

Heiner Goebbels

There Is No Such Thing as a Giessen School

www.polishtheatrejournal.com

Publisher:

Theatre Institute in Warsaw

Theatre Academy in Warsaw

Heiner Goebbels

There Is No Such Thing as a Giessen School

A few days ago, I told one of our Polish students where I am going and what the conference is about – and he just said ‘They talk too much about Giessen in Poland’. I couldn’t find out if he thought our institute is totally overrated here, or maybe he just wanted to prevent more of his friends from coming over to Giessen...

Anyway, thank you very much for the invitation to this conference and for the honouring topic, which is a huge ballast at the same time – a heavy duty for us.

In the past, I have already talked and written a lot about the right balance, the perhaps impossible balance, between research and craft. And as you all know – and that is why we are here – this is not an Eastern problem, it is a world-wide problem, from China to New Zealand, from Buenos Aires to Bogotá, Moscow or Seattle: all conservatories for theatre and theatre-related disciplines, for dancers, singers, instrumentalists, actors, directors, stage and costume designers, are now about to wake up to the fact that their existence is the result of the long development of an aesthetic convention. All these training centres were founded with the sole purpose of providing new talent for the representative institutions, in order that night after night they are able to perform ballets, operas, concerts, theatre and musicals. They are the result of an existing artistic practice in action, which is at least a hundred years old – and the basic premises for opera training are actually quite a bit older.

None of those institutions were built in order to renew aesthetics, or to question the structures or the basic assumptions of the institutions for which they educate. And thus the training for the existing ‘market’ is the last and most inert link in a chain of art forms, arts institutions and education for the arts institutions. And when I speak to other colleagues at institutions similar to the one here, many of them say ‘Yes, we want to open up education, we want actors to create their own projects, to develop their own ideas outside the main track, but we don’t have time to do that. Our curriculum demands from everyone, from eight in the morning until nine in the evening, busy training in all those important techniques – in order to secure the student’s future, being able to play the roles on theatre stages’.

It was actually Hanns Eisler – the composer and close collaborator of Brecht, to whom I owe much inspiration – who came up with the notion of progress and retraction (*Fortschritt und Zurücknahme*), meaning you can only develop specific things if you withdraw others. That is obviously

what happened, when thirty-five years ago, the founders of the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen decided to end the separation of all the disciplines (dancing, acting, directing, scenography, etc. – we have none of those). Then to devote the education to constant research on the future of the performing arts, liberated from the crafts.

When I took up my professorship for artistic practice in Giessen, I expected that there would be three types of students: theoreticians, technicians and artists. But I was completely wrong: the best of them unite all three competencies in themselves.

We are a university, but our institute has the character of an art school. So there is the coexistence of two extremely different systems, and of course it is defined by a permanent struggle between the different demands of a university and of an art school (for example, I am the only professor at the university who has no doctorate). But it is a very creative struggle and we have to be aware of maintaining this struggle and this coexistence, and not to solve it in favor of one side or the other.

When I came to the institute – first as a visiting professor in 1994 then as a regular professor in 1999 – the label of the Giessen School was still around but already outdated. It was probably more of a label from theatre critics in the major media – hostile to any theoretical reflection – who hated our approach and blamed Giessen generally for arty-farty, brainy diletantism. Gerhard Stadlmayer, in one of the major papers, actually named Giessen ‘the blacksmith of German theatre’s disaster’ – which for us was a great compliment, of course. Works by our students or alumni got either blistering reviews or were not mentioned at all. It was not until the very day after that theatre critic retired that Rimini Protocol – for the first time in fifteen years of their existence – finally got an appropriate article on page 1 of the feuilleton.

The title Giessen School may be accurate for a specific structure of education, though, but it is not accurate for a specific output. There is no such a thing as a common aesthetic among Giessen students or alumni. And since 1982, this educational concept hasn’t allowed a separation between research of the staff and teaching of students, but is instead a cooperative research.

It was founded by Polish theatre critic, author and professor of theatre studies Andrzej Wirth, along with Hans-Thies Lehmann, back then his assistant, whom all know today as the author of *Postdramatic Theatre*. Andrzej Wirth celebrated his ninetieth birthday this spring, still very active; just last night, he sent me new texts – short texts, poems on politics and theatre. And as a comment on a series of recent portraits by the photographer Antonio Storch, which show Wirth behind masks, he referred to Witold Gombrowicz, who ‘overcomes Sartre’s existentialistic individualism by showing that the attraction to authenticity cannot win – because it is deformed by our gambling with the Other’. To underline the fact that, for him, ‘playing with masks and images is an attempt to be yourself in the daily battle’.

Now recently everybody talks about artistic research. Sorry if this sounds vain, but ‘we do it’. I have some objections to the hype and misuse of the term artistic research. A true notion of research has to question all the basic assumptions of theatre, such as presence, expression, figure speech, technics – since every craft, every technique is ideological. Voice

training can extinguish the sound of a personality, can make the biography disappear, render the accent and uniqueness of one's own voice inaudible, in order to conform to a given aesthetic standard. Similar things may be true for singing lessons or other areas – such as working on roles in actor training and on staging strategies in directing schools, which still struggle artistically when they try to deal with non-psychological, postdramatic texts without dialogue or a linear narrative. Rarely in actor training does one find formal 'exterior' techniques beyond 'empathy'. And it is still like this in the 21st century. Many training methods would have us believe that classical conventions are 'natural'.

We try to reflect the relations of all media; we teach students from the very first year to become competent with, for example, sound programs, video programs, how to program lighting, to hang lights, to think about the lights; we discuss and reflect and try to promote the shift from hierarchical to a more horizontal use of media, the independence of elements, the shift in the notion 'drama' – which was originally a drama between representative figures in psychological confrontations on stage – over the past fifty years towards a drama of media, to a drama of perception for those who are looking at it.

The conventional distinction between disciplines (acting, dancing, directing, stage designers, etc.) has incredible gravity. I recall a talk with other colleagues at a theatre school in Berlin, they were rather jealous about our students being able to experiment so freely in all medias. 'Our directing students', they said: 'would love to do that as well, but our acting students are not interested in experiments at all; from the second year on, they are only thinking about getting an engagement in one of the big Berlin companies: the Berliner Ensemble, the Deutsches Theater, Volksbühne or Schaubühne. This is the only perspective they have, and they are not interested in anything that could prevent them from achieving this strategy.'

Our students arrive instead with quite an unfocused interest in performing arts, in contemporary live arts. And perhaps this is the biggest difference between Giessen and the directing schools. Oftentimes, students in Giessen can't initially answer the question of what kind of career in, or at, or around the theatre they are actually interested in. Yet that means they are open to the many facets and artistic opportunities that exist between visual arts, music, film and theatre.

Perhaps a young person's application for and decision to become an actor or director is frequently cast too early and is based on relatively clichéd expectations about the job, which raises the question of whether this doesn't ultimately entail a commitment to the particular notion of theatre we are so accustomed to – in Munich, or wherever. But this notion already means an aesthetic limitation, which during the course of completing their degree proves to be a persistent element further substantiated by their career aspiration.

We have a wide range of applicants with different interests, and a wide age-range from applying straight after school up to applying at age 35 after finishing a dance career; or – as a new tendency – there are a lot of students, or at least a reasonable number, who have already worked as actors or actresses, already had a career in theatre ensembles, but now are fed up with the business, want to reflect on what they are doing, to

develop themselves out of the repertory approach then take part instead in this research.

We have a wide range of visiting professors, and this diversity is actually an enormous inspiration, providing many chances to attach yourself as a student to different aesthetics, which helps in specialising. Over the past twenty years while I have been there, we invited Marina Abramovic, a lot of choreographers and artists including Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Kate McIntosh, Tino Sehgal, Walid Raad, Rabih Mroué, Ivana Müller, Kris Verdonck, Ivo Dimchev, Eszter Salomon, Vaginal Davis, the Lone Twins, Antonia Baehr, Laurent Chetouane, but also architects, pop theoreticians, non-European artists from India, from China, stage and costume designers, etc., sound artists. Four different visiting professors each year.

Not to overlook that theory – and this is something which cannot be easily transposed to a more craft-oriented institution – comprises at least 50 percent and also allows students to choose a theoretical career. There is a large amount of theatre history: antique Roman and Greek theatre, tragedy & comedy, Baroque theatre, Elisabethian theatre, Spanish theatre from the Golden Age, commedia dell'arte, French theatre of the seventeenth century, rituals. Opera and music theatre within the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, and music theatre of the twenty-first century. Developments in dance from the 1920s up to contemporary work, the avant-garde of the early twentieth century (Artaud and Brecht, Futurists and Dada performance), the American avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, within which Robert Wilson, Richard Schechner and Richard Foreman have also been present as former visiting professors at our institute.

In theory studies, seminars revolve around semiotics and deconstruction, poststructuralism, philosophical reflections on the subject, questions of identity, postcolonial studies, gender and queer studies. But neighbouring disciplines are obligatoric: music history, art history, English, Romanistic, German literature.

All in all, this is a demanding programme and I am very proud about our students taking this seriously. But it means that rarely have any of our students been able to do all that within the projected time period of five years: three years for the bachelor degree, two years for the master's. There is of course the question if they can find jobs to finance themselves, but for artistic development this is very important; you cannot condense the time necessary for it. So we must extend the time period, and should not force students to stick to what is designated for the BA and the MA. Basically – and I shouldn't say this too loud – there are no limits on how long you study.

Giessen is not for those who need restrictions for their inner health. It's a demanding programme. And on top of that, programme students organise two festivals – totally independently – Diskurs and Theatermaschine. And it's only consequential that our alumni represent a broad range of artistic or more theoretical professions: not only artistic teams and performers including She She Pop, Showcase Beat le Mot, Auftrag: Lorey, Mobile Albania, Monster Truck, Skart, Herbordt Mohren, Rimini Protokoll, but also theatre directors including Rene Pollesch, Boris Nikitin, Bastian Kraft, Jan Philipp Gloger and festival

curator Florian Malzacher, dramaturgs, theoreticians, editors in radio and TV, technical directors and production managers, as well as professors in Hildesheim, Bayreuth, Honolulu, Norway – just to name a few.

The relationship is interesting between theory and practise, since the institute was founded in 1982. This has always been an independent relationship. Neither should the artistic practise be considered an illustration of the theory, nor should theory just be an occasion or motive for a work of art.

I think theory should upset and penetrate the daily practise. Again: as a coexistence of these two independent approaches. We don't divide the year between periods of theory and periods of practise, as at some other institutions. We insist on a daily practise for both. Because we cannot foresee, it cannot be evaluated – intuition and inspiration take weird ways, and the unintentional combinations in finding a topic for your work are the interesting ones: to read something and to work on something else, while somehow both traces go through your body.

That is why we insist on the freedom with which you choose and develop your projects. We don't demonstrate how to do it, because we are interested in an artistic approach based on the desire to be confronted with something we haven't seen yet. A big part of the reflection is 'what has already been done'. The freedom and necessity to find your own, individual, artistic way to create a project is crucial.

Another theatre school heard that I will retire next spring and they offered me a permanent visiting professorship for their directing students. When we met to discuss that, I basically had three questions. Do the students have a free choice of seminars and workshops, can they choose if they want to work with me? Can students in different years join the workshops? And can they freely choose their teams and partners?

And the answer to all three questions was 'No. They have to work with you; it will be only second-year students; and those four second-year students must work together – they remain together for four years and sometimes it goes very well.'

I didn't ask how it was when it doesn't go well, but this structure is the complete opposite of how we deal with it. Since the conditions and preconditions of our applicants are so different, we have no separation between years (first year, second year...). Some of our students come directly from school, some already have a foundation as sound designer, Web designer, etc. So from the first years, they are free to choose from our teaching programmes and they learn much more from one another than they learn from me. Because they build small teams and communicate day and night, as there is not much else happening in Giessen, which is a big advantage.

They do many free productions apart from the curriculum, with the flexibility to assist and to join each other's projects. And all technical aspects, light, sound, etc., are in the hands of the students, all organisation of rehearsal stages are the responsibility of the students – and they take it very seriously.

In Frankfurt, there is a renowned art school, the Städel Schule, and in the context of their 200th birthday they conducted a survey among current and former teachers and professors, asking if it is possible 'to teach art'. And the main answer was 'after all, we can say this school is

a place where it may happen that somebody finds his or her way to be an artist.' And maybe I can say this also about Giessen, about all these freedoms I have described: freedom of choice, of being unintentionally inspired, of making connections which are not foreseeable, of developing their own aesthetics in various directions.

Despite all the diversity, there is perhaps a common denominator in their works. Individual elements of performance keep claiming independence: theatrical means, events, texts, elements which assert themselves, go against their expected treatment, don't 'add up', they don't reinforce each other's meanings, don't illustrate each other. Insisting on the autonomy of the elements, on the scenic action that stands for itself, is left un-commented on, develops its strength and successfully resists being all too quickly pigeonholed.

And especially the impossible is the beautiful, as it makes some of the most surprising and perhaps best moments of curating, when students – whose concepts I had critically tolerated but not really given much chance – manage to eventually and successfully achieve their goals with that project.

But what actually are the goals? When the lighting does what it wants, when the acoustic stage distances itself from the visual stage, when images run away from each other, when the text is marking time though the plot proceeds, and vice versa. In all these attempts, there are elements which leave a gap, in which the audience's production of meaning can actually take place, get realised, but distinguishing itself, all the while, from the production of meaning of other audience members.

And the inconclusiveness is doubled: whether theatre-making students or teachers, we don't know exactly, and not in advance, particularly, what will happen when several separate elements collide. That has to be tried and experienced and makes for research with theatrical means, focusing on aspects of perception, so vivid. But also with respect to audiences, this question about effect can't be exhaustively addressed. The clash of their modes and rhythms of perception is and remains individual, and can't be pinned down. And it is good that way. When I speak of rhythms, of individual rhythms, I don't mean this metaphorically, but quite literally in the sense in which Bernhard Waldenfels speaks of the 'rhythm of the senses'. These rhythms are bound to occur when competing elements demand separate attention and don't immediately 'lock in'.

If artistic experience means the experience of the not-yet-seen, not-yet-heard, not-yet-understood, then perhaps it can only ever happen in a space which is not already occupied by things already understood – somewhere in the much-debated space between theory and practice. How this relationship actually stubbornly articulates itself remains a secret, because any direct transference from theory into practice obviously doesn't work.

What precisely happens between reading, discussing, understanding, conceptualizing, rehearsing and dismissing, until a piece of work can succeed, can hardly be defined. To cut a long story short, I believe that the processes of adjustment and translation between what you plan for as an artist and what happens in artistic practices have to keep going through artists' bodies, with their complex perception, and allowing for the unconscious – the brain alone does not suffice here.

And in this still peculiarly nonrational gap between theory and practice, it isn't rare at all that even those representing very different tastes may agree about a successful scene; while suggestions about how to save a 'failed' scene are at least as numerous as the number of those participating in the frequent, hard-fought critical discussions in the department corridor we call Wilson Street.

ABSTRACT

Heiner Goebbels

There Is No Such Thing as a Giessen School

When Heiner Goebbels will leave the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies in spring 2018, he looks back to nearly twenty years of teaching – from which he has worked also as a managing director for almost ten years. In his keynote he will discuss common restrictions in the education of performing arts today, as well as giving some insight in the basic conditions of the institute's structure: what he considers being the major factors for the creativity of its students. Rather than providing them with techniques of 'how to do it' he strengthens the process, in which the students are able to develop their own aesthetics.