

Report from Germany

By Marvin Carlson

A week or so in Germany in May, Covid years excepted, has long been a high point of my annual theatre-going. Although Berlin has often been my focus, the decentralized nature of the German theatre makes available an even richer selection even if one's visits are limited to theatres only an hour or two train ride from the capital. Thus I began my 2023 visit with a mini-Shakespeare indulgence, beginning with *King Lear* in Hamburg, followed by *Hamlet* in Dessau and *Macbeth* in Dresden. Such a selection is by no means unusual in Germany, where Shakespeare makes an important contribution to the repertoire of almost every professional theatre. One of the results of this is that in Germany, where the director is often the dominant artist, the variety of interpretation, especially of the more familiar works, is almost beyond imagination (or some might say, reasonable justification). Accordingly I booked these productions expecting to see very little resemblance in any of them to the Shakespeare I might see in London or New York, and this indeed proved to be the case.



King Lear. Photo: Armin Smailovic.

I began with the *Lear* at Hamburg's Thalia Theatre, directed by Jan Bosse, who was in-house director there from 2000 to 2005 and has particularly close ties to Hamburg, though he directs regularly at most of the leading German-language theatres. Bosse is now in his mid-50s, the generation of Thomas Ostermeier and Michael Thalheimer. In the fairly predictable cycle of directorial reputations in Germany, leading directors like these, once considered revolutionary, are now generally considered respectable but very much a part of the establishment. In another decade or so, if they are still active, they will probably be considered hopelessly dated by at least the younger generation, as Peter Stein and Claus Peymann were in their time.

In the meantime, Bosse is considered a major if somewhat conservative director although his work would appear quite radical in the Anglo-Saxon world. His production begins not in Lear's palace but in a glittering disco ballroom, where instead of a throne, a shiny musicians' platform is the focus. Above it a huge half globe with reflecting mirror surfaces provides a visual element that will be ingeniously used in various forms throughout the evening. Lear is the master of ceremonies, making a rather awkward entrance below the globe through a curtain of sequins to seize the microphone. Although he is dressed in full drag, with a brilliant glittering low-cut black gown with a sweeping train, and with deep black fingernails, there is nothing effeminate about him—an aging but still strongly virile figure. The actor is Wolfram Koch, a leading figure in contemporary Germany who recently played a magnificent Prospero directed also by Bosse at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, and the colorful, but gender fluid costumes are the work of Kathrin Plath.

The scene is developed as a TV spectacle, with Lear calling up his daughters from their seats in the front row (where they smile and wave as the audience applauds) to present their clearly scripted testimonies on stage. Goneril and Reagan (Anna Blomeier and Tioni Ruhnke) are perfect properties for Lear's production—elegant model types, with splendidly glittering ball gowns, perfectly coiffed silver hair and of course long black fingernails and striking but subtle makeup. Poor Cordelia (Pauline Renevier, who also plays Edgar) lacks their visual elegance as well as the expected verbal display. She has not even the consolation of a volunteer husband, since Bosse has removed from this production many of the lesser characters, leaving only the three sisters, Lear and the Fool, Kent, Gloucester, Edgar and Edmund (Johannes Hegemann, who also plays Oswald).

After the glittering opening scenes, the elegant disco back curtain disappears, and the remainder of the production takes place in a cold black void, the central feature of which is the glittering half dome, which appears in an impressive variety of configurations. Still hanging in the air, it sometimes reveals its back side, essentially as assemblage of wooden supports, forming a kind of rough retreat where the villain Edmund can weave his plots, or the imprisoned King can be kept. Sometimes it sits dome-like on the floor as various characters climb up and down it to gain better

positions. On the heath, tilted slightly upward, it becomes the sheltering hovel containing the outcast Edgar. In some scenes this central element is surrounded by a cloud of individual lights hanging from the flies. During the tempest scene, it is pelted by countless small white balls, which suggest a crushing hail, or much more ominously but more metaphorically appropriate, a rain of detached eyeballs. The imaginative and constantly changing design is by Stéphane Laimé.

The reduced cast size leaves only leading actors, each of whom turns in a bravura performance. Perhaps especially notable is the flamboyant Edmund, a consummate villain in his flowing black hair, black petal sweater, shiny gold sports pants and cowboy boots. The ethereal Fool (Christiane von Poelnitz) in a yellow jumpsuit layered with gauzy wisps of fabric, hovers about Lear like a bedraggled and ineffective guardian angel, reduced to making ironic comments on a darkening situation. The production is dominated however, by the powerful visual images of Laimé and by the fading ruin of Koch's Lear, a major addition to his already impressive creations of other monumental figures of the Western theatre.

The next two evenings were devoted to other major Shakespearian tragedies, and although quite different from each other, both clearly demonstrated the general stylistic difference that exists between a "conventional" German director like Bosse and many members of the upcoming generation Bosse himself has jokingly referred to as the "pseudo-young savages." This is not simply a matter of age. Both Phillip Preuss, director of the Dessau *Hamlet*, and Christian Friedal, director of the Dresden *Macbeth*, are only five years younger than Bosse, but both are clearly among the "young savages," firmly on the other side of a distinct stylistic divide in contemporary German directing. This difference has many variations and has been described in many ways, but many German critics would use the term popularized by the theorists Hans-Thies Lehmann in his 1999 book, *Postdramatic Theatre*. Although the term has been much discussed and debated, the Preuss and Friedal productions would surely be characterized as postdramatic, in opposition to Bosse, despite his radical changes to the play. The central difference is that Bosse still essentially follows the plot and action of the original, respecting its overall narrative construction, while the others assemble and arrange images and motifs from the original or related sources and present these as a visual and oral collage which bears the name of its grounding text, but accepts no responsibility to the narrative contained in that text.

The approach is clear from the moment when the audience enters the Dessau Theatre to see the Preuss *Hamlet*. We see two similar male figures (Niklas Herzberg and Felix Axel Preißler) in dark military garb with sparkling accents, seated downstage at a table. The audience assumption is surely that these are Marcellus and Bernardo, the watchmen whose dialogue has opened Shakespeare's drama for centuries. In fact as they begin to speak, their lines are not the familiar opening of the play, but a series of unrelated exchanges of apparently free association, in which

can be recognized fragments of the play, including parts of Hamlet's soliloquies. Gradually we come to realize that these are not the guards but a divided Hamlet, out of joint with both his world and himself. In his (their) constant repetitions, false starts and recirclings, he (they) resemble less Shakespeare's character than such postdramatic protagonists as the couples in Beckett or Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. The cast, in addition to these, consists of Stephan Korves, a loud, grotesque, insecure Claudius, Boris Malré as a fawning and servile Polonius, Cara Maria Nagler, who slips back and forth disturbingly but convincingly between Gertrude and Ophelia, and two "utility" men—Sebastian Graf, who plays Horatio, Rosencrantz, an actor and a gravedigger, and his "double" Roman Welzien, who plays Laertes, Guildenstern, another actor and another gravedigger. Lines from the Ghost are spoken by the entire company, often over the heavy booted tread of the unseen spirit.

The stage, designed by Ramallah Sara Aubrecht, is in some ways extremely simple, in others highly complex. At the opening the table at the end of which the two Hamlets sit, is a long narrow one, running upstage and disappearing in the folds of a large curtain. On the curtain appears a live video showing a closeup of Claudius, carousing at his wedding banquet, and surrounded by everyone but Hamlet (the video is designed by Konny Keller). This scene actually takes place at the upper end of the long narrow table running down from far upstage, which is the main element of the set, although at this point it cannot be scene in its entirety. The offstage video then follows Gertrude/Ophelia as she leaves the King, climbs onto the table and walks slowly down it to where the Hamlets are sitting. As she comes through the curtains they part and for the first time we see her physically present, as the entire stage, and table is revealed. The effect is increased by a large mirror far upstage behind Claudius. We also for the first time see several other figures, dressed as courtiers, seated along the sides of the table, but soon realize they are actually dummies, somewhat reminiscent of the dead figures in a Kantor production.

Most of the action takes place on or (thanks to the tracking live video, beneath this table, which serves as most of the settings of the production. A section in the center can be opened to suggest a grave, which from time to time welcomes the bodies of various actors, who climb in, are covered with dirt, and then climb out again to resume their eternal and repetitive dance of life and death. The other major scenic element is a variety of full stage curtains, of widely varying styles and set at different depths, suggesting a constant play of somewhat arbitrary beginnings and endings. Upon each curtain plays a continuing live video image of the apparently never-ending wedding banquet. Now and then a fleeting image suggests a particular scene—the player king and queen embracing Ophelia lowered into her grave, but these are merely passing images, sometimes repeated, never contextualized, and always embedded in a sea of contentious language. Like all three of the Shakespearian productions I saw, this was accompanied by the almost continuous contributions of a small onstage band with keyboard, strings, and percussion (music by Cornelius Heidebrecht).

The continual repetitions and opening and closings of curtains calculatedly gave little indication of an approaching conclusion. On the contrary every effort was made to suggest something of a never-ending dream—perhaps that suggested in Hamlet’s central soliloquy, fragments of which are constantly repeated. Before the production begins, as the audience assembles in the lobby, confused noises are heard from behind the closed doors into the theatre. When the auditorium doors open, the audience enters to find the two seated figures in place on the stage, and projected behind them the live video of the loud and unruly wedding party, which has been going on for some time, and which we heard from outside. Like many post-dramatic creations, the production ends where it began, suggesting that there is in fact no ending. The two Hamlets resume their positions and conversation downstage and the video of the celebration continues on the closed curtain behind them. Eventually, their conversation ceases but the video continues. Perhaps ten minutes passed before the audience decided the performance was over and there was scattered applause, but nothing changed on stage. After another rather long wait a few audience members left, then others. When the house was perhaps half empty I went to the door and waited as others left. It was now about twenty minutes since the last words or live action on the stage, though perhaps a hundred determined spectators remained to watch the unmoving Hamlets and the continuing video projection. Out in the lobby I recognized that the sounds I heard there from inside the theatre were much the same as I had heard before the theatre opened, and I realized that the effect was to suggest that the display within presumably never ended, like the waiting for Godot.

One might wonder if so extreme a version of this well-known drama would be well received, and the answer is that although naturally the performance had its critics, this *Hamlet* was selected by a jury of leading German critics and theorists as one of the ten outstanding productions of the year, and invited to participate in the annual Theatertreffen held later this same month in Berlin.



Macbeth. Photo: Sebastian Hoppé.

My third Shakespeare, the Dresden *Macbeth*, was as unconventional as the Dessau *Hamlet*, but developed from a very different set of assumptions and circumstances. In 2011, Christian Friedel, an actor at the Dresden State Theatre, joined the four members of the pop rock band Arctic Circle 18 to form a new group, dedicated to working in theatre and film as well as on the concert stage. They significantly took their name from Shakespeare, the Woods of Birnam. The first major undertaking of the new group was in providing the onstage live musical accompaniment for a production of *Hamlet* in Dresden in 2012, directed by Roger Vontobel. Friedel played the title role, for which he created and performed several songs.

The group's second theatrical venture was a collection of dramatic and musical works inspired by various Shakespearian texts and presented in Dresden under the title *Searching for William* in 2016. As the group's reputation grew through a series of album releases, tours throughout Germany and Austria, and as far as Elsinore and major concerts, a production of *Macbeth* itself became inevitable. Like major and minor theatre projects all over the world, however, it fell victim to

Covid. Just a week before its scheduled opening in Dresden in 2020 the theatre was closed, and although a much reduced concert version, *Searching for Macbeth*, was presented later that year for a limited audience, the full production could not be mounted for another two years. At that time it ran for over three hours, as compared to the seventy minutes of *Searching for Macbeth* and the approximately two and a half hours of both the Bosse *Lear* and the Preuss *Hamlet*, both based on much longer texts.



Hamlet. Photo: Claudia Heysel.

Although more of the original in terms of lines and scenes could be perceived in this production than in the Dessau *Hamlet*, the Dresden *Macbeth* was essentially not so much a theatrical production as a no-holds-barred rock concert, with the emphasis not on the music, and even less on the text, but largely on the spectacular visual effects, stunning even for a *major* German theatre. The witch's realm was represented by a large open metallic box, filled with a writhing figure, that from time to time rose up out of the stage floor, the first time under the feet of Macbeth and Banquo. The menacing Birnam Woods formed an ever-present threat, both visually and aurally, appearing in countless and ever shifting forms—using video projections, beams of light, and

massive moving screens, among other devices. Often hovering over the action was what seemed like a skeletal craft out of *Star Wars*, lined with machines that engulfed the stage with billowing clouds of smoke and powerful spotlights that could pick out particular actors, usually Macbeth, or in different combinations send down shafts of light that could suggest the walls of an insubstantial room.

Certain images, like the bleeding hands, were developed into complex visual sequences, partly live and partly filmic. A striking example was the witches' prophecy that Banquo would produce many royal descendants—a brief passage in the play—which was elaborated into a complex visual spectacle lasting several minutes and primarily created by film and video technology using the image of an adolescent boy in crown and royal robes splitting, multiplying, and creating increasingly complex visual patterns rather like a kaleidoscope or the dancers in the climax of a Busby Berkley musical.



Hamlet. Photo: Claudia Heysel.

With all this spectacle the acting contributions of individual performers (there were over fifty of them) made a distinctly lesser impact. Indeed in terms of acting, critics regularly referred to this as a one-man show, not only because Friedel directed, created the music and acted and sang the title role, but also because spots and mikes often picked him out as the only distinct character amid a background of dark and constantly shifting configurations of characters. Like all the rest, however, he remained rather upstaged by the physical production, and his Macbeth was generally considered adequate, though rather conventional and even old-fashioned, considering the competition from the production as a whole. Aside from Friedel, the real stars of the show were the designer, Alexander Wolf, the lighting designer Johannes Zinc, and the video designers Clemens Walter and Jonas Dahl. By and large, the critics considered the production as a success in terms of its technical spectacle and far less impressive as an interpretation of Shakespeare's play. For audiences, however, the production was a major event, and the show is playing to continuously sold-out houses and standing ovations. Although all the productions I attended in Germany had good audiences, only in Dresden did I have real difficulty in obtaining a seat.



Antigone. Photo: David Baltzer.

The remainder of my trip was spent in Berlin, where my choices became much more varied. I began with one more major world classic, *Antigone*, at the Gorki Theatre, which once again demonstrated the liberties taken with such texts in many contemporary productions. The setting, designed by Zahava Rodrigo, was composed of dark billowing cloud-like forms, suggesting perhaps Antigone's fatal cave or perhaps, given the feminist orientation of the work, a sheltering womb. In it, four Antigone figures (Lea Draeger, Eva Löbau, Julia Riedler, and Çiğdem Teke) and an accompanying musician on an electronic keyboard (Fritzi Ernst) presented what might be described as a highly emotional group therapy session lasting about an hour and 45 minutes. Director Leonie Böhm is well known for her radical revisions of the classics, particularly for her 2019 feminist version of Schiller's *The Robbers*, performed, like this *Antigone*, by four women.

Of the Sophocles text, little is left but fragments of the famous choric ode on the wonder of man. The text and actions have been instead developed from the ensemble's improvisations on the themes of shame, exposure, personal loyalties, physicality and death. Some of the material is clearly improvised, especially when one or another actor directly addresses members of the audience. It is not an easy production to watch, especially the first ten minutes, when not a word is spoken, but the four actresses collect their saliva, play with it rather like chewing gum and mix and smear it on the faces and in the mouths of their partners. In a theatre just recovering from Covid, this sequence provided the audience with a serious initial challenge, and not a few departed.

After saliva came shit, the central image of shame, and clearly the most often repeated word in the text. A large pool of the appropriate color and texture provided material throughout the evening for the actresses to smear themselves and each other, and each of them, some nude, at least once immersed herself completely and emerged dripping to continue the performance. Certainly, the audience could sympathize with the often stated feelings of shame and embarrassment expressed by the actresses, but it seemed to me that these feelings were on the whole shared by the audience, and not in a positive way.



The Broken Jug. Photo: Arno Declair.

My last three evenings were scarcely more conventional, but on the whole more enjoyable. All were at the Deutsches Theater, which on the whole remains the most distinguished of the many major theatres in the capital. On my first night there I saw a German classic, rarely done abroad, Kleist's *The Broken Jug*, generally considered among the few major German comedies. The plot concerns a provincial Dutch judge, Adam, who gains access to the bedroom of a local young woman, Eve, falsely claiming that for the proper favors he can rescue Eve's fiance Ruprecht from military service. Surprised in the bedroom by the fiance, Adam escapes through the window, smashing an heirloom jug prized by Eve's mother. The play consists of an investigation brought by the mother to reveal the intruder's identity, a trial in which Adam serves as judge. His increasingly desperate attempts to avoid exposure are finally thwarted by a visiting external official who insists on seeing justice done.

Interestingly, this was the only production of the seven I saw that related to its grounding text in a conventional way. Kleist's sprawling text was cut, and in a few cases slightly updated, but generally

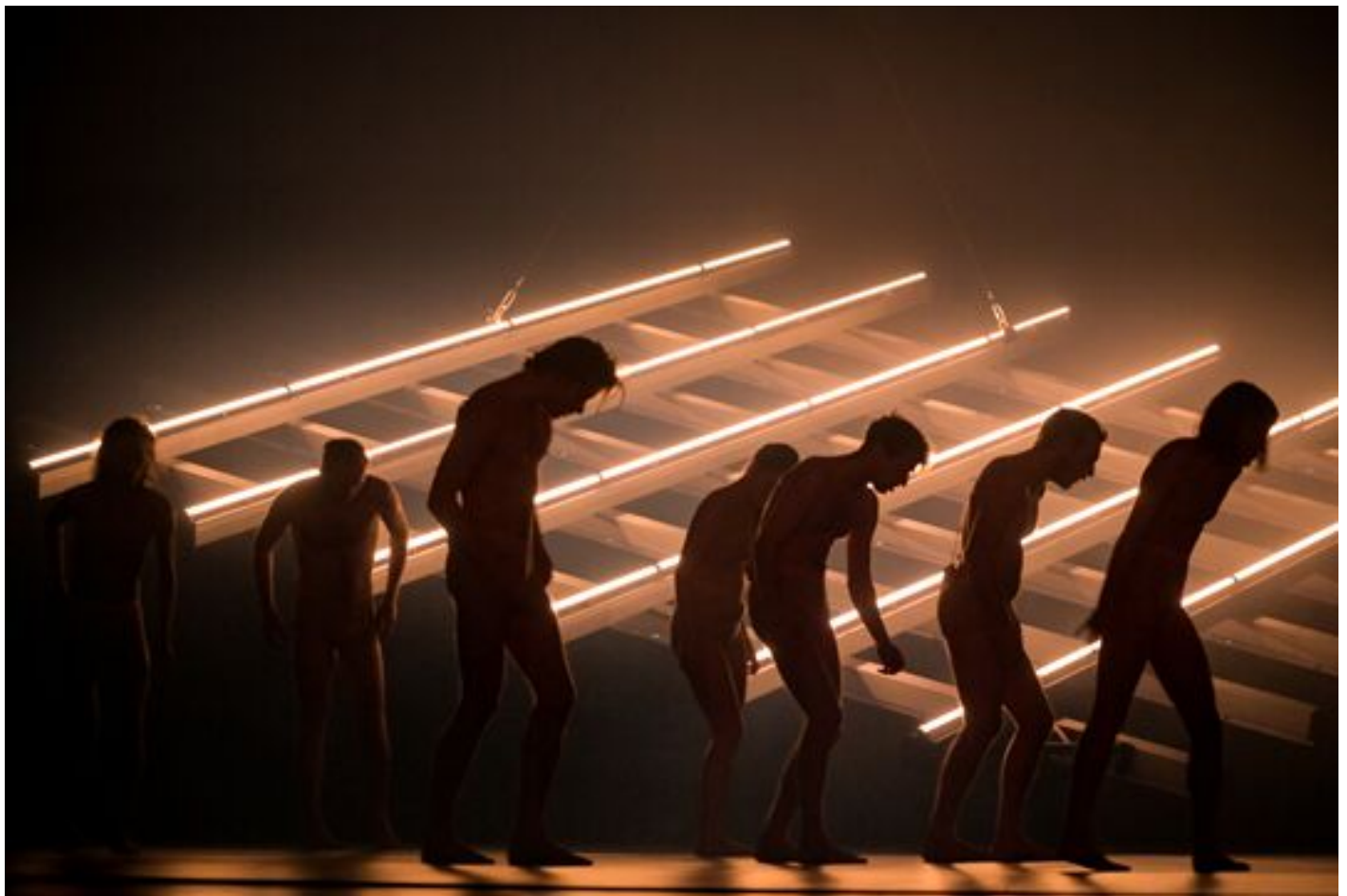
faithfully followed, with careful attention to psychological and linguistic nuance. Still, it was definitely a contemporary interpretation. Perhaps most notably, the visiting magistrate who ensures the moral order is no longer a man, but a shrewd, thoughtful, authoritative, and clearly pregnant young woman (Lorena Handschin). Director Anne Lenk has presented a series of popular classic revivals at the Deutsches, and is known for her general faithfulness to the text, with moderate, usually feminist updating. *The Broken Jug* shows this clearly, with justice at last established by a female judge, despite the best efforts of a corrupt patriarchy (led of course by Adam) to cast all blame on the female victim. The sleazy Adam, his face still revealingly scarred by his encounter with the jug, is beautifully played by Ulrich Mattius, one of Germany's most revered actors, and although he dominates the stage, he is ably supported by leading members of the theatre's famed ensemble, including Lisa Hrdina as the abused Eve, Tamer Tahan as the wronged fiancé, Franziska Machens as Eve's ranting mother, more concerned with her jug than her daughter, and Jeremy Mockridge as Adam's faithful but rather dull clerk.

Aside from its excellent acting, the production is a visual feast. Scene designer Judith Oswald has created a narrow stage, containing only a row of 14 chairs, facing the audience and close to the footlights. The actors move ingeniously among these chairs such a way as to constantly suggest the shifting relationships among them (Eve and Ruprecht for example, are placed at opposite ends of the row for much of the early action, and gradually coming together as they are reconciled). Immediately behind these chairs is a magnificent still painting filling the entire stage space—a 17th-century Dutch still life showing a lavishly furnished table, with goblet and play, oysters and ham, peaches, pomegranates and grapes, and even a huge parrot. No such opulence would be found in the home of a Dutch village judge like Adam, but costume designer Sibylle Wallum has created a set of somewhat anachronistic but richly imaginative costumes in the pink, orange coral range which combine beautifully with the opulent background.

The following evening I returned to the Deutsches Theatre, to its smaller venue, the Kammerspiele, or more precisely to the stage of the Kammerspiele where seventy or eight chairs had been set up in rows on the revolving turntable in the middle of the stage. Here the audience was turned to different positions where various backstage areas (and occasionally the auditorium itself and the walkways above the stage over our heads) became temporary performance spaces. The production was of special interest to me, Ibsen's very rarely performed early work, *The Pretenders*, one of the few Ibsen plays I had never seen. The young director Sarah Kunze argues that Ibsen's historical drama has been unjustly neglected, but this so-called "limited edition" does not really offer enough of the original to make a strong case. Ibsen's play owes much to Shakespeare, with a huge sprawling plot and dozens of characters. Everything in this adaptation is vastly reduced—the length, the complex plot, and most striking of all, the characters, reduced to only three actors, who primarily appear as the three central characters—rather like reducing *Henry IV* to the Prince,

Hotspur, and Falstaff. Granted, these characters anchor the action: the two rivals for the crown, the attractive and gifted Haakon (Lorena Handschin), and the dark and manipulative Skule (Natalia Seelig) and the Machiavellian Bishop Nikolas who feeds off of their rivalry (Elias Arens).

This distinctly melodramatic edge was even more clearly evident in Arens' Bishop Nikolas, whose flamboyant delivery, especially in his death scene and his return as a minister from hell, were high points of the production, as they are of the original play. I was pleased to see this theatrical rarity in any form, but the staging, cutting, and presentation in fact left so little of the original that I doubt it many audience members will accept the director's assertion that she has rediscovered a forgotten gem.



Leonce and Lena. Photo: Arno Declair.

My final production, back on the mainstage of the Deutsches Theatre, was a new interpretation by Ulrich Rasche of George Büchner's *Leonce and Lena*, a popular revival piece in Germany, but

almost unknown in the Anglo-Saxon world. Since his groundbreaking innovative production of Schiller's *The Robbers* in 2018 Rasche has been hailed as one of the most powerful and original of young German directors, with his highly technological, powerfully lit, and perpetually and obsessively acted reworkings of classic texts. Büchner's grotesque fantasy/comedy seems far removed from Rasche's usual dark material, but he brings it unquestionably into his distinctive dramatic world through a striking directorial choice. Very little of the actual text of *Leonce and Lena* remains in Rasche's production. It is replaced by extensive passages from other Büchner writings, including his letters, his revolutionary play *Danton's Death*, and most significantly a good deal of an eight page call for political revolution, the 1834 *Hessischer Landbote*, for which the author was charged with treason and forced to seek asylum in France.

The stage, designed by Rasche, is typical of his work, a vast essentially dark and empty space, here largely occupied by a massive, constantly revolving turntable, and a striking abstract element, here a huge, steadily shifting monumental lattice screen composed of color-changing fluorescent tubes (lighting by Cornelia Gloth). A chorus of ten actors, all clad in black with only their faces and hands dimly visible in a wash of blue light. Occasionally a chorus member will briefly emerge from the group to deliver a line, but the main body of the chorus remains steadily trudging onward, upon the constantly turning treadmill, slowly chanting the litany of oppressions and injustice making up the notorious pamphlet. Four musicians, placed in the front boxes with synthesizers, provide an appropriately crushing and continuous techno beat to accompany the unrelenting treading and chanting of the company. The effect is undoubtedly a powerful one, but at two and a half hours with no intermission, I found myself as much stunned as energized. This is an impression I often get from Rasche's work, despite the unquestionable power of his visual imagination.

In summary, I found the German theatre as always far more daring, more innovative, and more open to works (especially often neglected historical ones) than the Anglo-Saxon stage, which expands most of its creative energy on musical theatre and otherwise is satisfied as best with formulaic revivals of a handful of mostly English language plays. The German interest in pushing the boundaries certainly does not always work for me, but equally offers new insights into traditional works and into the potential of theatre to relate in new ways to the world around it to make this theatrical culture, so different from my own, continually fascinating.

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