

NTQ Reports and Announcements

Maria Shevtsova

Notes on 'Noteworthy' Productions

Report on the Berlin Theatertreffen, 2013.

THEATERTREFFEN – *treffen* meaning 'meeting' – celebrated its fiftieth anniversary this year in May, making it one of the older theatre festivals in the world. It is also quite distinctive in that it brings audiences, some from beyond Germany's geographic borders. The festival's Germanophone focus is tied up with the politics of the early 1960s. (See my article on Theatertreffen 2012 in the online journal *Critical Stages*, November 2012.) Further, the main criterion for selection by a rotating jury of seven people is that of 'noteworthiness': and finding not the best or the most startling but the most 'noteworthy' productions is a contentious aim, as has been observed by the festival punters year in and year out – it might simply mean productions that have attracted the attention of members of the jury, for whatever reason. It has been said, on more than one occasion, that the jurors' reasons were best known to themselves.

One such disputed production was *Disabled Theatre* from Zurich, directed by the well-known Belgian dancer and choreographer Jérôme Bel. This showcased performers who, prompted by a speaker sitting to the side with a computer and a microphone, introduced themselves by their disability, one by one throughout the performance, before they did their 'turn'; and, while the venture was important enough and was received with great warmth by the audience, it clearly anticipated planned pre- and post-show discussions where the question of whether all this was 'a kind of freak show' was likely to arise. The phrase, which had already been brought up in the press, had originated from one of the performers: it was part of the 'personal' that each one of them offered about himself or herself to spectators, rather in the manner of Pina Bausch's dancers in early pieces like *Kontakthof* (1978).

This particular performer was citing his mother's misgivings – 'a kind of freak show' is her phrase – about the appropriateness of 'parading' disabilities in something as public as the theatre; and, indeed, the event raised many issues, including the vital ones of freedom and dignity. I am remembering, post hoc, a colleague from Britain who makes a clear distinction between 'arts and disability' and 'disability arts', the

second foregrounding 'other ableness', which, the colleague believes, excludes 'freak-show' judgements. How this *Disabled Theatre* is to be accurately tabled is moot: my colleague would insist it was in the first, reprehensible, category. Well, the show elicited remarks on the jury's 'unfathomable' reasons for selecting it, along with rather pious pronouncements on 'inclusion' that did not quite help in the debate because they sounded too 'politically correct' to be real.

Yet the event was not swallowed up by the truly impressive richness of Theatertreffen, which involved approximately 550 artists in eighty events spanning eighteen days. Among them were thirty quite wonderful play readings, not least by Austria's Elfriede Jelinek, and eight radio plays produced by Deutschlandradio Kultur. Then there were public interviews, workshops, press conferences, discussions, film screenings of selected productions in Berlin's Sony Centre, and much more. There was, in addition, and for the first time, a bus ride around a circuit of Berlin theatres and non-dedicated spaces that had been represented in the festival at one time or another. The tour came along with a cloying video but also with a carry-bag snack that, apart from water, also contained a small bottle of fizzy wine. Wine aside, it recalled packed lunches and school outings, and was a humorously generous gesture on the part of the festival's organizing team.

A Grey-Black Medea

Theatertreffen's opening production was *Medea*, with the Schauspiel Frankfurt directed by Michael Thalheimer of Deutsches Theater fame – a magnificent piece in grey-black with minimal side-lighting. The entire cavernous stage was taken up by a wall from whose thin, high ledge Constanze Becker as Medea delivered her lines in a steely voice as powerful as the designed space itself. This wall started out at the very back of the stage but moved about halfway through the performance to the very front, leaving as narrow a ledge between it and the edge of the stage as the ledge on top. It was here, at ground level, that Marc Oliver Schulze as Jason appeared in an electric blue jacket as confident in its colour as his body was in its attractive, elegant proportions. The timing of Schulze's entrance into what, irrespective of Chorus interventions, was virtually Becker's extraordinarily compelling monologue, was a masterful directorial stroke, since it suggested that Jason was off the mark – proverbially late for his own funeral.

It was enough to look at this Jason to know why Medea coveted him; and enough to understand why he could speak so reasonably of his



Medea. Constanze Becker as Medea and Marc Oliver Schulze as Jason. Photo: Birgit Hupfeld.

betrayal as if, together with his unreasonable plans for her and their children, it were the most logical thing in the world. The dialogue between them was straightforward, avoiding any bravura effects, and had the ring of contemporary everyday speech – so much so that this husband could have been any husband in the audience telling his wife that his new lover was good for their marriage. The resonance in the audience and its sense of recognition were palpable.

However, there was nothing banal about the dialogue (translation by Peter Krumme), which showed through the actors' firm resolve how Euripides must have hewn it in stone. Becker is a rarity – a tragic actress in an age of celebrity, whose restrained power in every word, in every minimal gesture, and in her facial and body control keeps hitting its target. When Jason comes back, now in grey, she is remorseless, and the horror of Medea's deed and grief are present somewhere beneath the sheer strength of her discussion with him – not harangue or diatribe on either side, but discussion. The Chorus is made up of one woman (Bettina Hoppe) who chimes in, sometimes with the clump of heavy feet, in a composition of various electronic sounds that accentuate the austerity of the work. Thalheimer is not one for histrionics, and he has an unflinching sense of balance, which his actors maintain when playing their own part and in relation to each other.

The last production of the festival, Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending* performed by Munich's Kammerspiele, had a comparable feel for balance, albeit with physical violence and in a key close to social satire. Its director, Sebastian Nübling, who is known in Britain for his staging of *Three Kingdoms* by Simon Stephens at London's Lyric Hammersmith in 2012, had invited the Estonian actor Risto Kübar to play the role of Val. Val is the outsider who perturbs the 1950s 'all-American' town of blondes in full skirts and high heels, and tough men in cowboy hats led by a sheriff. The male gang beats Val up and rapes him. Nübling neatly edges his actors to convey the simmering aggression of small towns against intruders until their hatred explodes, especially when intruders find love among 'their' women.

Kübar is Nübling's prototype outsider. Kübar does not speak German and learned it phonetically for the role. Spectators can hear this, and he switches to Estonian or English, or to a song, which he croons into a microphone (usually in English), or to remarkable contortions of his loose body, which are meant to be another 'foreign' language. All of this foregrounds both Kübar's and Val's difference; and when Val hangs, like a star acrobat, out of the turning carousel that he and Lady Torrance (Wiebke Puls) had assembled – remarkably adroitly by the actors, piece by piece in front of the spectators – he could well have

been from the moon. The carousel dominates the stage, as the wall does in *Medea*. It is Nübling's central conceit for Williams's closed, prejudiced society, on the one hand, and for the magic, made possible but wasted, on the other. It is clear, as well, that his conceit stretches beyond the production's immediate context. Nübling is alleged to have said that Bavarians, too, wear cowboy hats.

Resistance in *Jeder Stirbt für sich Allein*

A wall, this time a vertical one cleverly filled in with bric-a-brac to map a city, also serves as both a stage design and a conceit in *Jeder Stirbt für sich Allein*, the title of Hans Fallada's novel from which this production, directed by Luk Perceval with Hamburg's Thalia Theater, is drawn (the English title of Fallada's book is *Alone in Berlin*). Perceval intelligently extrapolates from the book's main themes, which focus on the intransigent cruelty of the Nazi regime and how it systematically, and in the most organized of ways, crushed resistance.

Resistance comes in the form of a working-class couple, Otto and Anna Klugel, from the poor neighbourhoods of Berlin. This husband and wife are inexpressive, inarticulate, and politically disengaged. However, the husband snaps after the death of their son at the beginning of the Second World War, and he starts randomly to drop notices denouncing the regime, soon to be joined by his wife in their – as it turns out, fruitless – campaign to activate their co-citizens. A map of Berlin on a wall – hence the installation/sculpture-like map in Perceval's production – marks the spots where they had dropped these notices. The map and its method of closing in on possible suspects was the bright idea of the investigating thug, Escherich, whose efforts eventually lead to the arrest, torture, and death of the couple.

Perceval does not attempt to reproduce the novel's unparalleled grimness, which could be described as the literary counterpart of the 'New Objectivity' (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) that identified such painters as Max Beckmann. Nor does he dwell on its brutality, except for one brilliant scene when Escherich bamboozles his prey and persuades him to suicide so as to save his own hide. Escherich is tortured by his own superiors for having failed to track down the perpetrators of the writing crime – something that must be known from the novel since it is not made clear in the production.

Perceval presents, generally successfully, vignettes of everyday relations between people in a fragmented montage of a stage structure. The vignette concerning Escherich and his scapegoat, superbly performed in understated fashion, is one type of 'everyday' characteristic of the Third Reich. Perceval's closing scene after four hours of play is of another type. It concerns a mother and her surrogate son, both of whom protest as best



Medea. Constanze Becker as Medea. Photo: Birgit Hupfeld.



Mother and surrogate son drive away on an imaginary cart in *Jeder Stirbt für sich Allein*. Photo: Krafft Angerer.

they can against coercion – that is, essentially by dodging it. They drive away on an imaginary cart harnessed to an imaginary horse, happy to be together. This scene in Fallada's novel is rather more ominous as regards the future of Germany in a war that was about to escalate.

The actors deftly handle narrated passages from the novel by seamlessly shifting from narrator to character and back again; and this device recurs, albeit inconsistently and with far less skill, in the five-hour, three-part *War and Peace* (yes, after Tolstoy) from the Centraltheater Leipzig, directed by Sebastian Hartmann. The problem lies in Hartmann's uncertainty over how to juggle his numerous genres, which encompass Brechtian epic theatre (especially its show-and-tell dimen-

sion), mock period theatre, agit-prop, slapstick, vaudeville, burlesque, animated cartoons, video games, and the over-the-top theatricality that is generally favoured by contemporary German theatre. I think of it as 'German grotesque', leaning on Meyerhold's notion of the 'grotesque', since it is quite particular in its demolition of psychological theatre for the sake of a theatre of displayed extravagance. Frank Castorf at the Volksbühne in Berlin is the incomparable master of this particular genre. Hartmann was, at one stage of his career, Castorf's assistant.

Hartmann's point of departure, spelled out at the beginning of Part Three, seems to be the slogan that is displayed (as are many others throughout the performance) on a big screen or in

LED at the top of the stage. It reads (here translated): 'War and peace is over, now there is only comedy left.' The rest of Part Three is a roller-coaster of a film, preceding live play, whose swoop effect is rather like that of *Russian Ark* (which was filmed in one go by a hand-held camera), except that this one is hysterical. It blurs shots of Hitler, bombings, and Kennedy in Berlin, among many other images that pass by too quickly to be caught. It may well be a *comédie humaine*, perhaps closer, anachronistically, to Balzac than to Tolstoy, although that is really beside the point. The show is off its head.

In a similarly grotesque vein, although more lurid still, is *St Joan of the Stockyards* from Schauspielhaus Zürich directed by Sebastian Baumgarten. Cowboys here reappear, this time together with figures dressed like Lutheran pastors. Placards and fake blood abound, and the whole thing ends up being a treatise against capitalism. Brecht would not have been amused. More sober, by comparison, is *The Street, the City, the Attack*, a play by Elfriede Jelinek that centres on a real-life character, Rudolf Moshhammer, who was a celebrity in the fashion world. Moshhammer was gay, and notorious in Munich for his outrageous life style around which gathered rumours about his numerous, supposedly unsavoury, business transactions. He was found in the street, allegedly murdered by a transvestite whom he had tried to pick up.

Jelinek's play is a sharp account of fashion victims in a rapacious, treacherous industry, for which director Johan Simons's metaphor is a floor of melting shavings of ice. The men in this universe teeter on this in high heels, their legs bare or in women's tights, and their torsos covered by a short fur jacket or some other garment behaving as an accessory rather than as a practical piece of clothing. Handbags, champagne glasses, a bathtub on one occasion, and other paraphernalia of the 'high life' build up a picture of disasters waiting to happen. What in Jelinek is a rather complex view of aspirations to be seen and admired is, in Simons's production, altogether over-beautified, rather like his aestheticized, cleanly beautiful Sarah Kane trilogy, which was shown at Theater-treffen 2012 (see *Critical Stages*, as above). The Munich Kammerspiele actors – a different cast from that of *Orpheus Descending* – are engrossing, as always, and truly noteworthy in their versatility and range.

Actors of a similar calibre perform *The Rats* by Gerhart Hauptmann. Karin Henkel directs Schauspiel Köln and turns, once again, to the 'grotesque' mode, peppering it up with images that, today, can only recall Pina Bausch. This is so not only because of men in ballerina dresses and other such incongruities perpetuated by Bausch, but mostly because an English-speaking member of the company, Kate Strong, pronounces virtuoso

speeches about herself (in English), as is typical of Bausch's early choreographies. The difference, in Strong's case, is that her biography seems to mix fact with fiction (she really was trained as a dancer and really did work with Bausch, but was she as manhandled as she claims?). Furthermore, she is far more outrageous, bombastic, one might say, than anyone on Bausch's stage, and foul-mouthed in a way that would never have suited Bausch. It fits, however, with the overall theatricality of Henkel's production.

The idiom of theatricality is also developed through images of the theatre within theatre. These include a cabin in the style of a fairground booth where some of Hauptmann's murky events take place and where, as might be expected, Hauptmann's character, who wants to be an actor, plays bits of *Macbeth*, or walks about with bloodied hands playing Lady Macbeth on a catwalk at the front of the stage (Strong does her number on the same catwalk). Hauptmann's horrible scenes of seriously underprivileged people in straits that involve infanticide are taken over by excessively play-acted renditions of them. All this is performed by actors at the top of their game. None of it is true, not least the fake blood with which Lina Beckman, who plays Frau John, child-stealer and child-murderer, covers herself to show her character's suicide.

Murmel Murmel: a Play in Two Words

A very different kind of theatricality governs Herbert Fritsch's *Murmel Murmel* at the Volksbühne, which I saw in repertoire in 2012, before it was selected for Theater-treffen 2013 (although Fritsch's *The Spanish Fly* was shown at that year's festival). It is a glorious piece of slapstick in a variety of tones and colours as it spoofs one-man comedy acts, vaudeville, cabaret, crooning groups, swing bands, popular bands-in-the-park, music-hall dance routines, 1950s TV comic shows with bouffant hair-dos and bouffant dresses to match, and so on. Men, meanwhile, are either in open-necked shirts or tucked up in ridiculous, more often than not loud ties.

'Murmel Murmel', from a text (definitely post-Dada!) by Dieter Roth, are the only two words ever spoken or sung in a hundred and one ways in this production. The words are tweeted, as if by a cuckoo clock, by one of the tubbiest actors – filled out by extra padding for the joke; they are seductively murmured by a man with a slick hair-do; or are dolly-birded by one or a number of the improbable bouffant women; and so on in endless fantasies on the foibles of human beings. To cap it all, actors mutter or shout these two words, or throw them out in whatever mood takes them, as they topple and re-topple, always unexpectedly, into the pit, where a loony musician plays his stuff – and sometimes plays a general and a band-



Scenes from *Murmel, Murmel*. Photos: Thomas Aurin.



leader too. It is enough to make you flinch in fear for the actors (how many are going to break their legs or break their arms as they climb out?) while you are laughing your head off.

Again and again, laughter invades the audience, and all chant 'Murmel Murmel' at the end, with strangers greeting each other with these words like long-lost friends as they leave the theatre. The show's energy is nothing short of amazing, and, while it may put out spectators used to 'more substantial' material, its fun is anything but empty. It also provides one of those few examples of theatre that visibly unite audiences, regardless of a sprinkle of spectators who dissent – and these always (mercifully) exist, since unity does not exclude diversity.

Last but not least in this overview is Katie Mitchell's direction of *Journey into the Night* by Friederike Mayröcker with the Schauspiel Köln in another cast. Mitchell has carved a niche for her work in Germany, notably in Cologne, as well as in Berlin at the Schaubühne directed by Thomas Ostermeier, where she recently staged an absorbing *The Yellow Wallpaper* after Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Like the latter, *Journey into the Night* combines real time with flashback. The first is filmed and shown while it is being filmed, either in view or out of it, behind a door or a wall. The point is that the events and the actions taking place are seen closely, as they cannot be in the theatre, Mitchell believes, without the help of cameras and related technology. Flashbacks are previously filmed, but are so arranged as to look as if coming from within the characters' minds.

As always in such of her works, Mitchell

divides her space into rooms and cubicles, and in this production these closed spaces are the compartments and the corridor of a train in which a husband and wife travel to her father's funeral. Mitchell is interested in behaviour, and here she meticulously follows the various states of heart and mind of her female protagonist, taking her to childhood memories of her parents through to her unsuccessful attempts to make psychological and physical contact with her husband and her quick sex with the railway employee in charge of their carriage during the night.

Despite the cool 'detachment' of the camera, which films the smallest details close-up, the actors play their roles with emotional finesse, and in this way into human dramas that are not only visible, but are also meant to be moving. Mitchell's focus on the unhappy internal lives of women – *The Yellow Wallpaper* shows a woman going insane – may take her yet to broader themes. Even so, she has certainly won her audiences in Germany, where her talents are given the freedom and the actors she needs.

All in all, Theatertreffen made offerings that had much in common in tone and temperament, allowing glimpses of cultural currents and what could be called cultural 'tone'. It will be more than interesting to see whether the tone shifts between now and next May to indicate shifts in the reigning culture and so in the society that generates it. The jurors will be different, and perhaps the reasons said to be best known to themselves will, nevertheless, pick up signs resonant for others, as was, indeed, the case this year.