This is a comprehensive overview of contemporary European theatre and performance as it enters the third decade of the twenty-first century. It combines critical discussions of key concepts, practitioners, and trends within theatre-making, both in particular countries and across borders, that are shaping European stage practice.

With the geography, geopolitics, and cultural politics of Europe more unsettled than at any point in recent memory, this book’s combination of national and thematic coverage offers a balanced understanding of the continent’s theatre and performance cultures. Employing a range of methodologies and critical approaches across its three parts and ninety-four chapters, this book’s first part contains a comprehensive listing of European nations, the second part charts responses to thematic complexes that define current European performance, and the third section gathers a series of case studies that explore the contribution of some of Europe’s foremost theatre-makers. Rather than rehearsing rote knowledge, this is a collection of carefully curated, interpretive accounts from an international roster of scholars and practitioners.

The Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre and Performance gives undergraduate and graduate students as well as researchers and practitioners an indispensable reference resource that can be used broadly across curricula.

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Introduction: From euphoria to disillusionment – a European dramaturgy
Ralf Remshardt and Aneta Mancewicz

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INTRODUCTION
From euphoria to disillusionment – a European dramaturgy

Ralf Remshardt and Aneta Mancewicz

When German director Karin Beier staged a dazzling production of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a play in which the protagonists overcome strife and confusion to arrive at a celebratory resolution in a new Athenian state of amity, it was rightly seen as an allegory of a particular, unprecedented European moment. The 1996 production at the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus, subtitled ‘a European Shakespeare’, featured fourteen actors from different European theatres, speaking nine languages from around Europe. This was ‘the height of German Euro-enthusiasm’ (Boecker 2018, 28), when the images of the spectacle of 1989 were still fresh in mind. From a Western point of view, the Berlin Wall had cracked open like a proscenium behind which an entire half-continent became visible which had been too long offstage. From the East, the breach of the Wall spotlighted the promise of freedom and abundance many long dreamt of in the midwinter of the Cold War. The Schengen Agreement and the Maastricht Treaty were only recent events, and it seemed that the unstoppable pressure of capital-H ‘History’ had created a new and equitable playing field on which the European drama would now unfold like some exquisite multilingual text. Beier’s production was invited to Berliner Theatertreffen in 1996.

Twenty-three years later in 2019, the disillusionments with the European drama registered heavily in Croatian director Oliver Frlić’s (⇒ Chapter 80) project *Imaginary Europe* at the Schauspielhaus Stuttgart. Part of a larger initiative of the European Ensemble, a collaborative effort between Stuttgart, the Nowy Teatr Warsaw, and the Zagreb Youth Theatre, in associated partnership with the National Theatre of Athens, *Imaginary Europe* again presented an international and multilingual ensemble with two Croatian, two German, and two Polish actors. But in this production, the dominant language was English, the language of neoliberal empire, and the view of the European project was dim: tossed between *The Raft of the Medusa* by Géricault and *Liberty Leading the People* by Delacroix – two paintings referenced in the show – Europe appeared here not only as a frantic spectacle but also a spectral, insubstantial imaginary, a continent tearing itself apart once again, the confused nightmare sequel to Beier’s summery dream. The contrast is stark everywhere: where Beier’s production received the imprimatur of German institutional culture with its appearance at the Theatertreffen, the European Ensemble initiative was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Europe’s conflicted sense of its identity, ideals, and purpose has frequently been the subject of European theatre-maker(s) in recent years, often in the guise of the myth of Europa,
the Phoenician princess stalked and raped by Zeus. The Europa myth is so suggestive because its elements of displacement, flight, migration, and violence interweave the moment of the continent’s legendary founding with its present predicament. This mythical treatment gained currency, especially after a great influx of migrants and refugees in 2015 strained the self-image of Western European democracies as a welcoming sanctuary, representing the Greek ideal of ἥκτεια. In Elfriede Jelinek’s Die Schutzbefohlenen (The supplicants, Thalia Theater Hamburg, 2015, directed by Nicolas Stemann), Europa was just another among the refugees. In South African artist Brett Bailey’s installation performance Sanctuary, 2015, the labyrinth of the Minotaur had morphed into a hostile and intractable EU bureaucracy. In This is Europe?, a dinner-performance by Strefa Wolnosłowa in collaboration with Warsaw Improvisers Orchestra, 2015, the spectators listened to refugee stories interspersed with excerpts from Voltaire’s Candide, as they were invited to critically consider the idea of Europe as a safe haven. Yael Ronen’s production of Winterreise at Berlin’s Gorki Theater in 2017 chronicled a bus tour by members of the theatre’s Exilensemble (exile ensemble), a group of refugee artists who engage ironically with the unfamiliar German reality, exposing its Eurocentric blind spots. In these and other productions, the European outward gaze on the Other is reversed. With refugees populating (often literally) the stage, Europe becomes a kind of strange spectacle, the target of a searching inquiry by refugees, migrants, and aspirants from outside of the privileged sphere that Europe represents. At the same time, the notion of European safety, stability, and unity is being questioned not only by those outside but also by those on the inside, both in the centre and on the margins. In Zinnie Harris’s How to Hold Your Breath (Royal Court 2015, directed by Vicky Featherstone), an apocalyptic financial crisis exposes European citizens themselves to extreme poverty, violence, and exploitation, forcing them to flee the continent. Kosovan playwright Jeton Neziraj’s (⇒ Chapter 21) 55 Shades of Gay (2017) satirises the extent to which communities outside the EU are willing to betray their illiberal values in pursuit of inclusion into the union. In the play, a gay Italian businessman is planning to build a condom factory with European funds in the Kosovan provinces. When he asks the homophobic mayor to perform a gay wedding as a test of his fidelity to EU human rights, chaos predictably ensues. In all of these productions, what emerged was a Europe in perpetual crisis.

The shape of crisis

A resilient myth and a series of overlapping political entities, a geographical concept and a catalogue of often contentious values, and an economic conjunction and a litany of histories and traumas, Europe is a notion (but no nation), perennially under construction. Inevitably, a Companion to the contemporary theatres of Europe is similarly unfinished and unfinishable, especially at a time when the fragile unity of Europe has been decentralised and deconstructed by challenges to its ideological rationale and its territorial integrity. At the moment of this writing, the unity and resolve of Europe to represent a cohesive front have been put to the most wrenching test by a use of force unseen since the Second World War. One nation whose self-image feeds on the rejection of the tenets of Enlightenment Europe and of liberal democracy has sought to annihilate another sovereign nation which aspires, if imperfectly, to these tenets. And so in this latest crisis, precipitated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 – one of a string of crises which have shaken and redefined the continent in the last thirty years and more – the very idea of Europe is once again at issue.

To assemble a volume like the present one consequently means to see these crises not as interruptions of some Hegelian glide path to European perfectibility but rather as the
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structuring nodes in the web of European identity formation. Theatre and performance thrive on crisis, on opposition – the Attic theatre of the fifth century BCE, after all, saw its greatest blossoming when Athens was most under assault, both from Peloponnesian enemies and from demagogues corroding its fledgling democracy.

But apart from crises on the macro-level, those that are the stuff of geopolitical headlines, the theatres of Europe have also been subjected to a series of critical shocks that have manifested most strongly in the institutional realm, as analysed by Christopher Balme and Tony Fisher in their *Theatre Institutions in Crisis: European Perspectives* (Routledge 2021). There they propose four key factors that have inflected performance-making and -watching in the current age: ‘enculturative breakdown’, leading to shifts in theatre-going; social media’s radical ‘reorganisation of the public sphere’; ‘heterogeneity in models of labour’ triggered by neoliberal politics and subsequent austerity economics; and ‘new aesthetic techniques and production processes’ (2021, 2). And so, in this Companion, too, the heuristic value of crises both political and institutional often informs and guides the analysis of European performance.

When we set out to commission the contributions, the freshest ruptures lay only a few years in the past: the massive migration of populations from the Middle East and Global South as a result of warfare, famine, and ecological and economic catastrophe, culminating in a large resettlement of refugees in 2015, and the 2016 referendum in the UK triggering Brexit. As we set to work, the coronavirus mutated from a distant news event in Asia into a threat to health and life that rapidly engulfed the continent, and indeed the world. As we finished, Mariupol and Kherson had been devastated and Kyiv entered a bitter winter of blackouts and food shortages. In each instance, performers and theatre-maker(s) responded, and we sought, accordingly, to reflect these developments in the texts we solicited for this project, to live up to the objective of offering a contemporary analysis. Correspondingly, readers will find in this volume astute chapters on migration in performance, on theatrical reactions to Brexit, on performance in the pandemic, on activist performance, and many more. The chapters on Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, too, take the present war and suffering, as well as the courageous stance of theatre-maker(s) in the face of oppression and silencing, into full account.

The choice of 1989, as of any historical starting point, may seem somewhat arbitrary, given that the upheavals associated with that year, symbolised by the breaching of the Berlin Wall, did not universally resonate in all European countries as a rupture, and left some quite untouched. Or indeed, in some instances, the historical processes then set in motion created a delayed reaction, as in the dissolution of the Soviet Union (which also was its earlier, proximate cause in the policy of glasnost), or in the fierce and bloody wars of independence that seized the Balkans states in the 1990s. Nonetheless, the subsequent convolutions in European history are unthinkable without the events of 1989 (⇒ Chapter 43). In 2004, ten new countries joined the EU, including the Baltic states, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary. Romania and Bulgaria followed in 2007. The stern opposition of ideological blocs gave way to a more malleable and shifting Europe that transformed itself internally as it responded externally to a globalising world and an embrace of neoliberal economic policies – Thatcher and Reagan were followed by Clinton and Blair who sold neoliberalism as Hayekian economic policies in a guise even left-leaning elites could swallow. But unfettered markets and the staggering rapacity and indiscipline of the international financial sector led to the subprime mortgage crisis in the USA which spilled into Europe with often devastating consequences, degrading public credit. The Great Recession that followed triggered multi-year regimes of fiscal austerity starting in 2009 which lasted the better part of the subsequent decade; Greece in particular, squeezed by harsh conditions linked to EU bailouts, suffered financial and personal disruptions which tore at the fabric of civil society and also
Ralf Remshardt and Aneta Mancewicz tested the bonds of European solidarity. As mentioned above, stress on those political bonds and the institutions that sustained them was further exacerbated by dual events in the middle of the decade, the unprecedented influx of ca. 1.3 million migrants from the conflict zones of Syria and Afghanistan as well as the Global South in 2015 (many absorbed by Germany), and the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK that caused a schism not just in the EU but in the UK itself. The decade was capped by the outbreak of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 which resulted in lockdowns and a forced cessation of social and cultural activities.

All of these global-scale developments were significant for theatre companies and cultures in many European nations. Migration became both a thematic and structural focal point of theatre-making (⇒ Chapter 62). The decimated cultural budgets that quickly followed the imposition of economic austerity are a constant refrain in the chapters of Part 1, but austerity protests themselves also took on a quasi-performative nature (⇒ Chapter 48). Neoliberal politics and Brexit not only put economic pressure on theatres but also served as material for performances (⇒ Chapter 46) (⇒ Chapter 49). The pandemic curtailed or eliminated artistic travel and performance projects throughout the continent, even as it initiated new modes of theatrical communication (⇒ Chapter 50). Of equal weight were the powerful, if sometimes inchoate, social movements that sprang from flashpoints laying bare the injustices and inequalities pervasive throughout Western democracies, especially the Black Lives Matter and #metoo movements. Though both originated in the USA (following the killing of Black civilians by police and the increased public discussion of systematic sexual abuse of women), each resonated strongly throughout European societies. In Poland, #metoo became a rallying cry against systemic violence and sexual harassment in a country still dominated by patriarchal structures and religious orthodoxy, but it was also consequential in beginning to dismantle a culture of male domination and the tacit tolerance of abusive behaviour in theatre companies (⇒ Chapter 30). Germany, in the initial phases of facing up to its colonial past, saw Black Lives Matter protests that connected with the decolonial project (⇒ Chapter 61). Some practices of theatrical representation which had been deployed without questioning for years – for example the use of ‘blackfacing’ – came to be recognised as anachronistic and discriminatory and were eliminated (⇒ Chapter 63).

Changes in European theatre

The political, economic, and social changes outlined above have thus been intrinsically linked to the development of theatre and performance in European countries. They had an enormous impact on the cultures of theatre-making, institutional structures, and forms of representation. After 1989, in Central and Eastern European countries, funding models rapidly and radically shifted from state-subsidised culture to market economy. Some of the artists and institutions have found it difficult to adapt, as was the case with Czech director Otomar Krejča, whose Theatre Behind the Gate, closed in 1972 and reopened in 1990 as Theatre Behind the Gate II, did not survive long in the new economic and cultural circumstances (⇒ Chapter 9).

Neoliberal pressures were also hard to resist in other parts of Europe, particularly after the 2008 global financial crisis. In Greece, for instance, the debt crisis was used as a pretext to introduce a series of austerity measures, which has resulted in funding cuts for culture and the dwindling private sponsorship (⇒ Chapter 15). Several theatres closed and many artists had to rely on project-based funding, leading to a high level of precarity in the arts sector. The lockdown restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic further worsened the situation for makers and institutions not only in Greece but also across Europe. Although
most European countries introduced state subsidies for cultural organisations and their staff, many artists were not eligible precisely because of their precarious employment status pre-pandemic. As the global economy slowed down and the recession was on the horizon, the arts sector continued to face funding challenges. It will be increasingly difficult for artists and institutions to work on a long-term, exploratory basis, and they will have to further adapt their workflows and aesthetic approaches as a result.

In response to the funding cuts and the ongoing neoliberalisation of the European cultural sector, many theatre-makers in Europe have already decided to stage their works outside theatrical buildings, inviting spectators to museums, galleries, warehouses, abandoned factories, prisons, parks, and streets – in short, different kinds of repurposed and found spaces (⇒ Chapter 51). In doing so, they have challenged market-driven business models of cultural production, but they have also opened their practice to new forms of audience interaction and engagement. For instance, Lotte van den Berg, a Dutch practitioner, has experimented with different kinds of spaces outside theatre institutions to address the questions of intimacy, collectivity, human connection, and care (⇒ Chapter 93). A British company, dreamthinkspeak, has in turn explored the layered histories and material structures of the buildings in which they worked to present theatrical, classical, and contemporary references, often through the inclusion of digitally produced realities (⇒ Chapter 79). Many of these companies have been part of the immersive theatre or ‘theatre of experience’ phenomenon (Groot Nibbelink 2012, 416), which emerged in the UK, the Netherlands, and Flanders, and which has situated audiences in carefully curated or chosen surroundings, where the participants have often been able to move and act freely. According to Adam Alston, this immersive trend has linked theatre with neoliberal values, ‘such as entrepreneurialism, as well as the valorization of risk, agency and responsibility’ (Alston 2013, 128), responding directly to economic and political shifts post-1989.

The growing interest in non-theatrical spaces in contemporary European theatre has been accompanied by the changing relationship with the text in performance. Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre*, originally published in German in 1999 and in English in 2006, was fundamental in terms of framing the debate about contemporary theatre experimentation (⇒ Chapter 53). Lehmann identified different examples of theatre, performance, and dance that have questioned the dominance of the dramatic text and explored alternative textualities, forms of staging, and audience engagement. As part of this phenomenon, there has been greater emphasis on the processes of devising and collaborative models of performance creation (⇒ Chapter 54). Many cutting-edge practitioners, including Belarus Free Theatre (⇒ Chapter 75), Hotel Pro Forma (⇒ Chapter 83), Marta Górnicka (⇒ Chapter 81), Milo Rau (⇒ Chapter 87), She She Pop (⇒ Chapter 90), and THEATER HORA (⇒ Chapter 91) have experimented with the creation of performance text, dramaturgy, and forms of representation on stage.

The investigation of dramatic form has also led, among other things, to the popularity of documentary performance as a way of capturing the real through the inclusion of witness accounts, records, and documents, in an effort to establish the perception of authenticity on stage (⇒ Chapter 55). The phenomenon is a manifestation of what Andy Lavender describes as ‘a turn to testimony’ in the final decades of the twentieth century, which became even more prominent in the twenty-first century, when individuals gained voice and visibility on an unprecedented scale due to the emergence of multiple social platforms (2016, 35). At the same time, in a period marked by austerity, gentrification, and disenfranchisement, the rise of documentary performance became an important means for creating the sense of community and cultural participation.
Another important change in the twenty-first-century theatre and performance in Europe concerns the increased awareness of the climate crisis as an unprecedented global threat to the survival of the people and the planet. This has resulted in greater attention to ecology and sustainability in the arts, particularly after the pandemic. The health crisis, which exposed the vulnerability of humans to the changes in the ecosystem, has also enforced more sustainable patterns of performance production and exhibition, as lockdown measures necessitated remote collaboration and curation. One of the crucial developments in the recent period involved the emergence of ecodramaturgy as a mode of staging in which environmental thinking is not merely a topic but a form of performativity that transforms theatre as a medium (⇒ Chapter 47). Parallel to that, there have been concerted efforts and initiatives across the theatre industry to make work more sustainably and to ensure that theatres as creative enterprises, buildings, and institutions function in ways that are environmentally friendly. In the UK, theatre practitioners and sustainability experts have developed the Theatre Green Book, a three-volume guide to performance-making, building design, and theatre operations that provides practical advice on ecological strategies and solutions. An important area of scrutiny has been the carbon footprint of touring companies and international festivals; in response, the theatre industry has sought to implement greener approaches to design, transportation, and travel.

Finally, theatre and performance in Europe have experienced an intermedial boom in the twenty-first century (⇒ Chapter 56). Emboldened by the vibrant experimentation with video on stage in the 1980s and the 1990s, artists and collectives began to apply more advanced and sophisticated devices, such as motion capture, augmented reality, and virtual reality. This has led to novel forms of dramaturgy, design, and spectatorship, which have pushed the boundaries of theatre as a medium and redefined the traditional notion of theatre as a face-to-face meeting of actors and audience here and now. At the same time, given the cost and complexity of the new digital experimentation, companies and institutions have had to confront questions not only of funding and interdisciplinary collaboration but also of accessibility and inclusivity.

The discussions around access and inclusion are part of broader conversations that have shaped performance practice and the theatre industry in the recent decade. The issues of diversity, inclusion, and equality have become not merely a topic of stage work but have been embedded into the very practices and structures of theatre. In Germany (⇒ Chapter 14), for instance, there has been a systemic change in the field, with the emergence of a young generation of directors, such as Nuran David Calis, Pinar Karabulut, and Julia Wissert, who became artistic director of the Dortmund theatre in 2020 as one of the youngest Intendantinnen ever installed in Germany. In France (⇒ Chapter 13), documentary theatre has explored the intersections of gender, race, and class, amplifying the stories of women, queer subjects, migrants, and people from global majority backgrounds. At the same time, theatre practice has also engaged more consistently and widely with disability through the work of disabled artists and their contributions to our understanding of contemporary theatre and dance (⇒ Chapter 66). The focus on diversity and inclusion has been, therefore, both all-encompassing and transformative for the twenty-first-century theatre in Europe. Consequently, the discussion of this topic runs as a thread throughout the Companion, but it also occupies a prominent position in Part 2.

**Rationale and structure of this Companion**

This *Routledge Companion* offers a comprehensive overview of contemporary European theatre and performance. It features critical discussions of key concepts, practitioners, and trends
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within theatre-making, both in particular countries and across borders, that are shaping European stage practice in the twenty-first century. It will give undergraduate and graduate students as well as researchers and practitioners an indispensable reference resource that can be used broadly across curricula and in the profession.

The challenges and opportunities of producing a single volume on contemporary European theatre are several. First, the theatre scene in Europe is extremely dynamic, so maintaining a volume that retains currency depended on balancing broader, historically situated contributions with up-to-the-minute materials. Second, as sketched above, the geography, geopolitics, and cultural politics of Europe are more unsettled now than at any time in recent memory. Consequently, any division or delineation of theatrical cultures that merely broke them down by nation states would instantly be fraught and would fail to account for regional distinctions and transnational or transcultural work. However, national performance scenes had to be represented in the book’s structure to ensure that smaller nations and their respective performance cultures are included. It was crucial that the volume did not privilege a handful of dominant Western European theatres but instead presented a more inclusive and richer image of Europe: Europe is not the EU.

The primary difficulty of assembling such a volume is also its chief rationale. To compile a reasonably comprehensive book on contemporary European performance means to confront these fault lines head-on; it means presenting original, illuminating connections and discourses rather than merely rehearsing settled knowledge; it means serving as the point of departure for debates as much as being a point reference for inquiry. Given that factual information is easily available through online sources, a Companion must feature carefully curated, interpretive content by an international body of scholars and practitioners. It can provide access to the state of the performing arts throughout Europe without suggesting closure or completeness; it can give voice in the lingua franca of English to theatrical cultures apart from those to which the academic mainstream pays attention. We believe this volume does so.

The book was tasked, first of all, with defining what is ‘contemporary’ theatre. To complement existing research on European theatre, the timeframe of this Companion is post-1989 with an emphasis on the twenty-first century. A previous comprehensive survey, also published by Routledge, appeared in 1994 (second edition 2001) as World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre Volume 1: Europe (editors Peter Nagy and Philippe Rouyer). By necessity, its coverage extended only to the 1990s, though its thorough country-by-country treatment suggested the structure of the present volume’s Part 1. Both Contemporary Theatres in Europe (2006, editors Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout) and Contemporary European Theatre Directors (second edition 2020, editors Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato) introduced significant practitioners across the continent and did much to advance the idea of a transnational aesthetics. Other publications have examined European playwrights, dramaturgs, and designers. This volume was composed with those precedent sources in mind and positions itself within their coverage, attempting, where possible, to avoid duplication or redundancy.

Within that frame, the main objectives of the volume are:

- to offer a comprehensive account of contemporary European theatre and performance that includes smaller nations which traditionally have been underrepresented in English-speaking academia.
- to critically discuss themes that offer an insight into the most important issues and phenomena in contemporary performance and politics in Europe, such as ecology, trans- and interculturalism, and performance-based activism.
- to feature artists and collectives that are producing some of the most distinctive work in Europe and that represent a diverse range of perspectives.

We felt that the most appropriate to capture the complexities of the current European scene was a tripartite structure that not only explicitly took into account national and regional performance cultures but also deliberately went beyond such boundaries to reflect the increasing importance of multilingual (⇒ Chapter 44) and transnational (⇒ Chapter 45) theatre-making on the continent as a consequence of institutional collaborations, artistic migration, and international festivals (⇒ Chapter 69). We particularly encouraged contributors to cultivate an awareness of postcolonial, diverse, and inclusive practices in European performance as an important thread running through all three sections. While the parts and chapters are separately conceived and can be read independently, we found it useful to include signposts to other chapters parenthetically throughout the book (as for example earlier in this paragraph) to emphasize the interdependence of the material.

In Part 1 of this book, ‘Mapping the continent’, readers will find a comprehensive listing of European nations with a chapter dedicated to each. ‘Comprehensive’ however is not complete: on the one hand, some of the smaller sovereign nations such as Luxembourg or Liechtenstein have been omitted, based partly on the difficulty of obtaining sufficient material or writers with specific expertise, and partly on the need to keep the length of the project at a tolerable limit. No offence is meant to the vitality of the theatre-making scenes in those countries. On the other hand, we felt it justifiable to expand the cultural concept of Europe somewhat beyond its strict geopolitical boundaries and to include two countries outside of the European mainland, Turkey and Israel. It will emerge from those chapters how closely the theatre there is tied to European performance in a series of mutual intersections of aesthetics and migration.

The chapters in this section were subject to more stringent scaffolding to ensure a unitary appearance; thus, each contributor was asked to address Context, Cultures of Theatre-Making, and Institutional Structures in their respective chapter, though they had much latitude in how to apply these headings to their topic. In selecting and commissioning contributors, primary attention was placed on finding authors who could speak from ‘inside’ the countries, at least in terms of deep cultural and social knowledge. Nonetheless, these are not encyclopaedia entries but subjective discussions in the best sense, often full of passion, advocacy, and pointed observations. Readers perusing the chapters dedicated to countries that composed the former Yugoslavia, for instance, will see reflected there contentious and sometimes contradictory assessments of their respective (theatre) histories.

It was our considered decision to list the countries in alphabetical order for the reader’s ease of use and to avoid the potential biases that are inherent in any geographical taxonomy. Similarly, keeping the length of each chapter to about 2,000–4,000 words makes for a compact reference in every instance but generally benefits the smaller nations since it mitigates the perceived weight of the more dominant theatre cultures, which are generally well-covered in academic publications. In that sense, putting together a project such as this is also a commitment to a greater equity of representation for theatre-makers in often underrepresented nation states.

Part 2, ‘Charting themes’, is in many ways the core of the volume. In it, we were seeking an informed (and sometimes polemical) response to the dynamic developments in European theatre, especially during the last decade. The section above has outlined some significant shifts, such as the move away from theatre buildings to found and repurposed spaces, the importance of postdramatic theatre and new models of creation and devising, the popularity of documentary theatre, the growing emphasis on ecodramaturgies and sustainability, and the
expansion of intermedial theatre. This part of the book is further divided into four sections, which to large extent mirror the composition of chapters in Part 1. The entries in Part 2 address broader theoretical and cultural issues alongside selected case studies from different countries and cultures.

Section A, ‘Context’, offers concise and curated discussions of some of the key events and phenomena which have impacted twenty-first-century performance in Europe, such as the climate crisis, Brexit, and the pandemic. Section B, ‘Cultures of theatre-making’, is devoted to fundamental aspects of theatre production and reception that have to do with the space, the text, the audience, and the modes of performance. Section C, ‘Inclusive and diverse practices’, examines a number of topics that address the issues of representation, inclusion, and diversity in theatre, such as queer performance or disability in the arts, but as an inclusive section on inclusion, it also addresses practices often perceived as marginal, such as amateur theatre. Finally, Section D, ‘Institutional structures’ is devoted to the discussion of theatre as a system involving multiple stakeholders and structures, such as festivals and curation, performance training, or (online) criticism.

For Part 3, ‘Surveying the creators’, we have made a selection of twenty artists or groups who not only currently enjoy a high profile in their countries of origin but also, and importantly, represent a newer crop of theatre-makers who see themselves as European artists and who work both locally and transnationally. We also did not want to be repetitive by including those who are already subjects of numerous scholarly studies, such as Katie Mitchell, Thomas Ostermeier, Rimini Protokoll, Ivo van Hove, or Romeo Castellucci, though of course a case could be made for each one of these distinguished artists or groups. Rather, working from a broad geographical framework stretching East to West from Russia to Portugal and North to South from Norway to Italy, we attempted to represent diverse nationalities, genders, and aesthetic approaches, from Marta Górnicka’s choral performances to Philippe Quesne’s theatrical habitats, from Belarus Free Theatre’s radical political allegories to Vinge and Müller’s explosive-cartoonish dramaturgy. We fully appreciate that this listing can only be a momentary snapshot that needs to evolve in subsequent editions (if any), and we hope that in time, women and artists of colour will continue to enrich the dynamic scene that is contemporary European theatre and performance. Similarly, we are aware that the ideas and insights presented in the volume are subject to transformation and, in some cases, reassessment. After all, the subject of this Companion continues to be in constant flux – geographically, historically, and critically.

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Bibliography


PART I

Mapping the continent
1

ALBANIA

Ermir Jonka and Evi Stamatiou

Context: The aftermath of communist rule

Albanian theatre post-1989 faced the cultural vacuum left by the communist rule between 1944 and 1992. Using tactics such as the persecution of playwrights, eradication of amateur theatre, and institutionalisation of buildings and ensembles in most major cities, the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha had shaped Albanian theatre ‘to conform to the doctrines of socialist realism and Zhdanovism’ (Elsie 2004, 231). With a few exceptions of heavily censored translated plays (Klosi 2018), the regime gradually banned foreign and classical plays and reduced Albanian theatre writing to ‘a bland mixture of edifying morality plays and historical dramas, full of patriotic pathos and heavy-handed political messages’ (Elsie 2004, 234). But such dated and propagandistic narratives and characters were presented to Albanian audiences with exceptional stagecraft that evidenced influences from Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre and also Erwin Piscator (ibid.). Even so, by 1990, Albanian theatre was isolated from the outside world and alienated from its audiences, serving as an instrument of power in the hands of the communist party.

The political changes and social unrest that followed the economic collapse of the late 1980s, which reflected the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, brought about a new era for Albanian theatre. The advent of democracy saw foreign and classical plays being revisited with contemporary translations and adaptations (Klosi 2018, 14). The freedom to travel abroad since 1990 allowed for new influences from the outside world. The liberation from censorship invited Albanian theatre-makers not only to create works that reflected on the aftermath of the communist rule but also to tell the stories of their contemporaries, who suffered economic hardships and emigrated in masses. Several Albanian theatre-makers undertook training outside the Eastern block and returned to Albanian stages bringing influences from the Western world as well as personal and collective histories and narratives. The following sections offer an overview of how Albanian theatre has been reinventing itself during the last thirty years through developing a distinctive theatre-making culture and revisiting theatre infrastructures to engage new audiences.
Cultures of theatre-making: Decolonising repertoires and creating postmodern theatre

The main impulse of post-1989 Albanian theatre-makers was to address the censorship that dominated the staging of classical plays during communist rule. Albanian creatives re-visited classical plays with new adaptations and translations and updated staging. A major influential figure is the director Agim Qirjaqi, who after a two-year training with the Italian theatre director Giorgio Strehler at the Teatro Piccolo in Milan and Teatro Eliseo in Rome introduced Albanian audiences to the contemporary staging of classical plays. In his seminal 1991 production of Shakespeare’s Richard III at Tirana National Theatre, Qirjaqi used ‘60 pint of pigs’ blood’ and dressed ‘the actors as butchers in blood-splattered white coats’ to expose the feelings of horror that dominated the Albanian people during Hoxha’s dictatorship (Qirjaqi in Frei 1992). In liberating themselves from the communist regime, the Albanian stages lashed out against their oppressors.

A more subtle decolonising strategy was to commission new translations of classical plays. In the first decade of the 2000s, Albanian stage directors such as Alfred Trebicka, Albert Minga, and Spiro Duni staged new translations of Arthur Miller’s plays The Ride Down Mount Morgan, A View from the Bridge, and The Crucible (Klosi 2018, 12). Prominent actors included Timo Flloko, Eva Alikaj, Drita Pelinku, Naum Shundi, Neritan Liçaj, Fatos Sela, Elia Zaharia, Flaura Kureta, Erjona Kakeli, Vasjan Lami, and Mehdi Malkaj; translators included Rudi Erebara and Gjergj Peçi; and scenic designers Agim Zajmi (ibid., 13). Because of the ties between Albania and Russia during communist rule, Albanian artists have been trained on systems influenced by the Russian theatre and have excelled in realism. For example, in 2011, the ensemble of the Academy of Arts in Tirana presented The Crucible at an international festival in Pristina (Kosovo) and won accolades (ibid.). Several cultural projects used theatre to reconcile Albania with neighbouring countries with a history of conflicts, such as Kosovo, Montenegro, and Italy.

Quite a few directors are now trying to create an identity for the new contemporary Albanian theatre and have focused on developing Albanian writers. Altin Basha brought influences from English theatre which he encountered during his training at BADA—the British American Drama Society (Dervishi 2019, 14). Since 2020, Basha has been the director of the Kujtim Spahivogli National Experimental Theatre, after seventeen years of directing the sketch comedy and variety TV show Portokallia (Orange). Basha’s groundbreaking collaboration with the acclaimed playwright Stefan Capaliku introduced Albanian theatre to wider European audiences. Capaliku’s plays I am from Albania (2006), Allegretto Albania (2008), and Made in Albania (2016) explore and expose the identity challenges of the nation post-1989. For the writing of Allegretto Albania, Basha orchestrated a ‘laboratory process’ that invited the playwright to attend all rehearsals and develop the script from the improvisations of the actors (Dervishi 2019, 16). The postmodern political comedy received numerous national and international awards, and Capaliku is considered the most successful contemporary Albanian playwright.

It is important to acknowledge the contribution of Albanian theatre-making outside of Albania. The North-Macedonian-born director Qendrim Rijani studied directing at the Arts University of Tirana to a Master’s level and now operates in both Albania and North Macedonia. Apart from several foreign plays, in 2016, he directed at the Albanian Theatre in Skopje the plays Darka e Thërrimeve (Dinner of crumbs), written by the Albanian playwright Refet Abazi. In 2019, following two years of development at the Macedonian National Opera and Ballet, he directed the first Albanian opera Skënderbeu (Skanderberg),
with librettist Arian Krasniqi and composer Fatos Lumani, about the life of the Albanian hero Skanderbeg who led the rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century.

The real shift in theatre-making came from directors who work outside of text-based frameworks. Gjergj Prevazi, who established the first Albanian dance company, Albanian Dance Theatre Co, not only draws on dance theatre to develop his own productions but also influences the overall style of Albanian theatre through his movement direction of several productions. Ema Andrea blends theatre with performance art to bring the voices of the actors and local communities to the forefront (⇒ Chapter 73). Andrea’s work is also leading on the representation of female voices on stage (⇒ Chapter 64), in a patriarchal society where the progress of seeing women in decision-making, politics, and other life structures is progressing steadily but slowly. In 2015, Andrea directed the performance Prag (Eve) which brought the stories of women in prison on the stage of Tirana National Theatre, performed by the detainees. Another initiative that involved theatre in the fight against patriarchy was the staging of Edna Mazya’s play Games in the Backyard with amateur actors during massive protests that followed a rape case and resulted in changes in the law. A more recent initiative is the staging of the FemFest festival by the theatre company BashArt in March 2022. Such a celebration of female voices in various indoor and outdoor spaces around Tirana shows a growing interest in using theatre for social change.

**Institutional structures: Struggles with funding and audience engagement**

Unfortunately, because Albania struggled through poverty and civil war, Albanian theatre suffered from small audiences during most of the 90s. However, to mark the transition to democracy, key state theatres continued to operate. The communist regime left a clear sense of theatre infrastructure, including established subsidised theatres and ensembles in major Albanian cities (Elsie 2004). In 1991, the main theatre in the capital Tirana, Theatre of the People, was renamed Tirana National Theatre.

Other big theatres outside the capital that continued to operate after the fall of communism include the Zihni Sako Theatre in Gjirokaster. Notable institutions such as Andon Zako Çajupi Theatre in Korçë, and Migjeni Theatre in Shkodër offer a variety of shows for their audience, sometimes inviting foreign directors. But because of the lack of funding since 1989, state theatres had to resource alternative income. For example, the Andon Zako Çajupi Theatre in Korça has organised the KOKO comedy festival since 2013; the Skampa Theatre in Elbasan operates as a touring house for music events and also organises an annual international theatre festival (⇒ Chapter 69); and the Aleksandër Moisiu Theatre in Durrës operates as a cultural centre that hosts a variety of cultural events. Other theatres struggled more with resources. For example, the Berat Theatre survived until 1997 but then ceased its activity for about twenty years, and current efforts hope to secure its reopening (https://teatrial.home.blog/ish-teatri-i-beratit/). Most of the theatre still happens in the capital of Tirana, and the rest of the country remains mostly inactive.

Contemporary theatres that opened in Tirana during the last fifteen years, such as the Qëndra Metropol and the Kujtim Spahivogli National Experimental Theatre, produce works of Albanian and international artists and expand their activities to children’s theatre, youth theatre, and theatre in higher education (http://teatrimetropol.al/; https://tkeks.al/rreth-teatrit-kombetar-eksperimental-kujtim-spahivogli/). Notable work has been done by Qëndra Metropol as they try to engage young generations through free theatre courses and school lectures. The programming and infrastructure of the above theatres resemble similar contemporary venues around Europe. The opening of the aforementioned theatres aimed to
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inspire the exploration of alternative ways of theatre-making and the nurturing of grassroots theatre, paving the way for a new era for Albanian theatre. However, and perhaps for reasons that have to do with fundraising and audience engagement, there is resistance to abandoning traditional ways of theatre-making and taking risks to produce more experimental and community-based work.

Nevertheless, the independent scene got a good amount of attention. A prominent non-profit organisation is the Multi-disciplinary Arts Foundation (M.A.M.), which was founded in September 2013 in Tirana ‘by Albanian contemporary artists in a spirit of community, hoping to assist and encourage innovation, experimentation and potential in the arts’ (https://multidisciplinaryarts.org). Under the direction of Ema Andrea, M.A.M. continues to nurture young actors, training them on new styles of performance inspired by theatre practitioners who worked against the canon, such as Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, and Pina Bausch. M.A.M. organises the Performance Festival Tirana (PAFT). Among other things, PAFT showcases and celebrates the efforts of Albanian artists in the last decade to fuse theatre and performance art.

Even though certain theatres offered contemporary repertoires, there are parts of the theatre industry that are under development, such as the critical engagement with productions from theatre specialists or audiences, and an understanding of theatre happening outside of established buildings and organisations. For example, several TV news programmes cover new premieres in Tirana, but they rely only on the information from press offices of the venues and ignore theatrical activities outside the capital (Ymeri 2017). As Albanian theatre is looking for its contemporary identity, key venues remain at the centre of focus.

Tirana National Theatre was built during the Italian occupation between 1939 and 1943 and was primarily used as a cinema and theatre during the communist era. After the fall of the dictatorship, the building faced a lack of financing (Kristo and Perna 2021, 87) but in 2000, it was included within the Tirana Historic Centre. Local communities and international organisations resisted the government’s plans in 2018 to demolish it (Pompejano and Macchioni 2021). Actors and activists started the movement ‘The Citizen’s Alliance for the Theatre’ to defend the building, but it was eventually demolished in May 2020 (Kristo and Perna 2021). The government plans to build a contemporary building with multiple stages where Tirana National Theatre and Kujtim Spahivogli National Experimental Theatre will host their programmes. In the meantime, these two institutions perform their shows in a temporary venue called ArTurbina. When the construction of the contemporary venue is completed, it is hoped that ArTurbina will be used as an alternative space for smaller productions.

Even though the demolition of Tirana National Theatre is emblematic of how the neoliberal economy problematises artistic activities, it invited Albanian theatre-makers to create theatre outside buildings and funding structures. The most significant initiative of contemporary Albanian theatre since the 1990s is the development of grassroots or community-based theatre.

Conclusion: Challenges and creative opportunities

The Albanian theatre post-1989 found itself in an almost impossible situation. The institutional structures and the cultures of theatre-making needed decolonising from the communist ideology to invite a critical engagement with an alienated audience. It also acknowledged its role in developing an understanding of the outside world alongside its audiences. But at the same time, new financing strategies had to be invented, tested, evaluated, and at times,
Theatre shows mostly rely on national funds and consequently run for a maximum of twenty-five performances. There are no strategies or initiatives for audience development, or even touring and festival participation. In general, theatre work in Albania is isolated, short-lived and still not able to speak for its people, as the political stronghold still echoes old leadership. Another challenge is the low interest in producing Albanian plays, be they old or new. Theatre programming lacks the representation of Albanian authors, creating a vacuum in the effort towards a grassroots movement. The challenges seem insurmountable, and Albanian theatre-makers have felt disheartened at times. However, their focus on community initiatives shows resilience and commitment to what matters long-term. The focus on grassroots theatre develops the audiences, the artists, and the Albanian theatre of the future.

**Bibliography**


**Further reading**


Context: Socio-political factors in the Austrian theatre scene

Thirty years of contemporary theatre in Austria begins in 1990, the historical period of political change in the so-called Eastern Bloc countries, some of which are Austria’s direct neighbours. The capital, Vienna, with almost two million inhabitants, contrasts with other cities throughout Austria, which have considerably smaller numbers of inhabitants. This powerful dominance of the metropolis has an impact on the distribution of financial resources and administrative institutions, as well as on a certain canon of values and structures of social relations.

Theatre and culture react to socio-political events like a seismograph. This is evidenced by scandals triggered by certain productions and not least by the closure of all venues and suspension of activities for months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021. Cultural policy in Austria remains linked to financial policy. It was dubious fiscal management that led to the dismissal of Vienna’s Burgtheater director Matthias Hartmann in March of 2014. The incident kept the courts busy until 2016. The director, who came from Osnabrück (Germany), led the Burgtheater from 2009 to 2014, engaging directors such as Alvis Hermanis (⇒ Chapter 82), Roland Schimmelpfennig, Michael Thalheimer, and Stefan Bachmann, and actors such as Dörte Lyssewski, Katharina Lorenz, Sarah Viktoria Frick, August Diehl, and Martin Wuttke. With the Belgian artist Jan Lauwers and his Needcompany and the New York-based group Nature Theater of Oklahoma as artists in residence, the Burgtheater received attention beyond the German-speaking world. Following the departure of Hartmann, Karin Bergmann was appointed official director of the Burgtheater and its venues (Akademietheater, Kasino, Foyer) from October 2014 to 2019. This decision has attracted considerable international attention, since the institution, the second-oldest in Europe after the Comédie Française as well as the largest in the German-speaking world, has always been run by men. Bergmann was its press spokesperson under artistic director Claus Peymann (1986–1999) and co-director under Klaus Bachler (1999–2009). Bachler engaged directors such as Luc Bondy, Andrea Breth, Peter Zadek, and Martin Kušej. Hermann Nitsch’s Oergien Mysterien Theater (Orgies mysteries theatre) and his 122. Schüttaktion (122nd dumping action, Burgtheater, 2005) and Christoph Schlingensief’s animatographic expedition Area 7 – Sadochrist Matthäus (Burgtheater, 2006) shattered the space/arrangement of the
proscenium stage and led to a theatrical production in-between happening, performance, and participatory art actionism. Since Peymann’s directorship, the Burgtheater has no longer been the sacred space for the classics; his productions uncovered contradictions and absurdities with powerful words and images, provoking media coverage through his polemising interviews.

For Peyman, it was Peter Handke and George Tabori who became important companions at Burgtheater, along with Thomas Bernhard who, after his death in 1989, had his plays banned from being performed in Austria until 1999. Handke’s and Tabori’s plays are dominated by expressive imagery, absurdities, the folly of life, the poetry of memory, the violence of the Nazi regime, as well as partisan and power struggles. Tabori initially coined the term ‘catacombs’: he felt that working underground with a small budget was the valid place for (his) theatre work. From the 1990s onwards, he departed from this austerity, taking his later work to the Burgtheater and the Akademietheater. His style of word associations, psychodrama, and tragicomic schemes, which refuse the clear assignment of victim and perpetrator roles, is characteristic. Numerous Handke plays were premiered under Peymann’s direction, such as *Immer noch Sturm* (Still storm, Salzburg Festival, 2011), *Die Unschuldigen, ich und die Unbekannte am Rand der Landstraße. Ein Schauspiel in vier Jahreszeiten* (The Innocents, me, and the unknown at the edge of the country road. A play in four seasons, Burgtheater, 2016). Handke conveys his thinking in epic textual convolutions and in poetically charged visual language. He sided with Serbia in the Yugoslav wars (1992–1995), and this partisanship has led to heated controversies up to the present day and overshadowed the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature (2019) to him.

The Kurt Waldheim affair has also had long-term consequences and demonstrated the importance of politics for the art of resistance. The former UN Secretary-General who ran for the office of Austrian President in 1986 had concealed his activities as an officer in the Wehrmacht from 1942 to 1944 and denied any involvement in Nazi crimes. After his inauguration as President in 1986, the US authorities put Waldheim on the watch list. The Waldheim case marks a turning point in Austria’s handling of its Nazi period. The myth of Austria’s victimisation was no longer tenable and the complicity of many Austrians in Nazi crimes and Austria’s responsibility triggered domestic political disputes about Austria’s image of history and led to a changed self-image of the state and its citizens. Thomas Bernhard’s *Heldenplatz* (Hero’s square), on the fiftieth anniversary of Hitler’s seizure of power in Austria, deals with the Nazi past of many Austrians through a family of Jewish Holocaust survivors who have returned to Vienna (première 1988 at the Burgtheater, directed by Peymann). Felix Mitterer, Peter Turrini, and Elfriede Jelinek also use events in (contemporary) history and their protagonists as material for their play texts.

In *Rechnitz Der Würgeengel* (Rechnitz the avenging angel, première 2008, Kammerspiele Munich), Jelinek deals with the historical massacre of Hungarian-Jewish forced labourers who were shot at the end of March 1945. In *Bambiland* (première 2003, Burgtheater, directed by Christoph Schlingensief), Jelinek deals with war and terror, the function of embedded journalists, who were used for the first time in the (third) Iraq war for media effect, and cites techniques of warfare that lead her to Aeschylus’s *The Persians*. The Greek tragedies serve Jelinek as commentaries and responses to her broadly conceived texts, which lack specific roles and character images. Current political events and especially the inadequacies of public and private life in Austria are the starting point for her multivocal scores. In 2004, Jelinek was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her texts for the theatre aim to address bigotry, abuse of power, and the National Socialist past of the Austrians, as in the case of *Babel* (2005, Burgtheater), a treatment of the torture scandal in Abu Ghraib, and *Ulrike Maria Stuart* (2006,
Burgtheater), which mixes the Red Army Faction (RAF)-protagonists of the German post-war period with historical events from Shakespeare’s time. On her website, Jelinek takes a stand on current events, even imposing a performance ban on her texts in Austria in 2000 for political reasons (which she revoked in 2002). In 2000, in the context of Schlingensief’s action Bitte liebt Österreich (Please love Austria), the montage Ich liebe Österreich (I love Austria) was created, which criticises Austria’s treatment of asylum seekers (⇒ Chapter 62). With Die Schutzbefohlenen (The supplicants, Austrian première 2015, Burgtheater, directed by Michael Thalheimer) and Schwarzwasser (Blackwater, première 2020, Akademietheater), Jelinek again reacted to the current domestic political decisions in Austria. In Die Schutzbefohlenen, she addresses the Austrian government’s stance on refugee policy. In contrast to productions in other major cities, in the Viennese performance, actors had to give voice to the directly affected refugees. Refugees actually performed Jelinek’s text on April 14, 2016 in the auditorium of the University of Vienna. During the performance, there were disruptive actions by the radical right-wing ‘Identitarians’. The Austrian People’s Party in coalition with the right-wing Freedom Party Austria took office in December 2017, and subsequently, Austria’s political situation had developed towards an authoritarian control state. Since Schlingensief’s death (2010), Jelinek is arguably the most rapid-response political activist in the art world.

**Cultures of theatre-making: The mainstream and the subversive**

Productions of Jelinek’s plays also dominated the repertoire of the Vienna Volkstheater during Emmy Werner’s directorship (1988–2005). Strong female performances, for example, with Andrea Eckert as Maria Callas, were in the repertoire for years, and there were also premières by Austrian authors such as Gert Jonke, Gustav Ernst, and Franzobel (Stefan Griebl). The Volkstheater, Vienna’s second-largest theatre, has experienced changing directors and programming, as well as structural renovations during the past decades. Since the 2012–2013 season, the Volkstheater has had the ‘Hundsturm’ as a second space (from 2015 until 2020 under director Anna Badora with the new name ‘Volx/Margareten’). It became the starting point for district tours and for urban projects with public participation (⇒ Chapter 73). Another historically charged venue is the ‘Red Bar’ in the main building. The brown-panelled salon is a break room, built in 1938 for Adolf Hitler’s visit. Michael Schottenberg caused a stir at the beginning of his directorship in 2005 because he wanted to repurpose the historic wood panelling in his production of Thomas Bernhard’s Vor dem Ruhestand (Before retirement). The Federal Office for the Protection of Monuments determined that the removed parts should be returned to their original location. Since then, this space has been used for performances, readings, discussions, and exhibitions. At the end of the 2018–2019 season, the exterior and interior renovation of the theatre began, and it reopened in the 2020–2021 season under the direction of Kay Voges.

Plays by Felix Mitterer and Peter Turrini are repeatedly on the programme of Vienna’s Theater in der Josefstadt. This stage, founded about 1788 and funded by public subsidies and private foundations, has opened up to political discourse under the direction of Herbert Föttinger (succeeding Helmuth Lohner in 2006) and has expanded a repertoire, which used to be dominated by Arthur Schnitzler and Ödön von Horvath, to include contemporary authors, such as Daniel Kehlmann (Die Reise der Verlorenen [The journey of the lost]) or the playwright Thomas Arzt, who linguistically exploits his Upper Austrian dialect in his plays. The Austrian author Werner Schwab was discovered in Hans Gratz’s Schauspielhaus, with the premiere of ÜBERGEWICHT, unwichtig: UNFORM (OVERWEIGHT, unimportant: UNFORMED, 1991).
Austria

Participatory forms of theatre, the interchange of cultures and languages (⇒ Chapter 44), and hybrid forms of play are breaking the dominance of the main Viennese theatres. Director and actor Paulus Manker has consistently followed this path, for example, with his production of Alma – A Show BIZ ans Ende (Alma – a show biz till the end) since its premiere in 1996 in the former Purkersdorf sanatorium (near Vienna). This play by Joshua Sobol narrates the life of Alma Mahler-Werfel and her contemporaries Oskar Kokoschka, Gustav Mahler, and Alexander Zemlinsky. The play is performed simultaneously in different rooms and floors of the sanatorium, a building designed by the art nouveau architect Josef Hoffmann who was a friend of Alma Mahler’s stepfather Carl Moll. In this ‘polydrama’, the audience can interactively participate in the theatrical events – including a funeral feast – as invited guests. For more than twenty years, this production, in which Manker plays Oskar Kokoschka, has varied the settings and cities that dramaturgically determine the location of the characters and the historical course of events, touring to Venice, Lisbon, San Francisco, Berlin, Jerusalem, and others. The production, in English and German, is overwhelmingly self-financed. Notwithstanding this, Manker dramatised Die letzten Tage der Menschheit (The last days of mankind) by Karl Kraus in 2018–2019. Despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (⇒ Chapter 50), the over eight-hour-long performance took place in the Serbenhalle of the Viennese Neustadt and the Badner Bahn Remise in Vienna in 2020. The production was accompanied by a scientific health concept: the actors not only wore masks to protect their mouths and noses, but also gas masks in keeping with the play’s plot.

Beyond the major theatres, the current Austrian theatre and performance scene can be structurally defined by three essential characteristics; these have been gradually in preparation since the 1990s and visibly solidified around 2003: the subversive entered the mainstream, the so-called ‘subsidy watering can’ for independent productions was abolished, and the Wiener Festwochen was subjected to a programming change.

The most important theatre prize in Austria today is named after playwright Johann Nestroy (1801–1862). Every year, fourteen different categories are awarded. When the TiB (Theater im Bahnhof) in Graz, ‘the largest professional independent theater ensemble in Austria’ (TiB), took over the event moderation in 2003, a change in direction of the award ceremony announced itself. The intention was to turn away from a gala event. The TiB did not conduct the customary dignified evening but rather demonstrated the subversive quality of ‘trash theatre’ in the old folk theatre tradition, associated with Nestroy himself. The year before, the TiB had received the ‘Nestroy’ for the best off-theatre production, thus already indicating the step from the subversive into the mainstream.

This is similar to the artistic expressions of discontent and subversive as well as revolutionary neo-avant-gardes of the post-war years. In the meantime, they have arrived in the contemporary Austrian theatre landscape in both the established and mainstream sectors. In the 1960s, the actionist artist Hermann Nitsch walled himself up in the Perinetkeller, and in 2005 he celebrated his O.M. Theatre, an eight-hour orgy-mystery theatre at the Burgtheater. In 2000, Christoph Schlingensief took a stand on the subject of ‘asylum policy’ with his container action ‘Please Love Austria – First Austrian Coalition Week’ as part of the Vienna Festival (⇒ Chapter 69). In 2009, he was a guest at the Burgtheater with his ‘ReadyMadeOpera’ entitled Mea Culpa. Born in Graz, Olga Neuwirth celebrated her first international success in the early 1990s at the Wiener Festwochen with her two mini operas based on texts by Jelinek. In 2019, she premiered the opera Orlando, based on Virginia Woolf’s novel of the same name, at the Staatsoper.

Jelinek (recipient of the Nestroy Prize Lifetime Achievement in 2021) has been a permanent guest at the Burgtheater with her texts in recent years. She even appeared as a puppet
in a work by the Graz-born puppeteer Nikolaus Habjan. Habjan received the Nestroy Prize in 2012 for the puppet theatre production *F. Zawrel – Erbbiologisch und sozial minderwertig* (F. Zawrel – genetically and socially inferior), which he staged together with Simon Meusburger. Habjan tells the story of Friedrich Zawrel, who as a child was able to escape from the ‘Spiegelgrund’, a Nazi institution where euthanasia of sick and disabled children took place.

**Institutional structures: ORF and Wiener Festwochen as a national and international framework**

The still-fresh subversive theatre of the turn of the millennium began to infiltrate state television (ORF) in the course of the 2010s – always with the aspect, as the TiB calls it, of examining ‘Austrian identity’ in a humorous way. For example, individual ensemble members of the TiB appeared on the TV screen and in Austrian films. Despite or even because of the Austria-wide successes of individual theatre people, a characteristic of the TiB is the work in the collective and in exchange with ‘experts of everyday life’: scientists, artists, and the performance scene. That way, plays are developed together, often based on socio-political questions, while in the spirit of the old Viennese folk theatre tradition, improvisation and contact with the audience are emphasised. TiB and the so-called Monday Improvisation (*MONTAG. The Improvised Show*) are synonymous. Initially actually set in a waiting room at the Graz railway station – thus giving the TiB its name – the ensemble performed all over the city. An upholsterer’s building on Lendplatz, in what has meanwhile become the hip area of Graz, served as the company’s home for several years, followed by the current production site in Elisabethinergasse. There are also guest performances and collaborations with other performance venues, such as brut in Vienna or Schauspielhaus Graz. Here the TiB shows itself to be a ‘door opener’ for cooperation between the municipal theatre and the independent scene. TiB also regularly receives invitations to the Vienna Festival and to collaborations with the Steirischer Herbst festival.

The year 2003 was also the year in which the financial support of the independent scene underwent a drastic change following the so-called Vienna Theatre Reform. A study commissioned by the Vienna City Councillor for Culture and Science entitled ‘Free Theatre in Vienna’ proposed measures for reform: the establishment of a paid board of trustees, the systematic turnover of artistic directors instead of automatic continuation, and the restructuring of subsidies from a ‘watering-can system’ to ‘all-or-nothing’ funding (*Gutachten der Wiener Theaterreform 2004*). The founder-directors of often mediocre medium-sized stages, who were closely connected to ‘their’ theatres and built their thematic profiles, had to leave, retire, or go abroad; Gruppe 80, specialising in Austrian authors, was transformed into TAG (Theater an der Gumpendorfer Straße); daskunst took over the venue of Theater im Augenblick, which specialised in experimental productions, theatre for a deaf audience (⇒ Chapter 66), and neo-avant-garde theatre forms; Theater im Künstlerhaus and die theater im Konzerthaus, already with a focus on independent groups, were transformed into brut, a production and performance space; the Odeon Theatre with its background in puppet theatre, dance, and spoken theatre, as well as visual arts, remains and is also available to independent groups; the Theater in der Drachengasse, designated for feminist theatre and performances, also remains and focuses on promoting young talent; the Kosmos Theatre, which sees itself decidedly as a feminist house, maintains and promotes gender balance. The ensemble theatre at Petersplatz, with a focus on premieres by young authors, became Werk X in Meidling and WERK X-Petersplatz, a centre for innovative theatre and socio-politically relevant cultural events.
In 2009, another study, also commissioned by the Cultural Office of the City of Vienna and the Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture focuses on the Austrian migration reality, especially the Viennese scene, and programmatically demanded ‘art, culture, and theatre for all!’ (Akbaba et al. 2009). Against this background, Pimp my integration (Vikoler 2011), a post-migrant project series, was launched in 2011–2012, led by daskunst (which later becomes diverCITYLAB) and Garage X (see Werk X above). The programme achieved capacity utilisation of more than ninety per cent and thus aided the specific goal of sensitising the public to the post-migrant reality that shapes Austrian society. In order to counteract the image of clichéd roles, it succeeds in showing the diversity and quality of the positions developed by artists with a migration background through international examples of good practice as well as through domestic productions of different genres.

The Wiener Festwochen, which has been running since the 1950s, initially saw itself as a festival to represent a cultural nation. Today, it sees itself decidedly as an ‘interdisciplinary arts festival’ (Wiener Festwochen) with the task of bringing international contemporary art to Vienna and thus to Austria. Sometimes this leads to overlaps and double invitations with ImPulsTanz, the festival for contemporary dance. The social democratic mayor and his city councillor for culture had made preparations in the 1980s to ensure that the ‘programme policy’ of the Wiener Festwochen came into being in the 1990s. Following that, the festival took centre stage as a place of encounter. The venues for this are the Museumsquartier, the Volkstheater, the Schauspielhaus, and the Theater im Künstlerhaus (now brut). In the 1990s, artistic director Klaus Bachler focused on co-productions, bringing directors to Vienna, some of whom are still on the programme today: Ariane Mnouchkine, Jürgen Flimm, Thomas Langhoff, Christoph Marthaler, and Frank Castorf. After the turn of the millennium, Luc Bondy succeeded him as artistic director. With his management team, he moved from baroque theatre to contemporary opera works and a varied theatre programme (with a focus on experimental theatre forms and literary director’s theatre) (⇒ Chapter 58). The Wiener Festwochen then experienced a serious slump in 2017 under the direction of Tomas Zierhofer-Kin with the attempt to highlight subversive and youth-oriented performances. His contract was terminated prematurely after one year. With Christophe Slagmuylder and his team, the Wiener Festwochen is currently back on a more familiar track, apart from the time of the pandemic, which forced the festival to take a break in 2020 and to split the programme in 2021. The Vienna Festival attempts to build new, ubiquitous communities, a challenge that a so-called independent scene has always taken on and which integrates the subversive as a necessary part of the programme.

Translated by Ralf Remshardt.

Bibliography


Further reading


After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Republic of Belarus as an independent state was proclaimed. Despite the changes in the political system aimed to emancipate the Belarusian culture (and theatre as well), the situation developed differently after 1994 when Alexander Lukashenko was elected as the first (and still the only) President of Belarus. He reclaimed the Soviet ideology and symbols, taking under control almost all spheres of the state.

In the 2000–2010s, a new generation of theatre-makers grew up, developing new aesthetics and modes of perception in the Belarusian post-Soviet context based on documentary and political theatre, visual theatre, and dance. Such significant names and brands as Belarus Free Theatre, Pavel Priazhko, Dmitry Bogoslavski, Evgeni Kornyag, Skvo Dance Company, Jury Dzivakou, Laboratory of the Social Theatre, and others shaped the Belarusian theatrical scene of the last years. Nevertheless, it was the projects of the 1990s which created a platform for the development of contemporary Belarusian theatre. As the protest movements of 2020 have demonstrated, the cultural emancipation and exploring of identities became the most significant and essential issues for the cultural space in Belarus.

After almost sixty years under the Soviet rule, the period of the 1980s became a turning point for the history of the Belarusian theatre. Due to the loosening of censorship and control as a result of political and economic crises of the Soviet system, the process of emancipation and de-centralization of the Belarusian theatre started. The emergence of alternative theatre in Belarus was made possible due to the activity of dozens of non-state theatres and groups throughout the country (Arcimovich 2016). The aesthetic experiments of these groups became a base for the development of the Belarusian theatre during the next decades. Despite the manifold character of their experiments, one of the foremost discussions of the 1980–1990s referred to the national imagination and collective memory, which had been previously suppressed in the Soviet era, when any mention of the national vision of the history and culture was forbidden in Belarus.

In the 1990s, the Belarusian theatre was one of the spaces where the performance of remembrance happened. According to Elena Gapova, in the 1960s, there was a romantic shift to ‘an emergence of new ideas regarding national space and landscape’ (2017, 173). This romantic landscaping, which was performed mostly by intellectuals and writers on the margins of the...
public life, ‘changed the meaning of the land by creating a site parallel to socialist Belarus, the land of castles and manors, gothic mysteries, chivalry, noble uprisings, pure nature, and intellectual and moral pursuits’ (ibid., 175).

On October 17, 1990, the Janka Kupala National Theatre staged a production based on the play Tutejshyja (People from here) by the famous Belarusian poet and playwright Janka Kupala. Written in 1922, the play was forbidden in the Soviet Belarus as the Soviet censorship concluded that it focused on the ‘nationalistic theories of “originality” and other anti-Bolshevik attitudes’ (Seduro 1955, 64). In 1988, Tutejshyja was published in the state magazine Polymia, and two years later, the director Mikalaj Pinihin presented the play on the main stage of the country. This performance became a symbolic act of proclamation of a new page in the history of the Belarusian theatre as well as the country.

The play tells the story of one family which lived in Minsk at the end of the 1910s. From a geopolitical perspective, these were the turbulent years for the Belarusian territory. During World War I (1914–1918), the October Revolution of 1917, and the Polish–Soviet War (1918–1920), Minsk was occupied by the German army, the Polish troops, and then the Bolsheviks, soon after the Polish troops. Finally, the Bolsheviks came back and in 1919 proclaimed the Byelorussians Soviet Socialist Republic. The main character of the play, Mikita Znosak, is an ordinary person who tries to fit into new changeable political realities. He calls himself a local (in Belarusian – tutejshy). It seems that Znosak is a typical conformist who does not care about national identification. But it is possible that the message of conformism was so essential for the Belarusian audience of the 1990s that the performance turned into one of the most significant theatre events for decades.

Exploring peculiarities of concepts of ‘Belarusianness’, Per Anders Rudling notes that a geographical and cultural location of the Belarusian territory between the West and the East ‘determined [Belarusian] culture and historical experiences, producing a multi-layered identity’ (Rudling 2014, 42–32). He argues that until the beginning of the twentieth century, the fact that a Belarusian could not understand the question ‘who are you?’ did not mean that they ‘lacked an identity’. Rather, they ‘had several identities’ with ‘a local identity as tuteishy on the top (ibid.). Hence, the play by Kupala represented identity as a complex of different cultural and historical experiences relating to the process of its formation. As Simon Lewis concludes, ‘Kupala illuminates the identity-effects of these forms of violence on the local people: i.e. the ways in which individuals change their behaviours, their speech patterns, and their cultural self-identification in response to external pressures’ (2018, 43). It is the idea of cultural emancipation that became the main aim of Tutejshyja staged in 1990 by Pinihin. The performance ended with the emergence of the historical white-red-white flag, which was forbidden by the Soviet authorities. Several years later, the flag in the finale, and the performance itself, were no longer welcome to the new Belarusian regime represented by Lukashenka.

Cultures of theatre-making: A laboratory of identities

Discussing the character of the national movement in Belarus, various scholars highlight that it makes no sense to compare it with such processes in other post-Soviet or post-socialist countries, for instance, in Poland, Lithuania, or Ukraine. Rudling notes that the Belarusian nationalism forming at the end of the nineteenth century ‘merged class and national awareness into a radical left-wing program’ (2014, 3). Hence, ‘it was mostly democratic, socialist leaning, and anticolonial, employing ethnicity, language, and culture as vehicles for agency and political empowerment’ (ibid., 20). Similarly, such peculiarities determined
Belarus

the manifold character of the Belarusian theatre of the 1990s. Focusing on a matter of identities, these performances neither aimed to romanticize the Great Past nor created a unified perspective of national consciousness. Instead, they explored the past to invent the visions of the future for the Belarusian project which still found itself in-between Western and Eastern models of culture (Gapova 2004; Lewis 2018).

One of the most influential theatres of that time was Dze-Ja? Theatre, the name of which referred to a word game in the Belarusian dzeja (action) and dze ja? (Where am I?). As a non-state theatre studio, it was founded in 1987 by Mikalaj Truchan and Vital Barkouski, who were some of the most experimental Belarusian theatre directors of the time. They explored different aesthetic methods (such as physical impulse theatre, actor’s training through Jerzy Grotowski’s aesthetic of the Poor Theatre, and others), creating performances which were recognized as significant events in the Belarusian theatrical scene. It was for this reason that in 1992, the studio was awarded the status of a municipal theatre and was allowed to use a building of the former cinema theatre Rodina. The building was located in one of the working-class districts in Minsk, and colleagues asked Truchan if the working class needed this kind of theatre. He answered that this was precisely the kind of place where an experimental theatre should be.

Despite the aesthetic experiments, Truchan aimed to turn theatre into a laboratory focusing on questions of identification. His performances based on Francishak Aliachnovich’s Zdan’ (Ghost), Uladzimir Karatkievich’s Rospach (Grief), and Nikolai Gogol’s Miortvyja Dushy (Dead Souls) became legendary in the history of the Belarusian theatre. These performances were also presented in the programme of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland in 1995, 1996, and 1997. Focusing on the relationship between the body, space, and text, Truchan created his own scenarios of synthetic performances, exploring archaic types of Belarusianness. Folk motifs, such as Belarusian songs, dances, and poems, became the signature of Truchan’s style, as well as other theatre groups of the 2000–2010s. These references to ethnicity and language should be understood here in terms of the ‘vehicles for agency and political empowerment’ proposed by Rudling. About a century ago, the imagination of the past allowed the Belarusian culture to ‘emerge into the rest of the world’ (Seduro 1955, 40).

In 1991, Valery Mazynski, the former artistic director of the Jakub Kolas Theatre in Vitebsk, founded the Volnaja Scena (Free stage) Theatre which he promoted as a laboratory of the Belarusian drama. He noted that it was a period when Belarusian drama was marginalized despite the presence of plenty of young Belarusian playwrights. He created a space to promote plays written in Belarusian, asking the authors to contribute, and supported such authors as Ihar Sidaruk and Mikola Arahouski, who created examples of Belarusian absurdist drama.

Still I marvel that I staged A Head (by Ihar Sidaruk) – said Mazynski. – It is absolutely not my kind of drama … [But] I was wondering, I made experiments with myself…We were limited by the method of psychological theatre, but we found a way. The time and streets helped us.

(Gromyko 2017)

In 1992, Volnaja Scena was using one space in the Janka Kupala National Theatre that had an exit from the stage to the streets. Mazynski remembered that during rehearsals, they could hear what was happening outside. Once there was a demonstration during a performance, and they decided to put elements of the stage scenery on the streets, thus making it part of the performance. In the end, the actors went to the streets and performed there. ‘…life and
theatre combined. This experience of a live contact gave a lot to the actors’ (ibid.). In 1993, Volnaja Scena was turned into the Theatre of Belarusian Drama and got its own space, although changes in the political reality were underway.

**Institutional structures: Resistance to the present**

After 1994, Belarusian theatre was again submitted to state control and censorship, almost restoring the previous Soviet model of culture management. Those theatre directors and actors who did not support the state ideology lost their positions or did not get any support from the Ministry of Culture, which controlled the repertoire of all state theatres. Due to the lack of financial aid, most of the non-state experimental theatre groups founded in the 1980s did not survive or turned into commercial theatres.

Valery Mazynski was one of those who were forced to leave the theatre altogether. In 1997, his production of *Kar’era Artura Ui* (The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui) by Bertolt Brecht created a scandal. The play’s protagonist was presented as an ill-educated person who established dictatorship in his country. The Commission of the Ministry of Culture saw an allusion to the Belarusian president, and the performance was banned. In 2000, Mazynski staged *Prync Mamabuk* (Prince Mamabuk) by Ales Dudarau. The satirical comedy told a story of protest demonstrations in one fictitious banana republic. Its performance was banned even before the premiere, as the officials decided that this satire directly referred to the Belarusian reality. As a ‘suspect’ person, Mazynski was forced to leave the theatre which he had founded. In 2001, he revived Volnaja Scena as an independent theatre project and staged *Prince Mamabuk* again. Over the years, due to the performances which directly criticized the Lukashenka’s authority, they lost a space, and Mazynski was one of those who were on the ‘blacklist’ of the Ministry of Culture. As he could not get any legal job in Belarusian cultural organizations, he started a career as a documentary director, collaborating with different foreign TV channels.

Despite the desperate situation concerning the independent experimental theatre projects of the 1990s, which mostly disappeared from the theatre map, the 2000s became essential for the emergence of a new generation of playwrights and directors who aimed to explore and resist the presence of the autocratic state. New drama became the most significant movement of modern Belarusian playwriting. It emerged as a reaction of young playwrights to the new social and cultural realities of the post-Soviet countries. Despite the focus of these plays, which mostly explored these new realities, the question of identification, ‘as a construction, a process never completed’ (Hall 1996, 2), remained significant and became fundamental for many productions and pop-up laboratories (Arcimovich 2016).

In 2005, the Belarus Free Theatre (⇒ Chapter 75) was founded. It is identified as the first political theatre in Belarus (or the theatre of the resistance), as one of its aims was to promote the ideas of freedom and democracy in the Belarusian society. It has supported the New Drama movement by organizing staged readings and performances based on these texts which, due to the censorship constraints, were mostly unsuccessful in state theatres. Working underground, Belarus Free Theatre has become an important model for the development of contemporary Belarusian theatre and drama. There were also other projects emerging from state theatres as laboratories which made an attempt to discuss new plays and the issue of identity; for instance, in 2007, the Centre for Belarusian Drama was founded, which has significantly contributed to the promotion of Belarusian New Drama. These projects were, by large, marginalized and visible only to narrow audiences. The country’s main stages have adapted to the existing political reality by avoiding any ‘political’ issue
altogether. As Mazynski notes, the difference between the Soviet era and contemporary Belarus is that

\[\text{we tried to tell the truth. The censors came, and we tried to prove that the performance did not have any political meanings. Today, the theatre directors do not wait for the censors. The censorship is in their heads. There are some exceptions, but only a few.}\]

\[\text{(Gromyko 2017)}\]

The decade ended with a signal gesture by Mikalaj Pinihin who, while working as a new artistic director of the Janka Kupala National Theatre in 2010, withdrew Tutejshyja from the theatre repertoire. The official reason was that the stage design and costumes were too old, and the performance no longer had any meaning. This, however, looked like an attempt to adapt the theatre to the new political reality, which by then dominated all spheres of public life.

**Conclusion: The Belarusian theatre as a space for cultural emancipation**

Despite the lack of support from the state, a plethora of independent theatre projects have emerged during the last decade. Developing different aesthetic styles, these groups have created manifold artistic practices, reclaiming the role of theatre in the cultural and political life of the society. Most of these projects do not articulate any continuity with the 1990s, instead proclaiming their new vision of the Belarusian theatre. Nevertheless, the processes which started in the 1990s had an effect on the present-day situation.

After the presidential election of August 9, 2020, massive protest demonstrations against Lukashenka erupted all over the country. Due to the falsification of the results and disproportional levels of state violence, the society at large saw a need to reset the political system in the country. The question of cultural emancipation plays a crucial role in this process, as reflected in the most recent theatrical productions. For example, on the eve of the elections, the Janka Kupala National Theatre was preparing a new version of Tutejshyja, staged and directed once again by Pinihin. After the brutal suppression of the demonstrations on 9–12 August, Pinihin and most of the actors left the theatre. Within a month, they staged a clandestine show of Tutejshyja which was broadcast on the Internet.

This performance reconstructs the structure and style of the production of the 1990s. It is framed by a story of contemporaries who want to shoot a film based on the play Tutejshyja and look for a modern perspective. As a part of the audience, they watch the performance and conclude that Tutejshyja still deals with the essential matters for Belarusian society, questioning its future from the perspective of cultural identity and emancipation. ‘What future will we get?’ asks a young actor in the character of a cinema director, and the audience applauds chanting ‘Long Live Belarus!’ – a historical slogan which became a motto of the protest demonstrations. This performance has created a bridge between 1990 and 2020, representing the point of departure which, though different in meaning, invokes the same incomplete processes of social and political transformation. As Stuart Hall notes, there are plenty of discussions and critiques around the concept of cultural identity that provoke the question of who needs further debates about the matter (Hall 1996, 1). At one point, he mentions the ‘politics of location’ (ibid., 2), which still plays a significant role in a postcolonial context such as Belarus. If ‘identifications belong to the imaginary’ (ibid., 16), it seems that the Belarusian theatre has a potential to become, as it did thirty years ago, a space for such an imaginary which should not only embody a performance of remembrance but also
Tania Arcimovich

that of action, involving both performers and spectators. Author’s note: This text was written in late 2020; in light of subsequent developments in Belarus and Ukraine, it would have taken a more ‘radical’ tone.

Bibliography


Further reading


Context: A dual cultural landscape

Belgium has a dual cultural landscape, not only on a political and institutional level but also in practice. In the complicated Belgian state structure, culture is a community matter and therefore the theatrical landscape of the Flemish Community (including the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of Brussels) and the Francophone Community (including the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels) have different dynamics. Whoever wants to understand this duality has to acknowledge that both scenes have grown from different histories that mainly follow separate paths. The absence of a clearly identifiable canon of theatrical texts alongside the emergence of an emancipated, autonomous, and agile performer marks the recent evolution of the Dutch-speaking part, while the orientation towards France and its rich dramatic and rhetorical tradition stands out in the French-speaking theatre. All the while, from the mid-1980s onwards, both theatre communities have been shaped by international dynamics that in turn situate Belgium’s multifaceted theatre in the epicentre of the European scene, with Brussels as its intercultural future laboratory.

Cultures of theatre-making: Transgressing the boundaries and a multitude of forms

Flemish community

The peculiarity of the Flemish scene is to be found, to a large extent, in the developments of the 1980s with artists such as Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, Ivo Van Hove, Jan Decorte, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, and many others. Their work has acquired international renown and has been dubbed the ‘Flemish Wave’ (Vanhaesebrouck 2014). The retrograde term undoubtedly overstates the coherence between these artists, but what they did have in common was an urge to deviate from standardized conceptions of theatre and dance. These theatre-makers did not adhere to a repertoire of canonical plays or choreographies but looked at performance and visual arts instead in their bid to redefine the essence of theatrical representation in classical venues. What counted was the immediacy of personal impact, risk, and the agility of the body on stage. The performative effect was more often than not played out against the backdrop of highly aestheticized settings. In the Dance Sections, a short piece that
was to be part of the first opera of three in the early nineties, Fabre made ballerinas dance in medieval knights’ harnesses. The opera set was entirely hand-coloured in ‘bic-bleu’ using the cheap and ubiquitous ball point of the BIC brand as an alternative for the art of the Great Masters. The blue ink impressively provided for the effect that the stage was not static but fluid.

Throughout the nineties, the municipal theatres remained a rather tough touchstone of the rejuvenation cure provoked by the artists of the ‘Flemish Wave’. The Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg (KVS, Royal Flemish Theatre) in Brussels, Nederlands Toneel Gent (NTGent, Dutch Theatre Ghent) in the city of the same name, and the Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg (KNS, Royal Dutch Theatre) in Antwerp were set up in the nineteenth century as strongholds of the nation-state, its cultural heritage, and repertoire. Eventually, these epicentres of tradition and glory would also dissolve the rigid ensemble model to make room for new collaborations and challenges. This breach in tradition once again set the tone for long-lasting innovation. The Blauwe Maandag Cie, the performance group that director Luc Perceval founded in 1984 out of dissatisfaction with the KNS, returned with a vengeance to reform the old house that henceforth went under the name of Toneelhuis. The occasion for the storming of the castle was Ten Oorlog (At war), a brutally contemporary adaptation of no less than eight Shakespeare plays. In hindsight, this marathon performance series can undoubtedly be designated as the audience’s favourite of the nineties in Flanders. Meanwhile, in Brussels, stagings of new young writers such as Sarah Kane, Edward Bond, Rainald Goetz, and Werner Schwab cleared the way for a renewal of form and an outspoken élan with plays that were raw, edgy, and violent. When the management of KVS finally gave up at the end of the nineties, the new direction temporarily moved the functioning of the stately building to an industrial building in Molenbeek (De Bottelarij). The move within the same city is a clear indication of the new and outspoken ideological course that the house has been steering ever since with intendant Jan Goossens and, since 2016, Michael De Cock, by retracing the complex social strata of the city and the power lines of ‘Fortress Europe’.

In Ghent, finally, in 2005, after many years of internal scrutiny, NTGent appointed success director Johan Simons, who continued to combine his management with engagements in Germany, to put NTGent on the international map. But a radical change of direction would not come until the Swiss theatre-maker and sociologist Milo Rau (⇒ Chapter 87) took over the reins from 2018 to 2023 with a manifesto and the Marxist paraphrase: ‘It’s not about portraying the world anymore, it’s about changing it’. The rehearsals for his Orestes in Mosul assembled Iraqi and European actors in a war-torn public space for a 2019 remaking of the Oresteia that brought tragedy and trauma inconveniently close to the audience.

Meanwhile, a new generation of young theatre-makers had emerged outside the established structures, where they were being produced and supported by a broad and layered web of organizations. Throughout the nineties, independent companies were ‘on the move’ and toured from one place to the next. The range of possibilities and experiences of mobility enhanced the spirit of independence. Teams such as STAN, De Roovers, Dito’Dito, or De Koe deliberately choose to work as a collective without a director or any other central decision-maker. It was (and still is) the actor who selected and reworked her text, the costumes, and the scenography. This autonomy extended into the core of the acting style itself. This particular attitude is internationally recognized as typically Flemish yet is hard to pin down (Vanhaesebrouck 2021). It involves a transparent impersonation, in which the performer is visibly aware of her role in relation to the audience without, however, stepping out of her character or withdrawing from emphatic interaction on stage. This style can probably be traced back to Maatschappij Discordia, a company from the Netherlands that became
known throughout the eighties with its demonstrative Brechtian theatrics. The acting style persists until today, having gained in subtlety.

A case can be made that Flemish theatre is driven by a distinct urge to immediately react to reality. This impulse at the same time finds its complement in pronounced formal experiments and a physical play that deliberately challenges the conditions of the stage. Where universal meets casual: the interplay between the tangibly human and what transcends society (but is invariably part of it) was, for example, the pivot of a trilogy by the Ghent-based company Victoria in the second half of the nineties. The setting for the second play, *Ber­nadetje* (1996), named after Saint Bernadette of Lourdes, a popular place of pilgrimage in Belgium, was a real conductive floor for fairground bumper cars. Indicative for this play as well as for the others, *Moeder en kind* (Mother and child, 1995) and *Allemaal Indiaan* (Everyone is Indian, 1999), was its overwhelming immersion in a social universe where dance, music, and bold physical action set the tone. Friction is a force, and director Alain Platel and writer Arne Sierens portrayed adolescents in a heady way to which both youngsters and their parents could relate. The cast also included amateurs and children, a mix that was, and still is, not uncommon in Flemish productions and that once again can be understood as a way to implement the real in an aesthetic environment (⇒ Chapter 73).

All in all, since the turn of the century, theatre in the small region of Flanders has offered a wide range of multifaceted productions that are well attended by an equally diverse audience looking for new experiences and new ways to understand the challenges of globalization. Flemish theatre today is characterized by its creative intermediality (⇒ Chapter 56), flexibility, and freedom of form. Meg Stuart, an American dancer and choreographer based in Brussels, has since 2000 been a constant reference with her innovative interdisciplinary work on the body from distortion to transformation. Meanwhile, innovation comes from makers who move freely between big venues and small-scale initiatives. The starting point of each performance of BERLIN is located in the complexity of a city or a region somewhere on the planet. Characteristic for *Jerusalem* (2003/2013), *Perhaps all the Dragons…* (2014) or *Zwizdal* (2016), is a documentary approach (⇒ Chapter 55) that leads to stagings where the protagonists appear on monitors only. Meanwhile, more radical innovators such as Eric Joris and his team CREW are pushing the boundaries of theatre with immersive performances such as *CRASH* (1994), *Terra Nova* (2011), or *Hamlet’s Lunacy* (2019–2021), making use of cutting-edge video-based VR technologies in close collaboration with computer engineers (Vanhoutte 2010, 2015). Other individual artists seek connections outside the theatre to help them articulate their vision (see also Hesters 2012): philosopher Pieter De Buysser creates a performance for the Brussels planetarium, scenographer Jozef Wouters develops social experiments in Molenbeek, Thomas Bellinck builds the museum of Europe in a derelict building a ten-minute stroll away from EU headquarters in Brussels, and Hannah De Meyer develops a posthuman identity in a peculiar pairing of dance and literature.

**Francophone community**

From the 1980s onwards, francophone theatre in Belgium struggled to take its own dynamic beyond the structural divide between the Théâtre National de Belgique (TNB, National Theatre of Belgium) on the one hand and the ‘jeune théâtre’ (young theatre) on the other. The TNB had been occupying a central position since its founding immediately after the Second World War. The new generation grappled to find their place in this highly centralized landscape. Jacques Delcuverlierie and his Groupov must undoubtedly be credited with breaking things open, not only by introducing performance art into theatre but also,
and maybe even chiefly, by turning theatre once more into a space of explicit ideological reflection. During the 1980s, Delcuvellerie, together with other artists, organized in Liège site-specific events like Comment ça se passe (How it works, 1984). Between 1991 and 1995, he undertook new research into the question of truth, proposing an ambitious trilogy composed of L’Annonce faite à Marie (The announcement made to Marie, 1991) by Paul Claudel, Trash (1992), a text on pornography and terrorism by Marie-France Collard and Delcuvellerie himself and, finally, La Mère (The Mother, 1995) by Brecht.

Groupov’s internationally acclaimed Rwanda 94, a six-hour long play from 2000 on the impossible but necessary post-genocide commemoration, is without a doubt a crucial landmark for francophone theatre in Belgium, just as Ten Oorlog by Luk Perceval and Tom Lanoye has been seared into the memories of several generations of spectators. The production, which brought together both Belgian and Rwandese actors and musicians, started with the breath-taking witness account of Yolande Mukagasane, who lost her husband and her three children in terrible circumstances, hiding underneath the corpses of her loved ones. Delcuvellerie then interwove a fictional narrative recounting the quest for truth of the journalist Bee Bee with Brechtian didactic intermezzi, such as an impressive one-hour long lecture by Delcuvellerie himself on the geopolitical and historical rationale behind the genocide, and highly moving lyrical episodes honouring the death of the Rwandese hills.

Parallel to Groupov’s development, not only other artists such as Frédéric Dusenne, Michael Delaunoy, Lorent Wanson, or Ingrid Von Wantoch-Rekowski, but also itinerant companies such as Cie Arsenic (which now survives in Compagnie Pop-Up) or the Brussels collective Transquinquennal have shuffled the cards, questioning established aesthetics and working methods as well as the central position of the TNB in Brussels. Dusenne, for example, founded L’acteur et l’écrit (Actor and text) in 1996, while Delaunoy became the director of the Théâtre le Rideau in 2008, both focusing on contemporary playwriting as a genuine tool for artistic research. Transquinquennal developed a horizontal working method which allowed for the articulation of a very specific theatricality, moving between irony, self-mockery, and ideological critique, while at the same time defending a more ‘transparent’ way of on-stage presence akin to the Flemish acting style. During the second half of the 1980s, a new generation of authors emerged with Paul Pourveur, René Kalinsky, Paul Willems, and also younger authors like Virginie Thirion, Philippe Blasband, or Laurence Vielle. While the ‘Flemish Wave’ seems to have integrated the idea of ‘performance art’ into its mainstream, text and writing continued to function as the cornerstones of the late-twentieth-century francophone theatre.

In the last two decades, young and adventurous theatre-makers have not refrained from using other media, documentary research, alternative models of organization, or research strategies to take up explicit political positions and, at the same time, to develop a personal theatrical imagination. Directors like Fabrice Murgia and Anne-Cécile Vandalem fully embrace the challenge of the big stage, eagerly working with high-tech visuals or impressive stage design. In plays like Le chagrin des ogres (The sorrow of the ogres, 2009), Life: Reset (2009), and Exils (2009), Murgia depicts the glitches and flaws of the human condition, poignantly portraying social alienation in our present-day technological societies. The highly visual plays of Vandalem propose a unique mix of thriller and noir elements with absurd humour and uncanny reflections on the end of humanity. In Tristesses (2016) and Antiques (2018), she depicts men and women lost in a confined space which is both fictional (an island at the Dabish coast in Tristesses, a tourist vessel in Antiques) and real (the stage). Since the 2010s, a wide range of artists as diverse as Armel Roussel, Claude Schmitz, or Selma Alaoui, authors like Thomas Depryck and Céline Delbecq, and companies such as Raoul Collectif,
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Rien de Spécial, Nimis Groupe, La Brute, or Cie Art & tça, propose a highly singular theatre language, but always in tune with the challenges of our present-day world (Delhalle 2007). Their recurrent themes are not only consumerism and hyper-individualism, over-stimulation, and the consequences of our neo-liberal system (Rumeurs et petits jours [Rumors and short days] by Raoul Collectif, 2015), but also the ecological and economic impact of the agro-industry (Nourrir c’est l’humanité [Feeding is human] by Cie Art & tça, 2012), and the refugee crisis (Ceux que j’ai rencontrés ne m’ont peut-être pas vu [Those I met may not have seen me] by Nimis Groupe, 2016).

Over the past decade, the francophone theatre system has developed into a thriving breeding ground, acquiring a rapidly expanding international reputation, most notably through the Avignon festival (⇒ Chapter 69). Two (non-exclusive) tendencies appear at the surface, often (but not necessarily) going hand in hand. Firstly, an important group of artists and collectives – ranging from Françoise Bloch (Société de Services [Society of services], Money, 2011 and 2013) through Adeline Rosenstein (Décris-Ravage [Describe-ravage], 2015) to La Brute (Paying for it, 2019) – all conduct documentary research as an integral part of their production process, using theatre, in the tradition of Erwin Piscator and Peter Weiss, as a tool to reveal hidden (historical) realities and question the intricate link between theatre and society. In Money, for example, Bloch and her four actors explore the ins and outs of the financial industry, analysing the world of finance as an absurd universe of toxic habits and outrageous behaviour. To do so, the team not only interviewed experts but also performed embedded research in the world of high finance. A more recent example is Paying for it by the newly established collective La Brute. Using interviews with sex workers as its starting point, this performance investigates the economy of sex work as well as the role of sex in our present-day society. With thorough field research, these artists prove that theatre can actually step in where mainstream media seem to be selectively blind. Secondly, one can observe the increasing importance, for example, in the work of Raoul Collectif, of what is called in French ‘écriture de plateau’ (devised theatre) (⇒ Chapter 54), referring to a research and production process during which the material is simultaneously written, tested, rewritten, and rehearsed, as an ongoing process, which is subsequently taken to the stage to be shared with the spectators.

Institutional structures: Decentring tradition

Flemish community

The impetus of the ‘Flemish Wave’ coincided with the federalization of the Belgian state and the organization of culture at the level of the communities. The 1980s generation made great effort to convince the political authorities of the need for stable, well-equipped, and, most importantly, artist-run structures with the sole aim of creating pioneering work. The Brussels Kaaithéâtre, a crucial hotspot for new talents and international collaboration since its inception as a festival in 1977, played a pivotal role as a meeting place for artists, journalists, and academics who shared the same opinion about the status quo. The newly established Flemish Ministry of Culture followed suit and developed a cultural policy oriented towards experimentation, innovation, and international collaboration, explicitly choosing to support new artistic initiatives. This crucial shift was institutionalized in 1993 with the approval of a new decree for performing arts, which made it possible to (re)build infrastructures and to structurally integrate innovative initiatives due to the new system of state subsidies. Venues such as Kaaithéâtre – henceforth a stable theatre with seasonal performances – Vooruit, and
Karel Vanhaesebrouck and Kurt Vanhoutte

Nieuwpoort (Ghent), deSingel and Monty (Antwerp), and Stuk (Leuven), next to many other smaller ones, started developing their own system of production, reception, and distribution. They eagerly welcomed new artists and thereby consolidated the pioneering spirit of the 1980s. Since then, experiment and interdisciplinarity have grown from the periphery into the centre of the Flemish theatrical landscape, where by and large it still resides today.

Travelling between the main cultural hotspots in the cities of Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, or Leuven is easy, as it only takes an hour’s drive. Nonetheless, it has become impossible in the new century to keep pace with everything that is being produced. New collectives such as Lazarus, Ontoerend Goed, or Olympique Dramatique and independent companies such as Abattoir Fermé, FC Bergman, Action Zoo Humain, or Studio Orka ensure full houses. Artistic cooperatives like Wolfwolf or Camping Sunset seem to flourish, as they are bringing together a large number of young acting graduates in constantly shifting constellations. Their work is both popular and daring, as they joyfully explore the limits of theatricality through audience participation, scenographic border crossings, or original approaches to classical repertoire. In addition, multidisciplinary structures organized around a single artist, such as Needcompany with Jan Lauwers or A Two Dogs Company with Kris Verdonck, are flourishing and tour abroad as much as they do in their own country. Their eagerness to cross boundaries is indicative of a broader trend. Recent editions of the annual Theaterfestival that has been selecting the most interesting productions of the previous season for more than twenty-five years clearly show that the boundaries between genres and circuits are levelled out, as are those between professional practice and amateurs (the football performances of het KIP and Sanja Mitrović), between autonomous art and participative practices (Benjamin Verdonck, Jozef Wouters), between circus, dance, and theatre (Alexander Vantournhout), between theatre pur sang and social work (Tutti Fratelli), as well as between experiment and the bigger stage (Kris Verdonck).

**Francophone community**

Francophone theatre in Belgium seems to have been permanently torn between a consistent French influence on the one hand – ‘When it rains in Paris, it drizzles in Brussels’ is a commonly used expression in Belgium – and outspoken regionalist ambitions on the other. In comparison to its Flemish counterpart, francophone cultural politics is more centred on institutions than on artistic practice itself; it is, so to say, less artist-driven. Its budget is organized accordingly. The TNB occupies a central landmark position with an annual subsidy that by far outweighs the funding of the three smaller municipal theatres in Flanders. From its onset, it aimed at cultural democratization. Just like the Théâtre National Populaire (National Popular Theatre) in France, the TNB has consequently defended a humanist and universalist perspective with the ambition to unite, educate, and emancipate the general public by means of the ‘grand théâtre’. Next to the TNB, the four so-called ‘centres dramatiques régionaux’ (regional dramatic centres: Théâtre de Namur, Théâtre Varia, Atelier Théâtre Jean Vilar, Théâtre de Liège) and a couple of other important theatres (like the Théâtre le Rideau de Bruxelles) consistently receive annual subsidies. Independent (and certainly artist-centred) companies receive far less state support compared to their Flemish counterparts, as they are heavily dependent on co-production budgets from the larger operators, who in turn systematically work with ‘artists in residence’.

During the 1960s, this centralization and the related universalist perspective on theatre were increasingly being criticized (Aron 2018: 241–257). French thinkers like Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Louis Althusser were eagerly read by a new generation. In his
Théâtre 140, Jo Dekmine invited artists and companies like Bread and Puppet Theater and The Living Theatre (USA), Pip Simmons Theatre Group and Magic Circus (UK), and many others, allowing new artists to discover the work of the international avant-garde. Two trends ran counter to the hegemony of the TNB during the 1960s and 1970s. The first was largely inspired by a (re)discovery of the ideas of Antonin Artaud (through the Living Theatre, for example) and Jerzy Grotowski, considering theatre as a shared ritual of energetic transmission between performer and public. Out of this research grew Théâtre Laboratoire Vicinal, founded in 1969 by Frédéric Flamand and other young people, who would subsequently establish the legendary Plan K (later Charleroi Danse Festival). The second trend focused on the deconstruction of dramaturgical structures. Taking not only Brecht but also Heiner Müller as their sparring partners, directors and writers such as Marc Liebens, Jean-Marie Piemme, Michèle Fabien, Jean Louvet, Philippe Sireuil, and Philippe Van Kessel aimed at revealing the underlying ideological structures in texts, defending a pronounced anti-realist aesthetics, while at the same time refusing psychology as the basis of acting (Aron 2018, 279–295). Even though very divergent, their work seemed to have been connected through a pronounced preference for semiotic density, defending the idea that theatre should pose an intellectual challenge to its spectators.

From this dynamic of experimentation, in the course of the 1970s, sprang the so-called ‘jeune theatre’, which argued for a more equal distribution of public funds (Aron 2018, 258–277). The ‘jeune theatre’ was not a movement nor a group: it was an informal name awarded to a wide range of highly divergent individual directors who graduated from the newly founded theatre schools IAD and INSAS but were unable to find a place in the existing production infrastructure. However, in the long run, the ‘jeune theatre’ has proven to have gained important momentum, just like the ‘Flemish Wave’. This generation managed to create and/or occupy new spaces, such as Le Théâtre Varia or La Balsamine, that were then subsequently acquired by the government. In doing so, they managed to defend a more diverse and less centralized ecosystem on the francophone side. Like in Flanders, 1993 proved to be an important landmark. With its newly gained cultural autonomy, the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, as it is now called, developed a political framework focusing on professionalization and de-regionalization.

**Conclusion**

The Flemish- and French-speaking theatrical scenes in Belgium have a different genealogy and are organized along different institutional lines. Yet more and more bridges are being built between cultural communities. These bridges are not new. Since 1994, the highly international Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels has been functioning as a joint venture of both linguistic communities. Moreover, since 2012, the cultural agreement between Flanders and Wallonia is a fact, and the first cautious steps are being facilitated by politics. KVS and TNB, for example, organized Tournée générale, a joint program which allows them to exchange artists and productions, while at the same time stimulating co-production on both sides of the cultural border. As a capital of minorities, Brussels is the most cosmopolitan city in Europe, with two-thirds of its inhabitants having their roots in extra-European migration.

This demographic reality has huge consequences for the performing arts in Belgium (⇒ Chapter 62). At the moment of writing, Brussels is an experimental laboratory for the future of European performing arts. New art forms have their roots in street art and urban culture. They challenge established conceptions of culture and creativity, while at the same time
offering new possibilities of representation and recognition. Younger generations (Junior Mthombeni or Pitcho Womba Konga) do not seem to particularly care about cultural and therefore imaginary dividing lines and enjoy crossing linguistic and disciplinary boundaries. Their work breathes the streets: they take inspiration from hiphop, breakdance, post- and decolonial thinkers. Mthombeni is a director, actor, and musician, who directed highly energetic productions on the lives of Malcolm X, Winnie Mandela, and Tupac Shakur. The hiphop artist and poet Pitcho Womba Konga directed the widely acclaimed production *Kuzikiliza*, tackling one of the darkest pages in both Belgian and Congolese history: the murder on Patrice Lumumba. Both are part of a new generation of artists having their roots in migration and displacement, and they are taking the Belgian theatre scene beyond its language divide.

**Bibliography**


**Further reading**


