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Who Wants a Theatre Company  
and Doesn't Have One?

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## Who Wants a Theatre Company and Doesn't Have One?

In early 2016, it was announced that the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz would not continue to exist in the shape that it had taken over recent decades. The Berliner Senatsverwaltung, essentially consisting of Berlin's mayor, Michael Müller, and its secretary for cultural affairs, Tim Renner, decided to hand the direction of the theatre from Frank Castorf to Chris Dercon in autumn 2017. Though Castorf had been director of the theatre since 1992, this was a surprising announcement. Dercon is currently director of the Tate Modern museum in London and has worked as a curator in other contexts.

The discussion around the announced replacement at the Volksbühne quickly turned into a passionate fight about different organizational models in theatre, and has been called among other things the culture conflict of Berlin (*Berliner Kulturkampf*).

In this article, I will give a quick overview of how this debate has developed and which positions are at play. Then I will dismantle some of the implications that I see, especially in one of the two threads of argumentation: What ideas about cultural institutions and public spaces are represented in the defense of the Volksbühne as it is?

Without endorsing the takeover by Chris Dercon – mainly because I can't know at this point what it will bring – I will critically evaluate the claim that the current model at the Volksbühne is what Berlin needs, as some state.<sup>1</sup> To conclude, I will try to give some indications of how to imagine a theatre institution that would manage to integrate some of the points of critique that have been part of the debate.

The announcement of this change provoked a political debate that quickly reached a level that lacks concrete connection with what was actually about to happen. The personalities of Castorf and Dercon were transformed into representatives of two different ideas of a theatre institution. Castorf stands for German state theatre, which operates continuously and locally in order to offer not only bourgeois entertainment but also a space of identification and discussion around political issues. Dercon, on the other hand, is considered to be acting internationally and on an interdisciplinary basis; his idea of theatre is informed by a curatorial practice that mixes formats and media and that handles political issues on a level that takes into account the pluralist character of

1 As German theatre directors Joachim Lux, Martin Kusej and Ulrich Khuon claim in their open letter to Culture Secretary Tim Renner, "Berlin Braucht Frank Castorf!", <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/offener-brief-an-tim-renner-intendanten-berlin-braucht-frank-castorf/11658772.html>.

contemporary society.

It is remarkable how quickly these two very distinct counterpositions were established. It was expected that everyone who participated in the debate would take sides. The way in which the two different approaches to organizing a theatre company (one of them being only barely known) were played out against each other was emotional, but also stubborn and ideological. It became a pro or con: strictly pro-Castorf or pro-Dercon. A rough vocabulary was established at a very early stage<sup>2</sup> and the number of participants in the debate steadily grew.

The initial act that called for broad resistance was an open letter<sup>3</sup> published in June 2016 and signed by a significant number of employees from different departments of the Volksbühne. In it, the staff articulated their concern that the Volksbühne would be subjected to severe restructuring with the threat of job losses once the new director took up the position of *Intendant*. These fears had been raised, as the employees write, during the first meeting held with Dercon. The fact that his work has been that of a curator gave rise to the assumption that the structure of a well established so-called ensemble theatre would be liquidated on his very first day. The Volksbühne workshops, fulltime technicians and make-up artists would no longer be needed in a theatre with a programme consisting of ever-changing guest performances produced abroad.

Furthermore, a number of theatre directors, *Intendanten* and cultural spokespeople in general quickly positioned themselves in solidarity with the current staff at the Volksbühne and pointed out its cultural and artistic significance.<sup>4</sup> Ranging from the director Claus Peymann of the Berliner Ensemble to Martin Kusej, *Intendant* at the Residenztheater in Munich, they claimed an allegiance to the institution that had not necessarily been articulated before. As Amelie Deuffhard of the Kampnagel theatre in Hamburg mentioned in an interview, a lot of people suddenly took a protectionist attitude towards the Volksbühne and its staff, no matter how big the differences and conflicts had been over the past twenty-five years.<sup>5</sup>

Some months later, another open letter was published,<sup>6</sup> this time to Mayor Müller, in which international curators and artists including Okwui Enwezor, Hans Ulrich and Rem Koolhaas stepped to the defense of Dercon. They pointed to his professional qualities and to his artistic networks, and assured everyone that he was aware what kind of

2 Carl Hegemann spoke of a hostile takeover (*feindliche Übernahme*) (<https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/raus-aus-dem-business-as-usual>), while Claus Peymann proclaimed that Chris Dercon would turn the Volksbühne into an “event shed” (*Eventschuppen*).

3 The original is available here: [http://volksbuehne-berlin.de/deutsch/offener\\_brief/](http://volksbuehne-berlin.de/deutsch/offener_brief/), with the English translation here: <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/volksbuhne-staff-on-chris-dercon-we-fear-job-cuts-and-liquidation/3911>.

4 See <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/offener-brief-an-tim-renner-intendanten-berlin-braucht-frank-castorf/11658772.html>.

5 See <http://www.ndr.de/kultur/Amelie-Deuffhard-zur-Debatte-ueber-Chris-Dercon,journal520.html>.

6 An overview of the exchange of letters is available at the *New York Times* website: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/theater/plans-for-volksbuhne-theater-cause-worry-about-berlins-artistic-direction.html>; the letter of support is at [https://www.nachtkritik.de/images/stories/pdf/Chris\\_Dercon\\_Letter\\_of\\_Support.pdf](https://www.nachtkritik.de/images/stories/pdf/Chris_Dercon_Letter_of_Support.pdf).

institution he would be in charge of.

### **The Legacy of Castorf's Volksbühne**

Works produced at the Volksbühne during the Castorf era enjoy great acclaim, both regionally and internationally. Directors including Castorf, René Pollesch, Dimitter Gottscheff and Herbert Fritsch established theatre aesthetics that have shaped decisive parts of the canon of post-dramatic theatre. The regularity with which the theatre reinvented its aesthetic concept during these years made it a cultural authority. Castorf has personified the institution and offered the possibility of continuous artistic working practice to some of those directors. Such continuity in theatre work is not self-evident in the rest of German *Stadttheater* system, and even more successful directors have to work with very different actresses and actors depending on with which theatre they are currently producing work, while the ensemble of the Volksbühne has remained more or less the same. This privilege of continuity does not only apply at the level of director-actor relations: Many culture institutions are forced to restructure as the result of financial cuts or changing audiences, for example. The Volksbühne, meanwhile, has made itself the linchpin. The success and trust towards Castorf's leadership has positioned it at the spot from which changes could be observed – instead of experienced. This is a strong aesthetic standpoint, wherein the continuation of its thought positions the theatre institution as a stable entity within a constantly changing reality. In this model, cultural production sustains an outside perspective, rather than being implied in changes on a material level.

Members of the staff and thinkers around the company insist on the idea that theatre and art need to build a solid opposition towards the ways in which reality is shaped by current economic circumstances. At the level of the institution, this means that providing stability of structures designed in accordance with workers' rights is part of the anti-capitalist resistance. Can the same be the case for the aesthetics being produced? Does an aesthetic stubbornness, a perpetuation of forms that originate in radical leftist positions, automatically maintain its radicalism when capitalism accelerates? Perhaps it is important to hang on to forms that have found a way of addressing very clearly the contradictory logics of capitalism.

Here, we find a Marxist way of working reformulated for aesthetic operations in the 20th century by Heiner Müller, Bertolt Brecht and – with reservations – by Theodor Adorno. It is an idea of art production that is deeply rooted in political conflicts that arose during 20th century, including fascism and government repression during the Communist era of East Germany. Among other things, this is driven by the conviction that political progress functions through the dialectics of proposition and antithesis – and as an antithesis, the Volksbühne began being successful.

In order to evaluate how the Volksbühne has actualized its strategies of critique, I will try to look at its dialectic apparatus on its own terms. This means I will look for possible self-contradictions within the Volksbühne system – a heretical method, but possibly the only one that is fair about the company's self-conception.

My interest is not to undermine the Volksbühne's legacy in favour of a competing aesthetic idea, but to find how its structural renewal can be imagined if we keep some important principles of the agents of the

Castorf era in mind.

Here, I will focus on the argument of Guillaume Paoli, a philosopher who positions himself in close proximity to the Volksbühne's endeavours and emphasizes his defense of it by proposing to rebuild the original Volksbühne movement.<sup>7</sup>

### Self-Contradiction and Resistance

"Nothing has to stay the way it is"<sup>8</sup> is the opening sentence of Paoli's defense, and it immediately appears as a paradoxical statement under present circumstances. The goal of his article is very similar to mine, but he comes to different conclusions: he seeks to critically review the opposition between traditionalists on one side and visionaries on the other that has dominated the debate. Paoli's argument aims to show the extent to which Castorf and his team are visionaries in the field of theatre and have built successful resistance contra the economization of Germany's cultural landscape.

It goes like this: the criticality that Paoli has towards those who describe the Volksbühne as traditionalist is exactly the criticality he lacks when sketching the purported plans of Chris Dercon. Supposedly, dramatic and language-based theatre will be removed from the programme to benefit artistic formats more eligible for commercialization. Paoli argues that the current programme at the Volksbühne is oriented towards a local audience because its stage language is German. In this, he sees a feature that inherently resists commercialization since, according to him, the economic force that has changed Berlin in recent years emanates from international inhabitants who, due to their economic privilege, 'can sovereignly ignore the country's language'.<sup>9</sup> Paoli mentions that the programme that will shape the Volksbühne in the future, however international and accessible for non-German speakers, will still not be curated for 'Syrian and Afghan refugees who are forced to learn German in order to be able to survive'.<sup>10</sup>

The construction of Paoli's argument suggests the following opposition: the line is drawn between a resistant, historically informed, local approach to cultural production and a flexible, context-independent and thereby pre-commercialized one. This comparison functions essentially – but not only – by the significance and insignificance of language in theatre. Paoli seems to think that any art that renounces language as a key element is automatically in bigger danger of being economically appropriated.

The general idea of this argument definitely has a point: there have been critical analyses of how flexibility that arises from specific ways in which art production has changed in the current period of capitalism is a major issue when it comes to rendering artistic work precarious.<sup>11</sup> The

7 See <http://guillaumepaoli.de/allgemein/aufruf-zur-gruendung-einer-neuen-volksbuehnenbewegung/>. Historically, the Volksbühne was founded by a workers' union that built itself a theatre. This type of democratic and self-organized founding process is recalled in Paoli's proposition.

8 See <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/ein-fels-dem-branding/>. Translation by the author.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 See Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (London: Zero Books, 2015).

ways in which artists are forced to adapt their ways of life, not only to how they choose to do their work but to how institutions are willing to support their work, has taken problematic turns. Giving up a permanent place of residence, exchanging a continuous working practice for short-term project-based work, and generally renouncing certain demands one could formulate in order to be able to work (such as appropriate payment, etc.) are certainly among the biggest problems within the field of international performance. But Paoli is in fact not the first to have noticed this and the Volksbühne is by no means the most reliable source of possible solutions or ideas on how to solve these problems. The sedateness of production formats it offers can only be perpetuated by the reliability of culture funding that supports a very specific type of theatre. Artists interested in spaces outside of the main stage, for example, would have big problems with production formats that are supported there.

The Volksbühne around Castorf has found one way to reject any adaptation to changed relations of production within their own structures. But this is also tied to very specific methods of production, which are again connected to a certain aesthetic. Wouldn't it be important to recognize the differing ways in which the performing arts develop and to open up to a broader variety? I think this process also comes with a more complex idea of contemporary capitalism.

The preservation of language-based theatre alone will not provide the resistance that is an appropriate reaction towards the specific kind of precarization that has been going on within and outside the arts in recent decades. Even if it manages to escape it, at the same time, it does not have to confront it.

Hito Steyerl has argued how the opposition between 'cosmopolitan elites' and the 'indigenous oppressed'<sup>12</sup> is enacted in this conflict as much so as it is in many others. Categories are confused and different arguments and critical lines of thinking merge into very solid and seemingly indivisible positions that tend to impose either-or confrontations. In this example, the indigenous oppressed are connected with the use of German language, a certain continuity in the theatre programme, aesthetic reliability and – ultimately – the preservation of *Stadttheater* as a public institution in its current condition.

Other artists and members of Berlin's culture class have taken comparably ambiguous positions: there is great agreement on the fact that ending Castorf's Volksbühne is a big loss for Berlin's cultural landscape. Many people point out the significance that the Volksbühne had for their own artistic production and theatre-making in general. The perspective of the company under that management not being there anymore creates bitterness and sadness among locals. The Berlin-based pop-magazine *Das Wetter*<sup>13</sup> featured an edition almost exclusively dedicated to the Volksbühne, though the magazine usually supports artists much younger than René Pollesch and Frank Castorf.

12 'But many current global conflicts are generally flattened to "metropolitan elites" vs. "indigenous oppressed". I think that this opposition is stupid and a dead end', Hito Steyerl writes in response to an article on this debate on the website *e-flux*. Available in the comment section here: <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/volksbuhne-staff-on-chrisdercon-we-fear-job-cuts-and-liquidation/3911>.

13 *Das Wetter – Magazin für Text & Musik*, October 2017.

The exchange of open letters mentioned above included a contribution by anonymous artists responding to support given to Dercon by internationally active curators:<sup>14</sup> they point towards what they see as the biggest problem in Berlin's culture scene, which is the precarization of work relations. The authors of the letter express the omnipresent fear of being swallowed by the globalized art market, of lacking stable income and of being forced into increasing flexibility. The Volksbühne case, they say, is exemplary for this – but far from singular.

It is clearly acceptable to say Let's not open up another space that reproduces exploitative structures that we have seen take over in the performing arts when it comes to artistic labour and that were established long ago in the field of fine arts. But to connect and oppose different styles of theatre to the existence of these structures will not help. It might be true that the kind of exploitation that goes with flexibility is much more present on the international scene of performing arts than it is in the German *Stadttheater* system. But it demands a closer look at how these structures have developed in order to make artistic concepts responsible for them. We all clearly want theatre to be funded by a state that knows about the significance of culture in the well-being of people. But we have to ask ourselves how this conviction, prominently established by the German bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, can be successfully transferred into the twenty-first century? We are confronted with a change of class relations as well as globalized structures in the production of culture. What is an appropriate answer to this?<sup>15</sup>

### What's Coming?

The current staff at the Volksbühne has been working on these questions of structure for a long time. But the suspicion arises that certain things that have to do with privilege and social changes have shifted beyond their perspective. This is why that massive monolith in the middle of Berlin might be ready for a change: it should be staffed by other sections of culture workers.

Chris Dercon will bring more actors on the culture scene with him to curate the programme of the Volksbühne. The work of these people has barely been considered as a way of finding out about structural propositions that might influence the future at the institution.

Mette Ingvarstsen and Boris Charmatz have been working as choreographers and dancers in the field of contemporary choreography. Their work, along with that of others, has contributed to the forming of a scene that questions the institutional framework of performing arts – for example, by shifting the space of performances from theatres to museums.

14 <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/ein-anonymes-kunstlerinnen-statement-zur-volksbuhnendebatte/>.

15 I am aiming at the structural changes in capitalism that tend to develop different networks rather than providing a systemic entity that can be resisted as a whole. As Felix Guattari says, with the way in which capitalism has changed and adapted to different environments, conventional tools are no longer sufficient as a reaction. Problems have rather to be integrated and treated within the realm of the institution itself. 'In doing this it is no longer possible to claim to be opposed to capitalist power only from the outside, through trade unions and traditional politics. It is equally imperative to confront capitalism's effects in the domain of mental ecology in everyday life: individual, domestic, material, neighbourly, creative or one's personal ethics'. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London, New Brunswick: Athlone Press, 2000), p. 50.

Such work has initiated a new discourse on the perception of theatre. Furthermore, the scene they are often identified with has raised new questions about how to understand the 'concept' aspect of conceptual arts.<sup>16</sup> Since their work develops in different types of institutions, in site-specific environments and with varied levels of culture funding, it creates a very immediate experience of how institutions and markets are constructed and they may well bring interesting perspectives to the Volksbühne. Since Ingvarlsen and Charmatz are but two of the five people Dercon will bring aboard, there's a good chance that there will be a variety of organizational (and resistant) approaches entering into a dialogue.

And this heterogeneity alone will change the structure at the Volksbühne, where Castorf has long been the head of decision-making. Of course, those decisions have been taken along with other people, for example, the dramaturges Carl Hegemann and, at the beginning of Castorf's tenure, Mathias Lilienthal, but the continuity of employment has led to the establishment of certain purposes and, probably, also processes of decision-making. It is interesting in this regard to read what Adorno wrote in his essay 'Culture and Administration', on the question of institutional homogeneity:

The advantage of totalitarian 'monolithic' nations over liberalist nations in power politics which can be internationally observed today is also applicable to the structure of organizations of small format. Their external effectivity is a function of their inner homogeneity, which in turn is dependent upon the so-called totality gaining primacy over individual interests, so that the organization qua organization takes the place of such interests. An organization is forced into independence by self-preservation; at the same time this establishment of independence leads to alienation from its purposes and from the people of whom it is composed. Finally – in order to be able to pursue its goals appropriately – it enters into a contradiction with them.<sup>17</sup>

The only way to stay true to the task of culture administration is to practice self-contradiction to the fullest. This does not only mean putting new obstacles into one's own thinking, but to actually create an obstructive institutional environment. Here, representational politics come into play. As a matter of fact, the Volksbühne history named thus far is entirely male and white. Other obstacles can be found than those in divergent social experiences, of course, but after twenty-five years with the same team of old revolutionaries, I can hardly imagine the contradictions to be as activating as they were in the beginning of the 1990s.

The subtext of defenses by Paoli and other allies is the suspicion that the artistic programme to be expected in the new Volksbühne will be elitist and exclusive. Dercons' proximity to the fine arts is crucial in that assumption.

Contemporary art is a classist genre, no matter if it is produced by Damien Hirst or René Pollesch. The argument for it to be publicly funded doesn't follow the aesthetic forms it takes, but the conviction that

16 See Bojana Cvejic, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in Contemporary Dance and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

17 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Culture and Administration', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 110.

it can, when offered in a continuous, affordable way, gain people's trust and appreciation. To do this, one possibility is of course to sustain a specific theatre style for many years. Another would be to formulate offers of dialogue and mediation as an institution, or to think about the location of the theatre in the city. Dercon's suggestion on this may be the opening of another venue at Berlin Tempelhof, the former airfield currently converted to a refugee centre.

### **Future Impulses**

After having pushed back a bit against wishes for the preservation of the Volksbühne as it has been, I want to turn to general thoughts about theatre as a public institution. But before leaving the topic of the transition in Berlin entirely, I don't want to leave unmentioned my view that the decision to close precisely the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg Platz is one of the most unprofessional decisions ever to have been made in cultural politics. My problem, as I hope has become clear by now, is not derived from any aversion to the theatre work currently produced at the Volksbühne. It is only an aversion to the way in which the debate seems to be satisfied with outrageous simplifications.

This critique in no way equals an affirmation of the coming leadership of Chris Dercon. I do worry about precarization in the performing arts, also in the context of what the Volksbühne will be from October 2017 on. But I see different ways of dealing with these dangers than does Guillaume Paoli. I would ask for a true radicalism in decisions that were made and are to be made, which refrain from any alternative between keeping the existing system running and turning over this institution to a singular, middle-aged, white, male, upper-class individual. These cannot be the only options when it comes to responsibility for culture institutions. This argument may seem obvious, therefore it is remarkable that it hasn't been a focus in the discussions at all. Especially because it translates to the meta-level: Amelie Deuffhard notices in her interview that even in the debate around the Volksbühne, women or even people of younger generations are barely involved.<sup>18</sup> Hanna Lühmann, a young journalist from Berlin, wrote an article that labeled the internal protest as a 'conspiracy of the year 1951, designed to repress the youth',<sup>19</sup> in an only slightly polemic way.

Politics of representation is clearly not a cause of concern for those who are used to being granted the responsibility of taking care of a public institution.

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But no matter how painful the loss of a familiar place can be, there are ways of gaining some perspective on it. Instead of grieving about the specificity of the theatre of the past twenty-five years, I want to know what kind of structures can enable these beautiful processes of empowerment through art. For a discussion about this, we have to separate the possibilities for them to happen from the names they are currently

18 See <http://www.ndr.de/kultur/Amelie-Deuffhard-zur-Debatte-ueber-Chris-Dercon,journal520.html>.

19 See <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article159207567/Warum-die-Berliner-Volksbuehne-sterben-muss.html>.

identified with. Castorf, Sophie Rois, Christoph Schlingensief and René Pollesch created a canon that made us hopeful that there can be a dynamic community of artists and thinkers providing a very vivid relation with an audience over generations. But there are others who promise these things in an equally convincing way. Since this seems to have been going on forever, maybe it's time to trust in women, in dance and in a somewhat more diverse community, to find means of self-preservation for the future.

I suggest that we apply different threads of political thought towards how a public institution, even a theatre institution, should be generated: I don't mind the strength of counter-revolutionary dialectics being one of them. But I also want to be sure that Deleuze and Guattari's thoughts on micropolitics, for example, and Michel Foucault's analysis of (structural) power and Nancy Fraser's feminist-institutional theory of redistribution and recognition can be part of it. I furthermore demand that a reflection of gender and race relations within the institution be assured.

What could this look like? The suggestion that Paoli finally comes up with is to re-establish the Volksbühne movement, a community of workers that originally founded the place in the 19th century. They wanted a theatre company but didn't have one. Paoli wants to initiate a new gathering in which the future of the institution and the people who will shape it should be discussed. This is, of course, a very democratic proposition. It is the attempt to create a space of discursive participation that shall then create a new type of broadly supported theatre. Though the invitation that is formulated is a very broad one (people who are and are not interested in theatre<sup>20</sup>), it only exists in German and does not reflect upon ways in which spaces remain exclusive, however often they formulate their explicit wish not to be so. It is structural reasons that make them exclusive and, to begin with, the insistence on German as the language of discussion does contribute a great deal to that.

If we reformulate the question, we could arrive at: who wants a theatre company and doesn't have one? In all its implications and nuances, this should not be discussed in the Roter Salon, the small recital and events space attached to the Volksbühne. It should be curious about other spaces where people may already be discussing theatre they would wish to have, then try to be a host for them.

Christoph Schlingensief, clearly one of the most radical veterans of the Volksbühne, confronted this contradictory structure of inclusions and exclusions in the theatre in a regular manner when he went outside and invited people in. Schlingensief reconsidered the logic of its architecture, of participation and protection, over and over again. In order to be true to the democratic idea, this process has to be repeated in different, more contemporary ways, and with more effort than a printed invitation to the theatre's community room. Schlingensief died in 2010 and his force, which placed new challenges on the self-conception of the theatre, is painfully missed.

### **Aesthetics of Production**

One question is constant in this debate, but also very general: how is the discussion of aesthetics connected to the discussion of politics,

20 <http://guillaumepaoli.de/allgemein/aufruf-zur-gruendung-einer-neuen-volksbuehnenbewegung/>. Translated by the author.

structural power and leftist theory? In this article, I have tried to distinguish these spheres from one another in order to understand what kinds of assumptions and implications have been made about different aesthetic approaches and artistic disciplines. This is very evident in the extent to which institutional organization in fine arts will automatically be more identified with affirmation of value production than is the case with theatre. This is partly due to the fact that public funding is an important part of performing-arts production (especially in Germany). Another reason might be the ever-ready social character of performing arts: most production processes involve more than one person, thus they involve questions of distribution and economy from the very start.<sup>21</sup>

But along with this, it can be interesting work to investigate how certain aesthetics are entangled with certain modes of production. In my view, this is not work that in the end result returns to the production model of ensemble theatre, but is much more delicate. For production processes should be investigated carefully and in the context of their singularity, in order to find out about their acceptance of commercialization or their critical potential. As mentioned above, there is great potential for doing so in the current intersections of production processes. In this respect, contemporary performing arts have made some efforts that might also be read as a revisited institutional critique. There are, simultaneously, huge possibilities for messing up precisely this critical potential, and to adapt all too simply to what winds up being economically feasible.

How can a public theatre provide a framework that allows artists to reflect upon their modes of production without being forced into precariousness? This is a potential field for organizational radicality that I would follow, having in mind the legacy of the Volksbühne as a critical institution: an institution that provides critical education and discourse, as well as a space of manifold voices and, thereby, manifold self-contradictions.

The modes of production that I find worthy of investigation and of reflection on through art are the ones happening outside of publicly funded theatre rather than the ones established within it. It is the task of the theatre to enable a discourse about them that does not completely lack credibility. To do that, it might even be necessary to partially affirm them and – in reflected modifications – let them enter the building to find out what is actually going on. Let Chris Dercon enter the building to find out what he wants and how he works. Because good and evil should never be decided on from the isolation behind barricades – only by looking at relations of production.

Brecht has his say on this:

A theatre that makes productivity its main source of entertainment must also make productivity its theme, and with a particular keenness today when people everywhere are being prevented by other people from producing themselves, in other words from securing their own sustenance, from being entertained and from entertaining themselves.<sup>22</sup>

21 By this I mean negotiations around budgeting in free-production structures as well as time-planning, individual resources, etc.

22 Bertolt Brecht, 'Short Organon for the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre* (Bloomsbury eBook, 2014), p. 632.

I understand from this that for Brecht, the chance of theatre is to reflect on the relation of productivity, because it is after all the source of entertainment. Productivity is a sphere that connects life with theatre, and in order for the theatre to stay true, it must catch up with reality by using real images. In a different aesthetic, one does rely more on ways of articulation than on imagery, and a contemporary version of that thought could be to integrate and reflect on production processes in artistic-production processes.

Note: This article was written in February 2017 and therefore refers to a very specific point of the debate around the Volksbühne. The line of argument does not so much take into account the concrete facts about the new Intendanz that have been revealed during the past months, but speaks from a veil of ignorance, hoping to think about the possibilities of institutional theatre in a rather general way. The press conference about the specific plans for Volksbühne that was held in May 2017 raised major doubts about which of the potentials that are sketched in this article will actually be realized with the new administration of the theatre. Instead, it became obvious that the programme is not following the idea that nothing has to stay the way it is, but exactly the opposite of that idea. What was announced looks like an adaption of the structures and aesthetics that were established in the European performance scene years ago, with little modification and under slightly improved conditions.

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#### Abstract

**Henrike Kohpeiss**

Who Wants a Theatre Company and Doesn't Have One?

Taking a close look at the debate about the replacement of Frank Castorf as director of the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin, I will

comment on different aspects of the legacy and potentials of institutional theatre. The relation between representational politics of institutions and the claim for a revolutionary attitude will be discussed as two important but very different demands that could be directed towards arts institutions. Finally, I argue why a reflection on the relations of production from an aesthetic perspective might be a way to sustain the political legitimacy of a theatre company.