

Let's see what these criminals write

by Wolfgang Behrens

Osnabrück, September 6th 2009. No festival without nighttime parties, with dripping grill-steaks and alcohol. And no festival without a podium discussion: As the latter was scheduled for Sunday morning at the Spieltriebe 3-festival, the audience (with a large sum of professionals) must be highly praised for turning up in such a great number shortly after the second party.

Even though the fuel for conflict which the topic of the discussion contains isn't even that great: "Europatriots? European plays in German theatre". Sure, there are several points in the European theatre market that should be critically questioned, and the Osnabrück artistic director Holger Schultze and his dramaturge Jürgen Popig have also named them before-hand in the [n achtkritik-interview](#)

But when Detlev Baur, editor of the magazine "Die Deutsche Bühne", named the statistics of the Deutsche Bühnenverein at the beginning of the discussion, it soon became evident that the power of the whole thing is still very relative to the interpretation of the figures: In the course of the last 20 years, the number of annual productions has in total increased by a third (good!), the number of German world premieres has doubled (veeery good!) and the number of German premieres has, with a slight decrease, remained the same (hmm....).

Where has the interest gone?

"So what?" you might want to ask: the fact that two figures are rising should satisfy us; and the fact that the other figure has at least not decreased – well, culture isn't like economy and aiming at rates of growth, is it? The other way of seeing it is that the interest in foreign plays has at least in proportion drastically gone down – even though the breakdown of socialism soon gave something like a "Euro-awakening-fantasy", as Michael Laages, journalist and moderator of the podium remarks. Where has the interest in Europe gone, and in European plays?

The answers are naturally all different: Andreas Beck, artistic director of the playhouse Vienna, emphasises that – with all willingness to embrace the world – theatre is local, geographic, as well as deeply rooted to aesthetic conditions. Even though Slovakia is a neighbouring country of

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Austria, it doesn't mean that a Slovakian play should be relevant in Vienna. Mirjana Wittmann, Serbian translator (invited to Spieltriebe 3 with Maja Pelevic's "Orange Peel") surprisingly points out when interest for a foreign country does exist, namely when there is war in the country.

The publishing companies follow the politics

In the mid nineties, literature from the Ex-Yugoslavian countries boomed – as if to say "let's see what these Serbian criminals can write!" In short: the publishing companies, as negotiators of the plays, followed the politics. In any case, the publishing companies could be the main culprits for our lack of knowledge in foreign plays: publishing companies however – as publisher Marc Schäfers justly points this out – are private businesses, and as the translation of a foreign play is an investment and therefore poses a financial risk, the barrier is set higher than with German plays.

The main problem however, and the discussion continuously circles around it, lies within the cultural transfer and all its depths. Andreas Beck for example points out that many French plays wouldn't stand a chance in Germany, as nobody here values the specific art of the monolog-speaking actor any more. Instead everyone in Germany believes to be highly qualified for English plays, for first of all everyone can speak English and secondly, the Germans can produce much better than the Brits.

Even foreign aesthetics have to be endured

So it isn't solely the translation that displays a hurdle for foreign plays. Often the texts bring along other ways of performing, which first of all transport unfamiliarity, and can also unleash fear of contact and lack of understanding. The group let this idea through on the nod, and agreed that one should integrate foreign aesthetics in native work – be it with guest performances, or through multinational ensembles, which are already routine in dance theatre –, or through an actor-exchange, like the Theatre Osnabrück is currently operating with a Bulgarian theatre in Russe.

The question of what actually happens to a play, how it changes in a new context not only when it is translated, but also when it is performed, is in fact very interesting. Already a production created with actors from a foreign country, which apart from that has the same structure, drastically changes its image – whoever has experienced plays by Peter Stein, Dimiter Gotscheff or others, will be able to confirm this. And how much more this counts for a mere text. That would be – pardon the offense, Mr Schultz – a concept for a fourth Spieltriebe-Festival: To invite productions of new plays from European municipal theatres in their original language (including the "original" art of performance) and to produce the same plays with a native ensemble.

Europatriots? Discussion about problems and strategies of European exchange in theatre

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P.S. Detlev Baur, the man with the statistics, probably put the problem of the (perhaps) too slow migration of European theatre pieces into perspective towards the end of the event himself: "Shakespeare also needed a few centuries until he gained foothold in Germany and was "the" german stage author. Well then...

Europatriots? European plays in German theatre

Podium discussion

With: Michael Laages (moderator), Mirjana Wittman (translator) Andreas Beck (artistic director of the playhouse Vienna), Detlev Baur (editor Die Deutsche Bühne) Jürgen Popig (dramaturge Theatre Osnabrück), Paul Pourveur (Belgian author), Marc Schäfers (publisher), Bernhard Studlar (author and manager of the wiener wortstaetten).