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German Unity in Stage Design

On the First Unified German Contribution

“A Dream, what else?”

(Kleist, Prince of Homburg, last scene)

Are we dreaming, is it true? *One* German Quadriennial contribution in a city of Prague where Vaclav Havel is President? What was happened? A revolution took place where a strongly equipped army, meant to act inside the country, handed its weapons over to the stretched out hands of a people determined not make us of them. At the end, there was a unification where another strongly equipped army meant to act outside the country conquered that army by making it wear its own uniform. We realize it quite astonished: the fight for freedom to which all the countries of the socialist block had sworn had finally been won; we are standing there and can't really believe it yet. At the same time we realize how much it costs when the unimaginable suddenly happens, and, to speak with Grillparzer, “the dream comes to life”. We all can feel it, Germans and Chechs and Slovenians (the Polish and the Hungarian not less) that we have remained brothers in those countries where changes took place in that way – countries linked by *one* experience, that which separates the citizens of the former GDR from those people who speak the same language, who belong to the same nation and whose currency falling from heaven only unifies us on the surface. It creates new barriers which are not of a solid nature any more but of more “liquid” – or, one also could say – liquidating nature.

Here in Prague, on the seventh large theatre exhibition, founded in 1967 in the context of the Prague fore-spring (courageous specialists succeeded in bringing it through the winter), those new barriers are not perceptible. Here, in the exhibition rooms of the first unified German Quadriennial contribution, German unity really takes place. The stage rooms of the German exhibition don't look like the German Parliament, the Bundestag, where the representants of the East German regions, the Länder, are a minority which is not even visible as such because it is distributed to the many parliamentary groups; here – in the groups of the exhibition area – there is equality: German unity as one flat whose inhabitants have to share rooms in tenseful-friendly coexistence. Their names are provided by German literature, the old, the classical, the contemporary-actual one. With good reasons, the first one prevails – the drama of the German classical period was a tie which bound together the German theatre beyond the frontiers which were gradually easier to be passed.

The other linking element was Brecht. All German directors who started to work in that field in the sixties learnt from him and his theatre even if they took their distance from him. The direct influence of the disciples and grand disciples of the Berliner Ensemble on West German theatre life was another factor. Brecht is represented in this exhibition through his successor, Heiner Müller, who called his play “Germania – Death in Berlin” (Germania, Tod in Berlin) – a grotesque didactic series of scenes illustrating failures in former and recent moments of German history an “atrocious tale”. He wrote it at the beginning of the seventies for the Berliner Ensemble directed by Ruth Berghaus at that time, where its performance then was not allowed. Two stage designs of the play are shown in *one* room, testifying thus the close linkage in German-German theatre relationships, which had always been effective, sometimes also in biographically conflictuous ways, already before autumn 1989. Hans Joachim Schielker, a stage designer who got known at the Volksbühne in East-Berlin as a result of the support he got by Heiner Müller and who went to the German West in 1984, created a room for that play in a production of the National Theatre in Mannheim which is threateningly rigid, surrounded by a bloody brickwall. At the Berliner Ensemble Karl Kneidl, who usually worked in West-Germany, designed the stage for the “Germania” in 1988. It is an open space which can be assigned in manifold ways by way of set-scenes which continue into the auditorium. This design was realized in that production only to a certain extent. The Müller room at the Prague exhibition will present the original intention.

The Classics' presence is predominant here. In fact that would not be justifiable if they appeared as such. The productions presented here however show them as contemporaries describing their own situation through that medium of art; questioning our own situation we can see that they reflect it. In an each time doubled form three main events of that National Theatre come to sight which, between 1770 and 1810, created Germany as a theatre nation.

“The Robbers” by Schiller – that was the dramatic rebellion of the youth against a parasite-tyrannical structure of society which forced the author of the play to flee that state crossing several inner German borders: The play hit onto German stages like a bomb. In both parts of the city of Berlin, whose reunification will be a long, hard process as was its division, it appeared in 1990 as an aftermath of a youth movement which had essentially contributed to the overthrow of a different kind of tyranny, one which had not understood to take its own mechanisms, in fact bare of sense, serious. The director Frank Castorf is, more than anybody else, the theatre exponent of that young GDR generation; in Bert Neumann at the Volksbühne in East Berlin he found a stage designer who for his part insisted on a particular characteristic of that country. The imposed restrictions also lead to a certain density conveying a feeling of being a home country where even certain possibilities within that poorness must seem like luxury to the rich. Scarcity, mobility and simplicity of intricate humour are characteristics of the settings by which the stage designer surrounds the smashing of the play produced by the director.

On the other, the West Berlin side, things are more opulent. A real castle is shown in front of a romantic sky – the stage plays with the semblances of illusion, with its different forms of the play's performance tradition. However, also here the East-West confrontation is misleading, for the director of the production, Alexander Lang, had lived for a long time in East-Berlin, first as an actor and then as the director; only a few years ago, he changed countries and went to the West. His stage designer, Caroline Neven Du Mont, is a disciple of Volker Pfüller, with whom Lang went through a long and fruitful period of collaboration in the 80s at the Deutsches Theater.

Volker Pfüller is represented at the Prague Quadriennial already for the fourth time. The large exhibition has documented all the stages of this artistic development, to begin with the production of "Woyzeck" in the theatre town Meiningen in Thüringen. Its stage which gets its shape by large, swinging clothes was presented in 1979, at the 5th Prague Quadriennial, by huge photos. Also Pfüller had been working in both Germanies for several years – at least Munich offered him the space to let his art play. With lustful precision, a grotesquely exaggerated realism it aims at the actor, his action, his costume, his physiognomie and forms around him the setting of the plot, the world of fiction.

That is the world of Kleist and deals with Penthisilea, the Queen of Amazones, a women play which the theatres of an epoche having become bourgeois didn't bring to scandal and triumph anymore as Schiller's "Robbers" but which they simply oversaw. It was performed for the first time only 68 years after the publication of the book. Finke answers the high tension of the Kleist play by a rigid, cool-imaginative configuration of the space. The disciple of Karl von Appen imposes an architecture on the director which abstains almost ascetically from that ornamental gesture for which Appen used the term of the "decorative". A slim and directly falling in light column is enough to draw that rupture of the world the play deals with. Wolfgang Engel directed that production of Dresden. In collaboration with him Finke, whose work has been shown on each Prague Quadriennial since 1971, has found a field of activity which challenged his sensitive-laconic, dramaturgically concentrated art of design.

Also for Goethe's Faust, Engel had a stage built which acts with utmost clarity – the bare, the purely structural as the adequate setting for a theatre play which denies itself consciously the beautiful illusion which reality, finally, doesn't provide either. Engel's figure of "Faust" confronts itself with this reality and measures Goethe's text by the scale of his own experience. For this purpose, the stage designer Frank Joachim Hänig created a suite of spaces whose art resides in the fact that they never refer to themselves but always to the action of the respective scene. It can be of a provocative austerity, when the Walpurgis night is shown as a house party in a block of new buildings; in another scene it ends in a daring doubling of film and theatre play – one can expect anything from him but the comforting effect of beautiful forms.

Those beautiful forms one would also look for in vain in Einar Schleaf's work. He is one of those pupils and pioneers of the GDR theatre who, after a long absence which they used in manifold ways, now return to their home regions. Schleaf also is a Quadriennial veteran. He already was represented in 1971, at the 2nd exhibition, in the students' section at that time. A play by Goldoni offered him the opportunity to bring to its extremes the artistic means of Karl Appens, the arrangement sketch; a frieze of scenes, many metres long, wound around the exhibition space. In his following work he avoided that graphical-coloristic finesse which he had shown at the age of then 27. Already in 1975 one could remark that, when Schleaf was represented at the PQ by three sensational works. A tendency towards the baroque – overflowing however remained. When Wolfgang Engel presented two "Fausts" in Dresden, one of whom also played parts of the mephisto, then Einar Schleaf didn't do it in the Main-Frankfurt with less than 12 "Gretchen". With his double authority of the producer who is his own stage designer, he seated them pairwise naked on little buckets, thus hitting the text out of the body of poetry. A series of photos gives an impression of the visions of that production which didn't pretend to play Goethe's Faust but which played with it.

To play with the play: that is also what Johannes Grützke does – however by using less monumental means – when he puts Mozart's "Figaro" into the costume of our time. Susanna as the smart waitress of a millionaire who looks as if he had a Lamborghini parked behind the castle. This is as much funny as it is entertaining; it shows the hopeless distance which Mozart has to time where another anniversary of his death is a matter of economies. Grützke (and Zadek) create a distance by denying; Zimmermann (and Kupfer) insist on a distance as the basis for approach – in "Cosi fan tutte" which is closely related to the first mentioned. The cool grey-white of the costumes (by Eleonore Kleiber) fits into a scene, where the chain of misunderstandings is arched over by a glass roof; being transparent, the historic thus dominates the field of the sublime recklessness with which the figures in Mozart's operas fall in love with each other crosswise.

Six plays, five rooms with each time one East and one West German stage configuration – only on the surface two types of stage design are confronted here. A theatre productivity appears in different shapes, which, in spite of all the distances as a result of the circumstances never lost the connection to the other on its wound, often crisis-shaken ways. It is shown here by example of border transgressing variants, and also the new epoche will require the transgressing of borders when it steps over the put down barriers into uncertainty. In this sense, the first unified German Quadriennial exhibition also shows the transgression of borders. It shows its visitors something which goes for ahead of reality: the unification of two areas of living and experience seen as a productivity based on a common culture and merging informally with each other. To achieve it on a larger scale is not only a unified German challenge but also a challenge for the whole of Europe. Only when it is fulfilled, the dream which went beyond our own dreams will have passed into the sphere of the real.