

German in *PAJ*

A Coda

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Gliding for miles and miles along Heiner Müller's despoiled shores.
—Bonnie Marranca, "Berlin Contemporary," *PAJ* 65 (May 2000).

The coverage in *PAJ* of German-language theatre, arts, and politics began almost at the beginning. The second issue of *Performing Arts Journal*, published fall 1976, very nearly fifty years ago, included Alvin Goldfarb, child of Holocaust survivors, on "Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps" (only thirty years after the liberation of those camps). The research became Goldfarb's dissertation at the CUNY Graduate Center, and much later, in 1999, contributed to the important book *Theatrical Performance During the Holocaust*, co-edited by Goldfarb with Rebecca Rovit, and published by PAJ Publications. This issue also presented a memoir by Czech writer Mirko Tuma on the opera and theatre activities in Theresienstadt, where he was held for three and a half years, an article by Bonnie Marranca on Peter Handke, and a review by James Leverett of three books on Brecht. History, memory, horror, language, politics, and everywhere, all the time, performance.

These vapid exercises in artistic monumentalism.
—Gautam Dasgupta, "Berlin: A Coda," *PAJ* 65 (May 2000).

For the past several weeks, I have been digitally thumbing through the back issues of *PAJ*. My sense before beginning was that there were articles that had contributed much to my early understanding of theatre in Germany and Austria, and especially to my first book, *Performing Unification*. Indeed, those articles were there: Carl Weber and Heiner Müller, the special issue on Berlin from 2000, Chris Salter on theatre crises of the 1990s and early 2000s, reports on various Theatertreffen festivals.

And there was much more. *PAJ* has been a singular source for context, criticism, and scholarship on German-language theatre and performance, as well as for plays and essays in translation. This essay is a celebration of that work, with little windows into it, as well as a reflection on what is happening today.

For me, this sensual expression of ideas is the essence of acting. This form of expression is what interests me in Japanese films and pornographic woodcuts. The extreme concentration, visible in the pose of the Samurai with lifted sword, or in the man and woman coupled on the floor, is the playing of zero to excessiveness or form to horror.

—Jürgen Holz, “Self-Portrait of an East German Actor,” interview by Sue-Ellen Case and Helen Fehervary, *Performing Arts Journal* 13 (1980).

Sue-Ellen Case and Helen Fehervary were graduate students when they interviewed Jürgen Holz. Much later, in 2020, after Holz died, and near the end of her own life, Fehervary wrote about this interview in the electronic newsletter of the Bertolt Brecht society.¹ It turns out that the interview was kind of a ruse, proposed by Holz’s friend Heiner Müller: appearing in English, it would garner some attention for Holz that might make it easier for him to get a visa to work in West Germany. This succeeded, it appears, as Holz was allowed to perform in Bochum the following year.

There’s a great anecdote in Fehervary’s reflection, and I can’t help but repeat it: Holz was driving Fehervary and Müller back from a production of Müller plays they’d seen together in Erfurt. They got lost and the car started to break down. Holz got out and kicked each of the tires in turn, which, apparently, fixed the problem with the East German motor, and he drove off again. But Fehervary objected: they were still lost! “Then there was the quiet sound of the voice of the playwright Müller in the backseat: ‘In the GDR you don’t need to be afraid of getting lost. Soon you’ll reach a border and then they’ll shoot you.’”

There are many more dead people than living ones, and you have to write for a majority. This is socialist realism.

—Heiner Müller, “Playwright,” interview by Elinor Fuchs, from “The *PAJ* Casebook: *Alcestis*,” *Performing Arts Journal* 28 (1986).

I encountered contributions from Elinor Fuchs, my Doktormutter, who died while I was editing this essay; from teachers including James Leverett and Marc Robinson; from the teachers of some of them, like Daniel Gerould; from people I wish I could have studied with, like Carl Weber and Sue-Ellen Case and Herbert Blau; from figures who appear to me larger-than-life, like Eric Bentley and Martin Esslin and John Willett; from people who have supported me, like Andrzej Wirth and Erika Fischer-Lichte and Thomas Irmer; from people whose names I had not heard before or had forgotten, like Paul David Young and Patricia Anne Simpson; and from iconic

artists, including Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Elfriede Jelinek, Thomas Bernhard, and Heiner Müller. Together their work in PAJ's various publications builds a corpus of literature that displays the majesty and grotesquery (at times also the vapidness) of German-language theatre from the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

In what bears an uncanny similarity to the NEA culture wars in the late 1980s and 1990s, German cultural workers are on the defensive, arguing less for why subsidized culture is desperately needed in the time of Empire and instead that culture is a right that cannot be economically taken away by the state.

—Chris Salter, "Kulturstaat in the Time of Empire: Notes on Germany Thirteen Years After," *PAJ* 77 (May 2004).

Despite numerous funding crises in the thirty-five years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, including the closing of theatres and cultural institutions, as well as a thousand cuts, the German theatre today is still far more state-supported than theatre in the United States ever has been. But sometimes the funding itself can become something of a crisis. Although direct threats from politicians towards individual artists or institutions are rare (not unheard of), the *threat of the threat* can be enough to quiet, if not silence, certain speech.

Was *The Situation* at the Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin (2014)—a Yael Ronen-directed production about "the situation" in Israel and the Middle East, which ends in optimistic hummus sharing—taken out of the theatre's repertoire in mid-October because Ronen and the cast felt too much grief over Hamas's attack on Israel and the Israeli invasion of Gaza? This is what a Gorki press release claims.² Or, as a *New York Times* article implies, was the production "canceled" because the theatre's leadership was nervous it was too critical of Israel?³

In late 2023 the Berlin State Minister for Culture Joe Chialo proposed a ban on state funding for "racist, antisemitic, homophobic, or in other ways exclusionary [artistic] expressions."⁴ (Most culture in Germany is funded by states, like Berlin, not the federal government.) The proposal was withdrawn in January, but it had probably served its purpose by then. Prizes have been revoked; art exhibits postponed; plays perhaps never scheduled.

From the outside, this theatre season in Germany has seemed to me distant from debates about Israel and Palestine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was widely denounced by cultural institutions, and numerous conversations about the war were staged, as I wrote in my most recent report from Berlin, in 2022 ("Singing in Dark Times," *PAJ* 132). Ukrainian performers were even invited to present in special programs of the 2023 Theatertreffen—I saw *Bunker Cabaret* by the Hooligan Art Community that May, for example. Living in Ohio and following events through magazines, *Nachtkritik*, and friends, I could certainly have missed conversations. As

far as I can tell, there has been no special outreach to Palestinian or Israeli artists as part of the 2024 Theaterreffen, although Ronen's *Bucket List* (Schaubühne, 2024), invited to the festival, does attend to the tragedy obliquely.

In those days [the early 1960s], Brecht and Dürrenmatt were the only names from the German tradition most American theatre people seemed to have heard of.

—Carl Weber, "Problems of Trans-Atlantic Traffic," *Performing Arts Journal* 26/27 (1986).

Weber, in "Trans-Atlantic Traffic," collected anecdotes and statistics to tell a story of German playwriting in the American theatre in the 1970s and 80s. Studying TCG's "Theatre Profiles" over a decade beginning with the 1975-76 season, he found that translated plays accounted for 11% of all productions. Each season included between fifteen and twenty-two plays translated from German, accounting for 18-20% of the translated plays, or about 2% of all TCG member-theatre productions. Today these numbers are much changed.

According to data gathered by TCG, there were "1,560 full shows (productions with runs of at least a week) at 558 TCG member theatres" between January 1 and December 1, 2023; by my count, thirty of these, or 1.9%, were either translations or adaptations from another language.⁵ (I am including rather free adaptations, such as Luis Quintero's *Medea: Re-Versed* at the Red Bull Theatre). Nearly half of the translations/adaptations (fourteen) were from Spanish; there were three Chekhovs (all *The Cherry Orchard*), two Molières (both *Tartuffe*), and one play by Yasmina Reza. There was a single play translated from German: *The Visit*, by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. I should include a few caveats: TCG does not officially count translations, and I could have missed some; there are definitely non-profit professional productions missing from its list; total productions are still down compared to the last season pre-Covid-19, when there were 2,229 productions; and this list does not include commercial or university productions. (On Broadway in 2023, the only translation was Amy Herzog's new version of *A Doll's House*.) Nonetheless, I think it is fair to call this a representative sample of what the U.S. American theatre puts on its stages. The short version of the story of German plays in the U.S. in 2024 is—there are next to no German plays.

Of the American theatre, Weber wrote in his 1986 essay: "We truly face a sorry picture. Sorry not so much because of the mere 2 percent German drama can claim of the total of productions but because of the general neglect shown to world drama by our theatre." What can one say of the picture today? The U.S. American theatre does not just neglect world drama. We have quarantined ourselves.

To provide a brief comparison, the "Wer spielt was" (who is playing what) compendium, put together by the Deutscher Bühnenverein, for the 2021/22 season (the

most recent available) lists Chekhov (twenty-six productions), Reza (twenty-one productions), and Molière (twenty productions) as three of the ten most produced playwrights in Germany; as in the U.S., Shakespeare (sixty-five productions) is always the most-produced playwright. Unfortunately, though “Wer spielt was” is more comprehensive than the TCG listings, they do not include translations as a category, and there were too many productions listed for me to go through for this article. Still, it is easy to see that translations are much more prominent in the repertoire of the German theatre.⁶

One can also see that, although there were seven productions of Arthur Miller and five of Tennessee Williams, the German theatre disregards recent American drama, especially plays that thematize or represent race. In my searches, I found two productions of Tony Kushner (both *Angels*), and three of Matthew Lopez. There were no plays by Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Martyna Majok, Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins, and Jackie Sibblies Drury, among others.

WRITER: It is quite horrifying / out of language / out of mind

—Thomas Bernhard, *The Hunting Party*, trans. Gita Honegger, *Performing Arts Journal* 13 (1980).

PAJ, the journal, and PAJ Publications, which brings out books, have been essential in translating, contextualizing, and advocating for the work of international playwrights. Honegger not only translated Bernhard’s *The Hunting Party* and *The German Lunch Table* (a full serving of Nazi soup) for the journal, she also translated his plays *The President* and *Eve of Retirement* for PAJ Publications. Just from the German, there’s also Ödön von Horváth, Robert Musil, the expressionists, Walter Benjamin, George Tabori, Botho Strauss, Fassbinder, Müller of course, Jelinek, and Jenny Erpenbeck—a catalogue that could itself form a comprehensive examination reading list. This is true for languages other than German, too. The DramaContemporary series, which began in the mid-1980s, published plays from rich theatrical traditions now virtually ignored in the United States. The total number of plays that have appeared through *PAJ* must number above 1000, many of them translations.

There is still Tom Sellar at *Theater*, Carol Martin with “In Performance” through Seagull Books, and Adam Versényi with “The Mercurian.” We need more.

The comparatively early and quite general recognition of Bertolt Brecht, for instance, owes much to Eric Bentley’s untiring efforts to make the American theatrical and academic community aware of Brecht’s pivotal achievement.

—Weber, “Problems of Trans-Atlantic Traffic.”

In the U.S., we can point some fingers. Artistic directors are probably afraid that audiences won’t show up to see “world drama.” And audiences probably actually

wouldn't show up. We seem to want to make and see plays about us: of TCG's top-ten non-Shakespeare plays for 2023, eight are directly about America.

What are critics and scholars today doing to advance plays in translation? When I am asked, as I am from time to time, to suggest new German plays that should be translated, I tend to shrug. New plays are not where the energy is at.⁷ When I put together *Everything and Other Performance Texts from Germany*, I sought out texts from performances by groups including Rimini Protokoll and Gob Squad, not playwrights. In my 2022 report from Berlin, I didn't mention new plays, although I did lobby for *PAJ* to include in that issue an excerpt from the text of Helgard Haug's 2021 Rimini Protokoll production *All Right. Good Night.*, which is a kind of monologue in free verse (mostly projected onto screens in performance, not spoken). The German text of *All Right. Good Night.* was later published not as a play but as a novel (Rowohlt, 2023).

In my two-semester theatre and performance history survey course at Ohio University, which is required of undergraduate theatre majors and counts for general education credits, I teach many plays in translation, but of course I include more plays from the U.S. than any other specific country. From talking with colleagues, I get the sense that "world drama" has become more "world performance," with an emphasis on contemporary adaptations of older plays rather than the originals, as part of efforts to diversify and decolonize syllabi. Meanwhile, foreign language requirements are disappearing in undergraduate and even graduate curriculums; our domestic PhD students in Interdisciplinary Arts argue that the ability to translate from another language should not be mandatory. On balance, I think these students are correct that the costs of studying a language outweigh the benefits, given short time-to-degree requirements and cuts to language programs. Still, on aggregate, far too few of the next generation of academics will have even a second language they can work in.

ChatGPT, by the by, is excellent at translation, at least from German into English. But generative AI is not going to discover and advocate for international artists. Who among us will be today's Eric Bentley or Carl Weber?

And who among us will publish the plays they translate?

Müller has exchanged the Brechtian collective, revolutionary, theatrical model for a dramaturgy of self-implosion. The blast is self-contained and muffled—not a shot heard around the world, but isolated rifle fire in the streets.

—Sue-Ellen Case, "From Bertolt Brecht to Heiner Müller," *Performing Arts Journal* 19 (1983).

The playwright-director-theorist who most carried forward the theatre of Brecht and Müller was René Pollesch, who died suddenly, likely of a heart attack, on

February 26, 2024, at only sixty-one years old. Pollesch was not well-known in English, deliberately so; he embraced the anti-capitalist impermanence of the theatre by allowing the great majority of his great many plays to disappear without publication, and he never concerned himself with international success. Working with boundless actors, including Sophie Rois and Christine Groß, as well as large choruses, he made theatre about work: the labor of late capitalism, of thinking, and of frivolity. When his productions worked (often they didn't), they *really* worked, crackling with energy and ideas and pop music and great humor.

How do you make political theatre politically in the twenty-first century, Herr Pollesch? His performances were collective, theatrical, and explosive, and also isolated, self-contained, and impulsive.

From *Kill Your Darlings! Streets of Berladelphia* (2012, Volksbühne Berlin): F is the lanky Fabian Hinrichs; the chorus is made up of gymnasts in leotards printed with dollar bills, who do tricks while Hinrichs tries to simultaneously speak and watch them.

F: Capitalism (*gymnasts end their freeze and move together*) / presents itself today (*F turns around*) as a network. It had long hidden itself (*F turns around*) / in order to evade a criticism that had gotten disoriented (*F turns around*), for a long time we did not know where a capitalism had gone (*F turns around*) that we could criticize. (*F turns around*) Criticism was disoriented / because: (*F turns around*) / it did not know for a long time / which face / (*gymnasts stand still for a moment and listen to F*) / capitalism would reappear with, / but then it was clear— / it was the networks. / That's where it had disappeared / to evade criticism, / into a / network!⁸

Later Hinrichs pulled a Mother Courage-style wagon around the stage amid heavy rain.

It is both logical and an injustice that Pollesch's plays, essays, and interviews have not been published (have not been allowed by Pollesch to be published) in English, with a couple of rare exceptions, some of them unofficial. I should have, or someone should have, tried harder to be a Bentley or Weber for Pollesch, but he never felt he needed me or those like me. Now I am turned vulture, a parasite, the scholar-as-graverobber, rubbing my hands together over fresh dirt, preparing my proboscis. But I want to get his writing into new places, in front of new audiences. We need you, René! "It's not enough for us. Something's missing."⁹

MEN HAVE DIED FROM TIME TO TIME AND WORMS HAVE EATEN THEM
BUT NOT FOR LOVE.

—Heiner Müller, "Shakespeare a Difference," in "Heiner Müller in East Berlin,"
trans. Carl Weber, *Performing Arts Journal* 35/36 (1990).

In my office, on the bookcase that holds my library of plays, over my righthand shoulder when I sit and type, there is a papier mâché skull, decorated by my young sons with glitter and plastic jewels. A memento mori.

There are a certain number of years we are given, or that we have, or that we hold onto, the skull reminds me.

From *All Right. Good Night.*, a father and a daughter look at an oil painting the father has bought, as he begins, just barely begins to slip, stumble into dementia: "It depicts a flower-strewn path / Leading into the distance. [...] He says, 'I hope the path is like that.'"¹⁰ One can hope. I hope this was Elinor's path. She would have loved *All Right. Good Night.*

In my library of plays I have books given to me by old professors, some retired, some gone, some dead. More memento mori, it occurs to me.

The years I have left to write seem many. But they are no longer uncountable. I can sit and count them. One can hope. For my part, I choose to work along Müller's despoiled shores.

NOTES

Translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

Performing Arts Journal changed its name to *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* in January 1998 (beginning with issue 58); this name change is reflected in the citations above.

1. Helen Fehervary, "Ein Brief von Jürgen Holtz," *ecibs: Communications of the International Brecht Society*, issue 2020:2, <https://e-cibs.org/issue-20202/#holtzbrief>. Thanks to Marc Silberman for pointing me to this reflection.

2. See: Shermin Langhoff and Johannes Kirsten, "Postponed performance of The Situation," October 13, 2023; and Yael Ronen, "Director's Note," October 15, 2023; both at <https://www.gorki.de/en/postponed-performance-of-the-situation>, archived at <http://archive.today/rbAaJ>.

3. Jason Farago, "Berlin Was a Beacon of Artistic Freedom. Gaza Changed Everything," *New York Times*, April 8, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/06/arts/design/berlin-israel-gaza-art-scene.html>.

4. See: "Berlin: Antidiskriminierungs-Klausel ausgesetzt," *Nachtkritik*, January 22, 2024, <https://nachtkritik.de/meldungen/berlin-zieht-antidiskriminierungs-klausel-bei-foerdermitteln-zurueck>.

5. The full list is at: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2022-2023/>. For the list of the top ten most produced plays, see: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2023/10/18/the-top-10-most-produced-plays-of-the-2023-24-season>.

6. Theatre translators in Germany do not in fact feel that their work is prominent enough. See a recent open letter, which asks, among other things, that theatres do better in crediting translators: Forum für Übersetzung und Theater e. V. and the Verband der Theaterautor:

innen, "Offener Brief zur Nennung von Theaterübersetzenden," Drama Panorama, April 23, 2024, <https://www.drama-panorama.com/2024/04/23/offener-brief-zur-nennung-von-theateruebersetzenden/>.

7. There is an ongoing debate, going back to the 1970s Regietheater, about the status of new playwriting in German. See for example the recent essay by Christian Rakow and Michael Wolf on the forty-ninth iteration of the prestigious Mülheimer Theatertage, which presents productions of new plays: Rakow and Wolf, "6 Thesen zur neuen Dramatik," *Nachtkritik*, May 1, 2024, <https://nachtkritik.de/recherche-debatte/schreiben-fuers-theater-was-die-stuecke-beim-muelheimer-dramatikpreis-2024-ueber-den-status-quo-der-neuen-dramatik-aussagen>.

8. René Pollesch, *Kill your Darlings! Streets of Berladelphia*, in *Kill Your Darlings: Stücke* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2014), 293-4.

9. *Ibid.*, 290.

10. Helgard Haug (Rimini Protokoll), *All Right. Good Night*. (Excerpt), trans. Lyz Pfister, *PAJ* 132 (2022).

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