evident part of the self-image of cities and municipalities. This loss of significance of cultural events has also led to a sharp decline in cultural reporting in recent years, particularly in the print media. Especially for smaller theatres and groups as well as houses and projects outside the major cities, this poses problems in creating a public for their work.

At the same time, the performing arts in Germany are experiencing a surge in relevance as an accumulation point for political, social, and technological developments. In the societies of the digital age—increasingly defined by media, technologies, and their staging and user interfaces—dance and theatre have gained new emancipatory possibilities as instruments of physical experience and self-assertion. For they can convey methods and instruments for identifying, deciphering, and seeing through media stagings as such—or for opposing them.

04. HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The development of the performing arts in Germany is closely linked to the emancipation of the bourgeoisie. For this economically strong but practically politically uninfluential stratum (until the fall of the empire at the end of the First World War), the theatre became the central form of self-understanding in the nineteenth century. As a result, city theatres became important centres of a new urban and bourgeois culture. In this context, theatre has also played an important role in the development of parliamentary democracy in Germany, which, like theatre, is a system of representation.

The diverse German theatre landscape is also due to the fact that it was not until 1871 that Germany became a nation state with a capital in Berlin. Until then, there was a geographically and politically loosely defined structure of city-states and small states or principalities, whose royal cities each had their own court or state stages. Long before there was a German nation state, the cultivation of classical national literature in the theatre had ensured a relatively homogeneous cultural identity of the German bourgeoisie in the various small states. Almost every major city still has its own theatre, usually a so-called three-division stage with opera, drama, and ballet.

Around 1800, authors such as Friedrich Schiller, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe saw theatre as a social authority for the ethical and aesthetic education of mankind in the sense of the ideals of the Enlightenment: the proverbial “moral institution,” as Schiller called the theatre in a famous speech in 1796. It is here that the high status of theatre in the culture of this country and the self-image of many theatre makers as moral authorities and correctives of society

and politics is still rooted today.

The important role of the performing arts in German culture was further strengthened by the politicisation of the arts in the years around the First World War. In the course of this politicisation, the first ideas of anti-institutional, open forms of theatre were developed, which already in the 1920s had radically turned away from bourgeois theatre aesthetics and its institutions. Already in the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) free play groups, often occupied by laymen, were formed—so-called agitprop groups—which were no longer tied to fixed houses and forms of organisation. However, since these groups had essentially been founded in the environment of the Communist Party for the education and agitation of the workers, their development was severely restricted by state censorship in the early 1930s. The National Socialists finally ended this development by force in 1933.

05. AFTER 1945

After the end of the Second World War, two German states emerged: the Federal Republic of Germany, or FRG (Bundesrepublik Deutschland—BRD) with its capital in Bonn, which was integrated into Western alliances, and the German Democratic Republic, or GDR (Deutsche Demokratische Republik—DDR) with its capital in East Berlin, which belonged to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. From 1961 to 1989 Berlin was divided by a wall into an eastern and a western part.

It was not until the mid-1960s that the first independent groups in the states of the FRG resumed the anti-institutional movement of the pre-war period. It is no coincidence that the first centres of independent theatre in the Federal Republic of Germany were established in areas where there was a highly developed working-class culture during the Weimar Republic. Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia are therefore still important centres of independent theatre in this country. In the GDR, there was never a noteworthy independent scene due to its institutionally fixed and strongly centrally controlled cultural policy.

06. IN THE WEST

In the FRG, the city theatre underwent a restoration after 1945 as a centre of civic education, structurally supported by the constitutional cultural sovereignty of the individual federal states. This decentralisation of cultural policy was the consequence of the experience of the abuse of centrally controlled cultural and educational policy under the dictatorship of National Socialism. It was only in the years following reunification (or the GDR's accession to the FRG) that a central representative in charge of cultural policy at the federal level was created again. However, the "Ministry of State for Culture and Media" is not truly a ministry (nor does the "minister" have the rank of minister) but is assigned to the Federal Chancellery. The current incumbent is CDU politician Monika Grütters.

After 1945, the development of state theatres into leading theatres in the old Federal Republic of Germany was strongly favoured not only by decentralised cultural policy, but also by the disappearance of Berlin as an important theatre centre of the country. Theatres such as the [Schauspielhaus Bochum](#), the [Deutsche Schauspielhaus](#) in Hamburg, the [Münchener Kammerspiele](#), the [Deutsche Theater](#) in Göttingen and the [Theater Bremen](#) have risen to become nationally important theatres.

In West Berlin, only in the 1960s did a theatre move into the upper league of the important German stages: The Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer, founded in 1962 by a group of young artists led by directors Peter Stein, Claus Peymann, Frank-Patrick Steckel, and Klaus Michael Grüber, dramaturge Dieter Sturm, stage designer Karl-Ernst Hermann, playwright Botho Strauß, and actors Edith Clever,



Mittelreich/ Münchener Kammerspiele, Director: Anna-Sophie Mahler (photo ©Judith Busse)

Jutta Lampe, and Bruno Ganz.

The Schaubühne not only broke up the central perspective of the peep-box stage, which was still common at the time, but also the hierarchically organized institutional decision-making structures in favour of a model of parity and co-determination, and committed itself to a radical, critical contemporaneity. Not only classical and antique literature was reinterpreted, but also plays by Bertolt Brecht, who was boycotted as a communist by the theatres in West Germany and especially in Austria between 1953 and 1963, and whose plays also had a hard time on West German stages for a long time afterwards. Today the [Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz](#), as it has been called since its move to Berlin's Kurfürstendamm in the 1980s, is directed by Thomas Ostermeier and is one of the most internationally successful German theatres.

After the Berlin Wall was built, Berlin's disappearance as a German theatre centre for the West also led to the founding of the Berlin's Theatertreffen: once a year, top productions of German-language theatre were to be concentrated in West Berlin. Founded in 1964 as a child of the Cold War, the annual festival has undergone many changes since then. Its core, however, is still ten outstanding productions of German-language theatre, which are selected by a jury of critics and invited to Berlin every May as guest performances. [Theatertreffen](#) is the most important German-language theatre festival and is strongly focused on institutional theatre productions.

Festivals for independent theatre, the selection of which is not curated by the production side but based on the decision of an independent jury, include the [Politik im Freien Theater festival](#), which is held every four years in changing German cities by the [Federal Centre for Political Education](#), or the [Impulse](#) festival in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which, however, has lost considerable importance in recent years.

07. IN THE EAST

In the GDR, an initial attempt was made after 1945 to take up the various avant-garde movements of the Weimar Republic, including their efforts to open up the theatre both in terms of content and institution. But these efforts were quickly stifled by Stalinist cultural policy hostile to the avant-garde. In the end, attempts at renewal in the GDR, which also included opening up new strata of the working class, were limited to the institutions of city and state theatres. Cultural policy, which was strongly concentrated on the centre of East Berlin, meant that small provincial stages, which could operate at a safe distance from the focus of attention of the ruling SED state party, could temporarily grow into development sites for avant-garde theatre. Thus the theatres in [Anklam](#) und [Parchim](#) (Mecklenburg) or [Nordhausen](#) (Harz) became centres of development for idiosyncratic artistic talents, including Adolf Dresen, Frank Castorf, Leander Haußmann, and Armin Petras. Among the important GDR theatres outside Berlin before 1989 were the theatre in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now [Chemnitz](#)), the theatres in [Schwerin](#) and [Cottbus](#), and the [Volkstheater Rostock](#). Overall, the aesthetic innovation potential of GDR theatre was significantly greater than that of the Federal Republic.

The most important dramatist and director for the development of German theatre in the 20th century, Bertolt Brecht, returned from American emigration to the eastern sector of Berlin after the end of the war. There he first worked under the roof of the Deutsches Theater before he moved into the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm with his [Berliner Ensemble](#) in 1954, which still subsists on its reputation as the "Brecht theatre" today, but is hardly committed to its traditions. The [Deutsches Theater](#), led by Max Reinhardt, the inventor of the directorial theatre in Germany, during the

first three decades of the 20th century as a private-run theatre, came to be world-renowned, and after 1945 it became the national theatre of the GDR.

Until 1989, theatre in the GDR fulfilled a function that was as complex as it was contradictory, between the counter-public, opposition, and cultural self-assertion towards the west German Federal Republic during the Cold War. In 1955, the Federal Republic of Bonn declared itself to be the only legitimate representative of the Germans. While in the 1950s some West German artists still went to the GDR out of conviction, including Wolf Biermann, Peter Hacks, and the director Brigitte Soubeyran, GDR artists from the 1960s onwards increasingly failed due to the restrictive state cultural policy in East Berlin and left the GDR for the FRG. These artists, who had moved from the GDR to the FRG, modernised West German theatre since the 1970s. Between them such names as Peter Palitzsch, Heinar Kipphardt, Thomas Brasch, Adolf Dresen, Matthias Langhoff, and Manfred Karge. Of Brecht's successors as influential authors and theatre-makers, Heiner Müller in particular should be mentioned, who in the 1980s held the rank of unofficial national poet in both German states.

08.

WOMEN IN THE THEATRE

Moreover, the first woman at the head of a theatre was the actress Helene Weigel, director of the Berliner Ensemble in the GDR by 1949. After her death in 1971, she was succeeded by her deputy Ruth Berghaus, who directed the theatre until 1977 and was also an internationally-acclaimed director until her death in 1996. It was not until the late 1980s that the first women in West Germany reached leading positions in theatres. While in the GDR there were already a few women directing in the 1950s, theatre in the West was a purely male domain until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Even today, only a few women occupy executive positions in theatres. According to a study conducted by the [German Cultural Council](#) in 2016, only 24% of German directors are women. Among artistic directors, you can find only 22% women, including Karin Beier, who first headed the Schauspiel Köln and now runs the [Hamburg Schauspielhaus](#), Dagmar Schlingmann, the first female



The conference 'Burning Issues' at Theatre Bonn (photo: Thilo Beu)

artistic director in Saarbrücken and now in [Braunschweig](#), and Shermin Langhoff, who heads Berlin's [Maxim Gorki Theater](#). In terms of equal pay for men and women in the cultural sector (referring to the gender pay gap), Germany is also the worst performer in Europe. Actors usually earn a third more than actresses. The theatre critic and [nachtkritik.de](#) editor Anne Peter published [comprehensive research](#) on the topic in the summer of 2018 in the online theatre magazine [nachtkritik.de](#).

In March 2018, acting director Nicola Bramkamp organised the conference "Burning Issues" at the [Theater in Bonn](#), where gender equality in German theatres was discussed for the first time and a list of demands was adopted. Co-organizers of Burning Issues include Nicola Bramkamp and the Bochum actress Lisa Jopt, who is also one of the co-founders of the [Ensemble Network](#).

The Ensemble Network represents the interests of theatre professionals who work to improve working conditions at the theatres, including more family-friendly working hours and fairer pay. Its motto is "The freedom of art does not mean the bondage of artists." In a climate in which the mostly male artistic genius can rule unrestricted in the supposed sense of art and actors or performers only have the status of material in the context of an artistic work, the chances of abuse of power are very high.

But change has finally begun. Collective, equal functions, which have long been common in the independent scene, are also gaining ground in institutional theatre. Therefore, in productions by director Yael Ronen (born 1976)—working at Berlin's Gorki Theatre and the Munich's [Kammerspiele](#), among



Anna Bergmann (photo © TheaterKarlsruhe)

other places—performers are always also credited as co-authors. Director Anna Bergmann (born 1978), who has headed the acting department of the state theatre in Karlsruhe since the beginning of this season, has announced that she intends to work exclusively with female directors there. In doing so, she wants to create a counterweight in the still strongly male-dominated directing industry. This coup even inspired the New York Times to report from Karlsruhe.

In response to these debates and developments, the German Stage Association (*Deutscher Bühnenverein*), the interest group and employers' association of German theatres, adopted a code of conduct at its annual conference in June 2018, which is intended to regulate how to deal with and how to prevent abuse of power and sexual assault in theatre.



Pina Bausch (photo: AP Photo/Michael Probst)

09.

EXCURSUS ON DANCE

The revolutionary movements in art and society in the 1920s also particularly affected dance in Germany. The highly formalized movement language of classical ballet was not only attacked as an expression and relic of the courtly culture of feudalism, which was finally being overcome after 1918, but was also seen in principle as the epitome of man's being overlain by a social order that was hostile to his interests of freedom. In particular, expressive dance had the goal of working back to the natural movements of the body. In contrast to classical ballet, the beginning of the 20th century saw the emergence of a new form of ballet. Due to the strong dominance of German artists or artists working in Germany, this was soon called "New German Dance." National Socialism put a permanent end to this development.

In dance theatre in West Germany, it was not until the 1960s that Kurt-Jooss student Pina Bausch was able to effectively tie in with the demolished avant-garde tradition,

initially at the *Folkwangschule* in Essen, one of Germany's most renowned dance schools to this day. Since 1973, till her death in 2009, she has been the director of the ballet division of the Wuppertal Theatre, which has led her to world fame.

In the GDR, Gret Palucca resumed her work in Hellerau near Dresden immediately after the end of the war, where important innovators of dance such as Émile-Jacques Dalcroze and Rudolf von Laban had worked before 1933. But she repeatedly came into conflict with the avant-garde-hostile dogmatists in state and party leadership. The important choreographer and opera director Ruth Berghaus was born at her school. Until today the Dresden Palucca School is one of the leading educational institutions for modern and classical dance in Germany.

All educational establishments with university or higher education status:

http://tanzplan-deutschland.de/tanzausbildung_deutschland.php?id_language=1

Since 1990, only dancer and choreographer Sasha Waltz has succeeded in catching up with Pina Bausch both nationally and internationally. In contrast to Pina Bausch, Sasha Waltz comes from the independent dance scene before she became co-director of the Berlin Schaubühne together with director Thomas Ostermeier in 2000 after the final end of the Peter Stein era. She was one of the co-founders of the independent Berlin venue Sophiensaele and is now co-operator of her own venue in Berlin, the Radialsystem. Since the beginning of the 2018/19 season she has been artistic director of the Berlin State Ballet—together with Johannes Öhmann.

Modern dance theatre still has a hard time asserting itself in the three-division operation of state or community stages, where classical ballet still dominates today. One exception is the Theater Heidelberg, where the choreographer Johann Kresnik was already active in the 1980s and until recently the choreographer Nanine Linning was very successful with her dance theatre. The ballet companies of the city and state theatres—in contrast to the acting ensembles—have an international structure, as the German city theatre system offers attractive working conditions for well-trained dancers from all over the world.

With its focus on contemporary forms of dance and performance, the government's funding policy of recent years has also made the Federal Republic of Germany interesting in the independent sector for international artists. Artists like the Argentine choreographer Constanza Macras work both in the city theatre and in the independent scene, where Macras has been creating a furor for several

years with choreographic projects with Berlin immigrant children from socially marginalized groups. Thus dance theatre has also occupied a new social function as a medium of integration. In recent years, dance has also shown convincing ways of being a threshold medium and initiation instrument for cultural education and participation. This is because it offers the possibility of interaction between people of the most diverse backgrounds beyond age, language, or educational barriers. Even the "Interest Group of Cities with Theatrical Guest Productions" (Interessensgemeinschaft der Städte mit Theatergastspielen, INTHEGA), which has so far focused strongly on spoken, musical and light comedic theatre, is now increasingly trying to integrate modern dance theatre and performance into its programme. INTHEGA organises cities without their own theatre and outside of the federal state stages, which therefore have to organise the basic cultural provision of their citizens with theatre elsewhere.

10.

EDUCATION

Many federal states maintain their own top-class state training centres for theatre and dance. As a consequence of the division of the city, Berlin is doubly equipped in many areas. The state training centres for drama, dance, choreography and directing usually have university or college status. However, there are strong access restrictions. Furthermore, it is always only a fraction of the applicants who pass the tough entrance exams. Anyone who speaks German with an accent has little chance of getting a place for classical acting training at a state institution.

State theatre academies:

<https://www.hfs-berlin.de>
<https://www.udk-berlin.de>
<https://www.hfmt-hamburg.de>
<https://www.theaterakademie.de>
<https://www.hmtm-hannover.de>
<https://www.hmdk-stuttgart.de>
<https://www.hmt-leipzig.de>
<https://www.hmt-rostock.de>
<https://www.folkwang-uni.de>



Mittelreich Schwarzkopie/ Münchner Kammerspiele, Director: Anta Helena Recke (photo ©JudithBuss)

The theoretical and practical innovation elite of the German theatre and performance scene came for a long time from the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies at the Justus Liebig University in Gießen. In the tradition of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, the students learned to think along with the conditions of the respective form of representation in their theatre works. In Gießen, the term "post-dramatic theatre" was coined around 1990 by founding director Andrzej Wirth and the theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann: for a theatre whose basis no longer necessarily has to be a dramatic text. Giessen graduates who contemporary theatre has to thank for its characteristic impulses include the director and playwright René Pollesch, the documentary theatre-maker Hans-Werner Kroesinger and the members of the performance groups Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, and She She Pop, who also conquered the city theatres from the independent scene. In the meantime, the degree program Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Practice at the University of Hildesheim has also earned itself a reputation as a cadre forge for a growing theatre and performance avant-garde. Performance groups like machina eX, Henrike Iglesias, or Markus & Markus emerged from the Hildesheim school.



Volksbühne in the Castorf era with Räuberrad (photo: Wikimedia commons)

11. THE BERLIN VOLKSBUHNE CONTROVERSY

In reunited Germany, after 1989 the Berliner Volksbühne under artistic director Frank Castorf became the style-shaping theatre of the young Berlin Republic: a melting pot of artists from East and West—and also a meeting place for the audience from East and West. Besides Frank Castorf, the Volksbühne was particularly associated with the names of artists from East and West Germany, Austria, and Switzerland such as Christoph Marthaler, Christoph Schlingensief, René Pollesch, Herbert Fritsch, and the stage designer Bert Neumann (1960-2015). The Volksbühne under Frank Castorf produced a resistant and unmistakable aesthetic that worked its way through the existential cracks of the only superficially reunited Berlin, which were at the same time the cracks of Europe.

The divided city, which Berlin was just three years before Frank Castorf took office as artistic director at Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in 1992, was not only Germany's heart of darkness but also the

broken heart of Europe: the intersection of two ideologically and technologically highly equipped systems, between East and West, between communism and capitalism. Many Volksbühne productions of the Castorf era repeatedly inspected the chasms and ideologies of the fatal 20th century – whose fallout we can see in the present in the ghosts of totalitarianism that are reappearing and threaten democracy everywhere.

Whether it was Frank Castorf's sensational Dostoevsky adaptations, Christoph Marthaler's musically melancholic lost landscapes, René Pollesch's lucid discourse comedies about the individual dissolving under the pressure of neoliberal exploitation economies, or Christoph Schlingensief's provocative theatrical actions aimed at the hypocritical facades of consumption and consensus: the basic theme of the Volksbühne was the assertion of the individual in an ever more unleashed neoliberalism, which could not be tamed

by any enemy after 1989. An essential element in this was taking the side of the “humiliated and insulted,” whose voices and life stories no longer attracted attention after the victory of capitalism. This theatre was loved by its audience in East and West equally and was also internationally one of the most famous stages in Europe.

The end of Frank Castorf’s artistic directorship in 2015, unprofessionally forced by Berlin’s cultural policy, triggered a year-long cultural struggle. Over 40,000 people, including leading artists and intellectuals of the country, petitioned for the preservation of the theatre. The immature plan of the politicians was to transform the Volksbühne into an international production house that would work cross-sectorial. But the Castorf-Volksbühne, where crossover projects by visual artists or film directors as well as dance theatre were regularly residing, had always done this; first Johann Kresnik’s ensemble, later Meg Stuart and her dancers worked here.

Chris Dercon, originally a museum curator and presented as Castorf’s successor, was

overwhelmed. As well, his plans seemed to have little substance. Despite a preparation budget of €3 million, his team was not able to present a complete season. So the big theatre often remained closed due to a lack of programme. A few expensive guest performances cost a lot of money, while the permanent employees of the theatre remained unoccupied. Dercon also showed little skill in talking to the city and its audience, so that the few performances often played in front of half-empty rows. Eight months after the start of the first season for which he was responsible, Dercon gave up.

Dercon’s proponents, as well as Dercon himself, have repeatedly tried to reduce the conflict provoked by his appointment and his failure to an antagonism of national versus international. In fact, however, Castorf’s Volksbühne had an unmistakable signature that had made it one of the most interesting theatres in Europe internationally. Dercon, on the other hand, presented an interchangeable programme that was essentially taken from the glossy catalogues of the European dance and performance scene, some of whose works

had long been shown on other stages or festivals in Berlin—a programme that had already been covered by festivals and other production houses such as the Haus der Berliner Festspiele and the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) in Berlin and therefore no longer found an audience in the Volksbühne.

In the years 2015-2018, a front line emerged in particular from the struggles for the Berlin Volksbühne: city theatre versus production house. The plan of Chris Dercon and the then Berlin Cultural Administration was to transform the Volksbühne, which had been set up as a city theatre with a repertoire system, into a production house with a seasonal system. Both Dercon and Berlin politicians, however, concealed from the public this structural change they were striving for. Instead, an attempt was made to push this change through the back door without public debate. The protest in the city was also aimed at this process, which was so fierce because these structural questions had and have an exemplary character. The question behind this is to what extent this country can and wants to continue to afford its unique but expensive theatre system.



The Mirror Barricade (Die Spiegelbarrikade) by Theater Dortmund (photo © Flint Stelter)

12.

CITY THEATRE VERSUS
PRODUCTION HOUSE

Compared to the independent scene, city and state theatres were long regarded as structurally immobile, less innovative, and more committed to the preservation of cultural heritage. For a long time these institutions were dominated by the trust in a homogeneous audience rooted for generations in Germany. This was reflected in repertoire policies as well as in the composition of the ensembles. It was not until the last two decades that institutionalised theatre began to open up and no longer orient itself exclusively towards the idea of a national core culture. In times of tight public finances, it had been forced to redefine its function as a representative centre of urban culture.

Theatre audiences in Germany have diversified in recent decades, as has the society of the Federal Republic of Germany as a whole, which long since been made up of people with the most diverse cultural roots and educational contexts and can no longer be reached with the classical bourgeois educational canon—social realities that have long been ignored by city and state theatres.

However, these realities have long been a structural and content-related component of the independent scene, which has always been a decisive motor for the development of the performing arts in Germany. There, wide varieties of formats—from performance to documentary theatre, devised performances to free adaptations of classical material, interdisciplinary projects or symposia with socio-political content—were able to open up completely new audiences. These include a young generation that grew up with digital media and technologies, whose viewing habits and cultural techniques have since



Roma Armea, Director: Yael Ronen/Gorki Theater Berlin
(photo: © Ute Langkafel/Maifoto)

changed the demands placed on theatrical narratives.

Well before the term “Audience Development” became a marketing instrument in city theatre dramaturgies, independent venues such as Kampnagel in Hamburg, the FFT in Düsseldorf, the Berlin Sophiensäle or the HAU under Matthias Lilienthal had shown how this could be done: namely, by offering events for the most diverse target and interest groups. Also for those who no longer saw their demands on cultural education and entertainment necessarily fulfilled in a theatre evening alone, but also in events such as symposia on socio-political topics or, influenced by pop culture, mixed forms of reading, performance, and concert.

In the context of the search for new audiences, independent theatre also discovered a part of German society that had previously been completely ignored by city theatres: the descendants of those who had come to Germany since the 1960s as immigrants, so-called “guest workers”, and who had stayed here. They now account for almost one fifth of the German population. It was Matthias Lilienthal, director of the Berlin HAU, who founded the first theatre festival for post-migrant culture *Beyond Belonging* in 2005, where German artists with Turkish

roots could question their cultural identity for the first time. Shermin Langhoff, by that time commissioned by Matthias Lilienthal (who was Frank Castorf’s chief dramaturge at the Berlin Volksbühne from 1991-1998) as curator of the festival, soon brought the concept to supra-regional fame in her own small theatre, the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse in Kreuzberg, Berlin, where it was extended to other post-migrant subcultures.

Shermin Langhoff took over as artistic director of the *Maxim Gorki Theater* in Berlin in 2013. Since then, this theatre has been drawing its material decidedly from the horizons of immigrants and social minorities—looking for new material for a new audience, which has so far found itself and its cultural identity insufficiently represented in German theatre. The Gorki Theatre employs artists from a wide variety of countries, including Israel, Turkey, Russia, and the former Yugoslav republics. The Gorki Theatre is also home to an exile ensemble in which actors from Syria, Afghanistan, and Palestine are represented. On stage, not only the classical stage German is spoken, but also English, Arabic, Hebrew, or Turkish—sometimes all at the same time.

The Gorki Theatre, however, is a city theatre. For a long time now, the equation

independent scene = innovation, city theatre = conservative is no longer applicable. On the contrary: in contrast to the independent scene, publicly financed city and state theatres offer comparatively secure production and working conditions that also leave sufficient scope for innovation. Here, a long-term, reliable artistic development within the secured structures is possible. Such theatre artists as [Christoph Schlingensiefel](#) (1960-2010), René Pollesch, the performative extreme installations of the duo Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, and the performance and installation artists of the [SIGNA group](#), that had a huge influence on the independent scene, emerged, were supported and sometimes even discovered by institutional theatres. Christoph Schlingensiefel, for example, who began as an independent filmmaker, was first asked by the city theatre (the Berlin Volksbühne) to work for the stage in the 1990s and realized his most famous works here.

Where could the influential and provocative practices of artistic representation by the city and state theatres better be questioned than in those theatres themselves? At the Munich Kammerspiele, the young Afro-German director and performer Anta Helena Recke staged the so-called “black copy” of a successful production of the house. Based on an autobiographical novel by the Bavarian actor Sepp Bierbichler, *Mittelreich* tells the story of a Bavarian innkeeper family in the province over three generations. Director Anna-Sophie Mahler had successfully staged the family epic about home and German history at the *Münchener Kammerspiele* in 2015. Two years later, Anta Helena Recke staged an exact copy of this production, which, however, was exclusively cast with Afro-German actors and actresses.

“My initial question was, how can I make you experience in the theatre the resounding disillusionment you have when you understand for the first time

that you are white?” Recke explained her procedure in an interview. “How can I make visible something as invisible as whiteness? If you want to show something that exists, you have to make it again, but change one thing: the deviation in the repetition. You can see this thing for itself then.” And this deviation was that the predominantly white audience of the Munich Kammerspiele suddenly heard an urban Bavarian story told by black actors and was thus confronted with the question: what do terms like “home” or “German” actually mean—who belongs to them and who is excluded from them?

In contrast to city and state theatres, the artistic production conditions of the independent scene, due to their lean and often project-based structures, also fundamentally fit in the profile of what it means to work in neoliberalism. Projects of the independent scene thus breathe “the new spirit of capitalism”, as described by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their famous book. The unbound, flexible and also technically—regarding social security—self-employed “independent” creative is defined as a role model for neoliberal deregulated employment relationships.

Moreover, in recent years independent theatre has increasingly become the target of the creative economy, which

has discovered its potential as an “image factor” for the marketing of cities and regions. Here, too, the congruence of interests between the independent scene and the economy harbours the potential for social conflict. Various independent artists joined forces in Berlin in 2012 in order to speak as a lobby group with a common voice towards politics. This [Coalition of the Independent Scene](#) in Berlin successfully negotiated with politicians to participate in the income from the overnight-stay tax for tourists.

At the same time, activists groups easily suspect independent artists and companies of going along with the gentrifiers—of being their vanguard, so to speak. Since 2015, this has played a role in the debates about the successor to Frank Castorf as artistic director of the Berliner Volksbühne. A high point of this *Kulturkampf* was the occupation of the Volksbühne in September 2017 under the leadership of a loosely organized collective called [Staub zu Glitzer](#) (Dust to Glitter). Young people who wanted to protest against gentrification and expropriation of urban space by commercial interests—including the processes surrounding the installation of Chris Dercon—came together under this name. After a few days Dercon had to have the theatre cleared forcibly by the police.



Die Toten kommen, Aktion vom Zentrum für Politische Schönheit / Gorki Theater Berlin (photo © Nick Jaussi / ZPS)

13.

RIGHT-WING POPULIST
CLIMATE CHANGE

Increased migration from crisis and war zones in recent years, has put society under a pressure which is fuelling fears that are increasingly playing into the hands of right-wing populists. On the one hand, the different cultures and ways of life in German society pose new questions and challenges to theatres. Who is the audience? How must the traditional canon change? How can diversity in society also be reflected on stage?

Theatres (such as the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin or the Münchner Kammerspiele) that are looking for answers to these questions, are facing growing pressure from right-wing conservative to right-wing populist forces, which have gained increased importance in Germany in recent years. Right-wing populists do not want a diverse society, but insist on a diffuse, ethnically defined concept of tradition. Right-wing populists expect the theatre to preserve and strengthen German identity (whatever that may be) and culture, as well as doing so for a sense of belonging to the homeland. Since right-wing populist parties such as the AfD (Alternative for Germany) or movements such as PEGIDA (Patriots against the Islamisation of the Occident) have become more and more popular in Germany, theatres in the cities have often decidedly positioned themselves as bastions of civility and defenders of an open society—both independent theatres and city theatres.

Thus the Munich Residenztheater hung a giant banner with the inscription REGIDA on its façade, which made fun of the supporters of the PEGIDA movement (REGIDA = Residenztheater against the Idiotisation of the Occident). The Semperoper in Dresden, on whose forecourt the PEGIDA movement marched

every evening, simply switched off the light that would otherwise illuminate the square and Gottfried Semper's magnificent neo-Baroque building as bright as daylight. In 2016, the Dortmund Theatre used the methods of action art—a mirror barricade—to disrupt a march of neo-Nazis in the city who had travelled from all over Germany: with the help of inflatable balloons made of mirror foil, which can be classified art-historically somewhere between Andy Warhol's Silver Clouds and Christo's "Land-Art Projects."

In 2015, when hundreds of thousands of people reached Germany who had to leave their homelands because of need or war, the theatres also took part in helping these people, converting artists dressing rooms into emergency shelters for refugees, offering cultural programmes, or simply collecting donations. The online theatre magazine nachtkritik.de has documented these countless activities in a [long list](#).

In this context, Amelie Deuffhardt, the director of the Hamburg Kulturfabrik Kampnagel, was reported to the authorities by the AfD for "aid to the violation of the right of residence for foreigners." She, too, had offered refugees accommodation at the premises of the Kulturfabrik. As a result, the Hamburg public prosecutor's office had to initiate preliminary proceedings against her, which were, however, discontinued at the end.

One of the most spectacular actions of this time was the project The Dead Come by the action artists of the Centre for Political Beauty led by Philipp Ruch in June 2016. At a Muslim cemetery in Berlin, a burial was organized for a young woman who had drowned with her baby in the Mediterranean Sea while fleeing Syria and who had allegedly been recovered from a mass grave by the activists. The action deliberately left open whether this funeral was real or just an artistic action. On the following day, the people were called upon to join a funeral procession into the government quarter, walking behind the coffins of those other victims of the

European border policy who had drowned in the Mediterranean, in order to bury the dead in front of the Federal Chancellery. The police had forbidden the carrying along of an excavator that would have been necessary to inter them. On June 21, 2015, thousands of people marched on the Federal Chancellery to demonstrate against the daily tragedies at sea, where hundreds of people drowned every day (and still drown today), and demand the reception of refugees in Germany. At the end, the large meadow in front of the Reichstag in Berlin was covered with small symbolic graves that the people had spontaneously erected there.

Action artists such as the Centre for Political Beauty use public space as a stage. But this public space also inherently includes the digital public space, which has already for a long time been incorporated in the analogue space—with the social networks, for example. Many of the satirical and subversive actions of the Peng! collective, an association of artists, activists, craftspeople, and researchers in Berlin, can also be located in that context. A campaign against an advertising campaign of the German armed forces, Bundeswehr-Hack, became famous in particular. Peng! built a mock website that warned of the dangers and horrors of war and the army instead of promoting attractive job opportunities with the armed forces as on the original site. Within a very short time, the Peng! version of the Bundeswehr website beat the real site of the Bundeswehr in Google rankings. While the original campaign cost the Ministry of Defence €10.6 million, Peng!, by their own account, spent only about €100. The group has just received the [Aachen Peace Prize](#).

14.

THEATRE
AND DIGITALISATION

Digitalisation has long since begun to reformat the performing arts, even though many theatre makers did not really want to admit this for a long time. They were of the opinion that their art form was a purely analogue one and therefore not affected by the consequences of digitisation. But digitisation not only creates new cultural techniques, it also changes the old ones. Non-linear, interactive narrative forms, as are the rule in digital media or computer games, have led to the development of new theatre formats and narrative styles. The performance group Machina_eX develops evenings which have several optional courses of action. Which course the story takes depends decisively on the participation of the spectators and the decisions they make in the course of the performance. The group Prinzip Gonzo builds interactive theatre evenings as open world game arrangements, which would not work without the participating audience. The Berlin network Invisible Playground, a collective of game designers, visual artists, theatre makers, musicians, theorists, and practitioners, is developing art projects and game arrangements that use analogue and digital urban space as a platform. The suggestive and elaborate long-term installations of the SIGNA group make their stories accessible only to viewers who actively roam these installations, play along, talk to performers, or the figures they embody.

The duo Chris Kondek and Christiane Kühl present interactive performances under the label Double-Lucky Productions, which made the audience experience in concrete terms how surveillance works. For the Anonymus P. project in 2013, they collaborated for the first time with hackers who hacked the smartphones



The Hairs Of Your Head Are Numbered, by Chris Kondek + Christiane Kühl / Doublelucky productions (photo: Kim Albrecht)

of spectators during the performance and projected their sensitive data onto a screen. The last production *The Hairs Of Your Head Are Numbered* made it possible to experience how humans are themselves becoming cyborgs by means of live surveillance technology—not only through medical digital surveillance via apps and smartwatches, but also through their permanent self-representation in social media and the constantly growing need to control their own external perception.

These increasingly immersive works of art don't imply an audience which just stands facing. Instead, the audience becomes part of the artwork and co-produces what it simultaneously consumes, as a "pro-sumer."

In particular, digitisation has given object and puppet theatre a new relevance. Here the transitions between physical and virtual objects are just as fluid as the animation of figures and objects by players or computer programs. The vocational training in puppetry at the Berlin Academy of Dramatic Arts opened already some years ago a department dealing with the implementation of digital media in puppet and object theatre in order to investigate new paths in the aesthetic practice of theatrical narrative for several years now.

This has led to the emergence of the Master's programme Play and Object, the first year of which began in the winter semester of 2018/19 and, according to its own statement, has undertaken interdisciplinary artistic research at the interface between "the utopia of the playful and the social relevance of objects in a contemporary, mediatized, social context: for a theatre in the age of the Internet of Things." The Berlin object and puppet theatre Schaubude organises the annual festival "Theatre of Things" (Theater der Dinge), which focuses on experimental developments in the field of contemporary puppetry and object theatre.

The stage in Germany that deals most offensively and creatively with questions of theatre and digitisation is the Dortmund Theatre. Here, the further digital development of theatre aesthetics is being researched beyond the use of new technologies. The Internet and its effects on society are subject of artistic contemplation in several directions. To this end, the Dortmund Theatre was converted into a technological workshop of the future, alliances were forged with Internet activists, hackers, technicians, and developers of hardware and software.

According to the Dortmund Theatre every theatre dramaturgy needs a programmer. At the same time, the theatre has redefined its mission as a "moral institution" for the digital age, i.e., to show theatre productions that explain the risks and side effects of the digital age. In addition, the Dortmund Theatre has dedicated itself to the idea of the theatre as an institution for learning digital media competence: the theatre as a moral institution 4.0.

Thus an evening was created at the Dortmund Theatre about people who, on behalf of Facebook in the Philippines, have to spend murderously long shifts looking at and deleting all the violent and pornographic images that are uploaded daily to Facebook worldwide. Because neither filters nor algorithms can cope with these floods of cruel images. (Moritz Riesewieck / *Laokoon Group: In Manila*). The Internet activist and researcher Arne Vogelgesang and his group *Internil* presented various evenings that evaluate videos by extremists of all kinds on YouTube and pursue the question: where does this hatred come from? With his staging *Borderline Prozeession*, the director and artistic director of the Kay Voges Theatre developed a theatre evening that deals with the constantly firing media and excessive

demands in a world that broadcasts via thousands of channels whose emissions the individual can hardly process in simultaneity: a suggestive and powerful high-tech opera and scenic installation whose flood of simultaneous images and stories threatens to drown the spectators.

For Kay Voges, who was born in Düsseldorf in 1972, the essential question for his theatrical work is how one can confront and help shape technology in the digital age, both as a theatre maker and as a spectator, instead of being at its mercy and leaving the field to the Internet companies. For Voges this also applies to the development and design of content on the Internet, which has so far been dominated by private-sector corporations. "We need to learn to master this technology, but also to understand how the Internet and digitalisation are transforming our society," says Voges. In February 2018 the founding event for an Academy for Theatre and Digitality (Akademie für Theater und Digitalität) took place at the Dortmund Theatre. In cooperation with the German Theatre Technician Society (Deutsche Theatertechnische Gesellschaft, DTHG), the Dortmund Theatre wants to make artists and theatre technicians fit for theatre in the digital age.

Since 2013, the Theater und Netz conference in Berlin has been bundling the knowledge and issues of theatre and digitisation. The founders and organisers are the theatre portal nacht kritik.de and the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Theater und Netz examines to what extent the upheavals of digitalisation have consequences for the theatre from various perspectives. The topics range from information for theatre people about digital possibilities for communication, marketing, and audience development and a positioning of the performing arts in the network society, towards aesthetic, technological and socio-political questions. Under the pressure of digitalisation, the classical bourgeois public sphere, which had previously also been the site of the theatre, is also eroding. In this disruption scenario, which is currently rearranging the relationship between artist, artwork, and audience, the performing arts must reposition themselves. Artists, theatre makers, technicians, politicians and net activists meet for discussion at Theater und Netz. The conference sees itself as a bridge between the network conference *re:publica* and the Berlin Theatertreffen and takes place every year in May between the two industry meetings of the network and the theatre scene in Berlin.



Borderline Prozeession, Director: Kay Voges/ Theater Dortmund (photo © Birgit Hupfeld)

CONCLUSION

The scene in Germany is a scene in upheaval. The performing arts today works to mediate between the most diverse intersections: at the crossing of private and public spaces, at the border between fiction and documentation, between pop and high culture, and

between the virtual and physical world. The borders between the sectors and between institutional and independent forms of production are becoming fluid, as are the borders between countries and cultures. However, the dense network of the city, state, and national

theatres in Germany still represents a strong structural umbrella for the overall architecture of the theatre landscape, which needs to be defended. That is why independent and institutionalised theatre should not be played off against each other.