

## About a (not so) Small Revolution

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**Peter M. BOENISCH, ed. *The Schaubühne Berlin under Thomas Ostermeier: Reinventing Realism*. London: Methuen Drama, 2022. 208 p.**

How can you write a synthesising work of theatre history about an institution that is still in operation today? This collection of essays, edited by Peter M. Boenisch and written in collaboration with a dozen theatre scholars and theatre practitioners, offers a possible answer to this question by examining the first twenty years of the Schaubühne Berlin's recent history from different perspectives. The book constructs a narrative that—and this is very important!—has not been interrupted, has not ended, and is still *happening*. In addition, some of the performances discussed in the book are still in the repertoire and can be seen in Berlin or around the world, allowing readers to compare them with their own experiences. And most importantly, Thomas Ostermeier, who, at the turn of the millennium, re-founded or at least re-conceptualised the Schaubühne's work from the ground up, is still its director and a leading figure of contemporary German theatre.

This is not the first encounter between German theatre scholar Peter M. Boenisch, who currently teaches and conducts research at the University of Aarhus, and Thomas Ostermeier. His 2016 monograph, co-authored with the director, offers a thorough and distinctive introduction to the director's intellectual

workshop.<sup>1</sup> At that time, Ostermeier and his close collaborators reflected on his working methods and aesthetics; now, members of the academic community contribute their perspectives, positioning him in a broader context on the extensive map of contemporary world theatre.<sup>2</sup> This new multi-perspective volume, edited by Boenisch, is particularly notable for its breadth and diversity. And although some of the essays may seem out of place at first reading, by the end of the volume it becomes clear why it was necessary to bring together seemingly less fitting pieces of the mosaic.

The title clearly and decisively defines the focus of the investigation while also elevating Ostermeier to a 'demigod' status by implying that what has happened and is happening on and around the three stages of the Schaubühne in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is primarily—or even exclusively—his doing. Compiling a two-hundred-page book on a stage director who remains highly active, with contributions from a dozen experts, inherently carries the risk that the analysis will focus only on his successes—essentially canonising his career as a triumph. Without disputing the validity of this perspective, it is still worth noting that this book serves as a monument to Ostermeier and the theatre model he has led so effectively. At the same time, it is important to highlight another crucial point: precisely for this reason, the book's most unexpectedly compelling moments arise when it explores

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<sup>1</sup> Peter M. BOENISCH and Thomas OSTERMEIER, *The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ostermeier is one of the most analysed directors among the active creators of contemporary world theatre. In addition to the volumes already mentioned, see, for example,

Gerhard JÖRGER und Thomas OSTERMEIER, *Ostermeier* (Theater der Zeit, 2016); Jitka PELECHOVÁ, *Le théâtre de Thomas Ostermeier* (Centre d'études théâtrales, 2017); Delphine EDY, *Thomas Ostermeier: Explorer l'autre face du réel pour recréer* (Presses du Reel, 2022).

failures and shortcomings—instances where the best intentions did not translate into success.

From the book, Ostermeier emerges as a notably self-reflective and self-critical artist and company director. One of the most compelling chapters is a lengthy interview in which he candidly responds to Clare Finburgh Delijani's questions, including Schaubühne's stance on inclusivity and diversity. Ostermeier acknowledges that while the cornerstone of his theatre-making credo is addressing the struggles of marginalised groups, the Schaubühne as an institution falls short of reflecting the diversity of contemporary German society.<sup>3</sup> He identifies the failure of the 'enforced democracy' introduced within the company after he became director as the greatest failure of his career: actors were interested neither in receiving equal pay nor in being restricted from working outside the Schaubühne. Similar initiatives are not unprecedented in the history of Western theatre (consider Ariane Mnouchkine's commune-like operating principles at the Théâtre du Soleil) nor, as we shall see, in the history of the Schaubühne itself.

The collection of essays, divided into three chapters of almost equal length, explores the phenomena of the 'Schaubühne' and 'Ostermeier', as well as their intersections, from multiple perspectives. The history of the institution and the portrait of the director continuously reflect one another throughout this kaleidoscopic volume. The four essays in the first section focus on the institution (*The Schaubühne Berlin under Thomas Ostermeier: Reinventing an Institution*), while the five essays in the second section examine the director and his work (*Thomas Ostermeier at the*

*Schaubühne: Reinventing 'Directors' Theatre'*). The third section, comprising five additional essays, offers indirect insights into the institution, the director, and his environment through case studies addressing specific sub-topics (*The Schaubühne's Experiment Across Forms and Borders: Towards a New Realism*).

The central keyword of the volume—also emphasised in the subtitle—is realism and its flexible, continuously evolving forms across time and space. For this reason, the volume does not define a single, fixed concept of realism. Instead, the authors approach the term through their own frameworks, at times even developing distinct typologies. A striking example of this is provided by Marvin Carlson, who organises the terms 'socialist realism,' 'capitalist realism,' and 'Ostermeier realism' in chronological order, examining the history of the Schaubühne in parallel with Ostermeier's directing career.<sup>4</sup> The volume's editor, Peter M. Boenisch, further refines the final phase identified in Carlson's essay by distinguishing different forms of 'Ostermeier realism' along both chronological and thematic lines.<sup>5</sup> According to Boenisch, after the early 'in-yer-face realism' practised on the studio stage of the Deutsches Theatre's Barracke and later in the early years of the Schaubühne's administration (*Shopping and Fucking, Human Circle, Woyzeck*), the early 2000s ushered in Ostermeier's era of 'neo(n)realism', which focused on middle-class experiences—exemplified by his Ibsen adaptations and American family dramas. According to Boenisch, the era of 'reflective realism' began with *Hamlet*, a production that exposed the cracks in the staged fictional world, allowing the audience to glimpse contemporary reality—a world in crisis.

<sup>3</sup> "Audiences Know Their Cause will be Treated': Making Political Theatre at the Schaubühne: Thomas OSTERMEIER in Conversation with Clare FINBURGH DELIJANI," in *The Schaubühne Berlin under Thomas Ostermeier: Reinventing Realism*, ed. Peter M. BOENISCH (Methuen Drama, 2022), 48–49.

<sup>4</sup> Marvin CARLSON, "Socialist Realism, Capitalist Realism, Ostermeier Realism," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 53–65.

<sup>5</sup> Peter M. BOENISCH, "Confronting the Present: Thomas Ostermeier's Post-Conceptual Regietheater," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 105–119.

The foundation of the entire undertaking lies in the short, well-structured mission statement, written in 1999 by the four individuals who took over the theatre—Thomas Ostermeier, Jens Hillje, Sasha Waltz, and Jochen Sandig—who collectively assumed the responsibilities of artistic direction. This mission statement has now been published in full for the first time in English, translated by Peter M. Boenisch. Calling for a 'new realism' throughout, the manifesto states: "Realism is not the simple depiction of the world as it looks. It is the view onto the world through an attitude that demands for change, born from pain and injury, which become the reason for making art in order to take revenge on the world for its blindness and stupidity. It attempts to comprehend and to express these realities, and to refigure them."<sup>6</sup> The manifesto concludes with a vision of long-time and new audience members sitting peacefully together as they watch contemporary dramas unfold on stage. The authors of the text assert that, should this vision be realised, 'a small revolution'<sup>7</sup> could take place—not just in Berlin, but beyond. The volume as a whole serves as a rich reflection on this mission statement: nearly two decades after Ostermeier's Schaubühne debut, it is an opportune moment for both a summary and (self)evaluation. The 2020 date of the book's editing and production also marks another significant anniversary: Peter Stein assumed leadership of the Schaubühne in 1970, exactly thirty years before Ostermeier. During Stein's fifteen-year tenure, German *Regietheater* was born, shaped by the influential directors who worked there. The first section of the book, which focuses on institutional history, presents a fragmented yet panoramic theatre

history rather than a strictly detailed and chronological account. The preface already highlights the theatre's founding fathers from 1962, about whom Erika Fischer-Lichte, employing a diachronic approach, offers a more detailed historical commemoration by interpreting the present in light of the past.<sup>8</sup> In 1962, theatre students from Freie Universität founded a new theatre, Berliner Schaubühne, where Klaus Michael Grüber, Peter Stein, Peter Zadek, and others soon began their work. Stein assumed leadership in 1970, introducing *Mitbestimmung* (joint decision-making with all theatre employees) and *Vollversammlung* (a monthly general assembly), making the Schaubühne Germany's first democratic theatre. It is instructive to see that thirty years later, Ostermeier's determined attempts to implement similar democratic principles were met with resistance from the company—underscoring the stark differences between Berlin in the 1970s and the 2000s. Just as Stein's vision of opening up to international collaboration was ultimately realised, Ostermeier transformed the Schaubühne into a truly international ensemble through frequent touring. The significance of this evolution must be understood in the broader context of globalisation and festivalisation.

Ramona Mosse's insightful study conceptualises the Schaubühne as a building, an institution, and a socio-cultural experiment, framing it as a phenomenon that oscillates between the local and the global.<sup>9</sup> She draws a parallel between Berlin's rapid internationalisation in the early 2000s and the Schaubühne's emergence as a global company, while also emphasising the key concept of 'out-of-place'—a notion that ensures the

<sup>6</sup> Thomas OSTERMEIER, Jens HILLJE, Sasha WALTZ and Jochen SANDIG, "The First Season: The Mission (1999)," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, "Between Philosophical and Sociological Theatre: The Political

Regietheater of Peter Stein and Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne Berlin," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 7–21.

<sup>9</sup> Ramona MOSSE, "The Schaubühne's Civic Mission in the Age of Globalization: An Imaginary Island that Probes Society," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 22–38.

institution's continuous transformation. This idea is reinforced by initiatives such as the annual international festival FIND and the *Pearson's Preview* blog on the Schaubühne website. The metaphors used in the study to describe the Schaubühne building, originally constructed as a cinema in the 1920s and converted into a theatre in 1981, are particularly evocative: a 'small, habitable island', a UFO on earth, and, since Ostermeier's landmark Ibsen production *The Enemy of the People*, a 'civic space', a site for testing democratic processes. This train of thought is further developed in the important interview with Ostermeier, referenced earlier. In addition to offering a precise and insightful historical overview, the interview serves as a valuable window into the director's personal artistic manifesto. Ostermeier's commitment to democracy and audience participation remains a central priority, as does his rejection of the traditional divide between low and high culture—a perspective he traces directly back to English Renaissance theatre: "For me, theatre is the art of entertainment, and all my senses need to be stimulated."<sup>10</sup>

The interview serves as a transition into the second part of the book, which focuses on Ostermeier as a director. The previously mentioned study by Marvin Carlson examines the presence and evolution of the realist tradition within Ostermeier's oeuvre. The trajectory of his career from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s is unconventional, and the author also reflects on why Ostermeier achieved significant success with classical drama. The key to this success, in Carlson's view, lies in the consistent use of a contemporary perspective, which he analyses primarily—but not exclusively—through Ostermeier's Ibsen adaptations. Shakespeare's works, which have been notably marginalised in the mentioned

studies, take centre stage in the next two essays. Jitka Goriaux Pelechová compiles a director's guidebook, examining six of Ostermeier's Shakespearean productions—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, *Richard III*, and *Twelfth Night*—to establish a typology and, presumably due to space constraints, an analytical framework that is not fully elaborated.<sup>11</sup> She identifies the contemporary perspective in these productions through elements such as scenography, a concept she defines in her study as directorial 'fabrication', storytelling, epic narrative, and exposed theatricality—all of which extend Ostermeier's Shakespearean stagings beyond conventional realism into symbolic expression and pure theatricality. This framework is immediately challenged by Elisa Leroy's compelling study of *Hamlet*. She examines the Schaubühne's legendary production, which has been running since 2008 and continues to sell out, analysing it across multiple temporal and spatial contexts.<sup>12</sup> The validity of this diachronic reading is reinforced by Ostermeier himself, who, in a 2019 interview, described *Hamlet* as a 'breathing organism'. Reading the essay, it becomes evident that, despite the production's rigorously structured framework, there remains ample room for improvisation—a freedom that Lars Eidinger, Ostermeier's iconic Hamlet, fully exploits. Over the years, the once well-defined boundary between the character of Hamlet and the German actor Lars Eidinger has become increasingly blurred.

The following short essay introduces a sudden shift in perspective: Igor de Almeida Silva contemplates what German theatre, particularly the Schaubühne, looks like from

<sup>10</sup> FINBURGH DELIJANI, "Audiences Know...", 49.

<sup>11</sup> Jitka GORIAUX PELECHOVÁ, "Thomas Ostermeier's Shakespeare Productions: The Mise en Action of Canonical Plays," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 66–80.

<sup>12</sup> Elisa LEROY, "Hamlet Out of Joint: Variations on a Theme in Thomas Ostermeier's Production, 2008–20," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 81–94.

Brazil.<sup>13</sup> His reflections are prompted by the guest performance of *The Enemy of the People* in São Paulo in 2013, which unexpectedly took on new significance due to a major protest occurring at the time. Once again, the focus is on the ruptures within the classical dramatic text: despite the fact that the Brazilian press largely engaged with the Ibsen production through a lens of 'silent resonance', the author interprets the performance in direct relation to the political realities of contemporary Brazilian theatre and dance. In the final essay, Peter M. Boenisch, the editor of the volume, synthesises and defines Ostermeier's directorial credo within a typology of realism. Central to this discussion is the concept of political theatre, a recurring theme throughout the volume. Boenisch highlights critical reflection, the emphasis on recognition rather than identification, and the notion of the stage as a laboratory—all key aspects of Ostermeier's approach.

In fact, the four case studies in the final section of the book could serve as an introduction to a forthcoming edited volume. These analyses offer a glimpse into the wide-ranging and diverse work that has taken place at the Schaubühne over the past twenty years. The reader may feel a sense of relief as Ostermeier finally ventures beyond his own stagings at the Schaubühne. In other words, the book acknowledges that the theatre's creative landscape extends beyond Ostermeier's productions. Of particular significance is Jens Hillje's essay. A founding member of Ostermeier's initial team, Hillje became a key dramaturg during the first ten years of the Schaubühne's transformation.<sup>14</sup> He reframes the Brechtian connection already emphasised

by Fischer-Lichte, defining the spectators as 'citizens of our society'. In his view, the active collaboration between invited directors and the theatre's established audience has led to the development of 'a theatre of real societal relevance'. This transformation has been shaped by key figures such as Sasha Waltz, who was involved from the beginning, as well as Constanza Macras, Falk Richter, and Luk Perceval—not to mention the playwrights associated with the institution. Following this, Hillje's study examines the methods of Richter, Perceval, and Ostermeier. In the next study, Benjamin Fowler introduces another compelling dialogue between directors: Ostermeier and Katie Mitchell.<sup>15</sup> Their parallel approaches highlight both differences and similarities in their directing methods—for example, in their respective productions of *Wunschkonzert*, as well as in Ostermeier's legendary *Hamlet* and Mitchell's *Ophelias Zimmer*, which engages in a creative dialogue with it. Fowler's sensitive analysis also addresses a critical issue within Ostermeier's theatre: are women truly given an equal position within the institution? Additionally, his study presents a challenge for future theatre historians, arguing that the history of a theatre should not be seen as a mere succession of independently staged performances but rather as an ongoing and evolving dialogue. Marina Ceppi then provides a thematic perspective by analysing FIND, the Schaubühne's annual international theatre festival, which takes place every spring. She examines it through the lens of the 'rage' of South American theatre,<sup>16</sup> particularly from Mexico and Chile, drawing connections with an earlier study of Ostermeier's visit to Brazil. Finally,

<sup>13</sup> Igor de ALMEIDA SILVA, "Sensing the North: Thomas Ostermeier and the Schaubühne in Brazil," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 95–104.

<sup>14</sup> Jens HILLJE, "The Schaubühne's Experiment Across Forms and Borders: Towards a New Realism," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 123–140.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin FOWLER, "Re-scripting Realism: Katie Mitchell and Thomas Ostermeier at the

Schaubühne," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 141–158.

<sup>16</sup> Marina CEPPI, "Encountering the Rage from the South: Latin American Theatre at the Schaubühne's FIND Festival," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 159–172.

Sabine Huschka explores the status of contemporary dance at the Schaubühne.<sup>17</sup> She focuses on figures such as Waltz, Macras, and Anouk van Dijk, noting that while dance was once a vital component of the theatre's revival, it has since been gradually overshadowed by theatre.

The volume is elegantly framed by a wide-ranging essay by Hans-Thies Lehmann, a leading figure in German theatre theory.<sup>18</sup> One of the key elements of the 1999 mission statement was the creation of a dialogue between theatre and dance, a vision that gradually faded into the background following Waltz's departure. In this essay, Lehmann interweaves personal impressions, critical observations, and theoretical considerations within

the context of Falk Richter and Anouk van Dijk's collaborative production, *TRUST*, which premiered in 2009. It is worth quoting the final sentences of the opening paragraph of his essay: "These spaces indicate: this is about discourse. Theatre here is part of a wider, general social field of reflection, to which it seeks to contribute with its own means: physicality, poetry, visuality, musicality."<sup>19</sup> These lines extend beyond a single production; they encapsulate the essence of the Schaubühne, as it continues to be revitalised under the direction of Thomas Ostermeier.

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<sup>17</sup> Sabine HUSCHKA, "Performing Bodies as a Scenic Playground of Social Realities: Choreographic Theatre at the Schaubühne Berlin," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 173–190.

<sup>18</sup> Hans-Thies LEHMANN, "REST/less EXHAUSTION, SEMI-CALM: Some Notes on Falk Richter's and Anouk van Dijk's Trust," in *The Schaubühne Berlin...*, 191–201.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 191.