THE THEATRE OF THOMAS OSTERMEIER

PETER M. BOENISCH AND THOMAS OSTERMEIER

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'Almost the only question we ask of any piece of theatre is: Is it alive? Thomas Ostermeier's theatre absolutely is. Alongside his 'social vision' of the exterior world is also a profound musicality, which leaps past logic to another deeper human truth. The wordless, the un-sayable, the unreasonable and the instinctive and incidental is always there in his work. There is a poetic dimension which, by definition, cannot be defined by any book. So don't look for answers. Here, perhaps, in this book is a description of a journey that is as much a kind of self-interrogation as the revelation of a "method" '.

—*Simon McBurney*

With *The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier*, the German director presents his directorial method for the first time. The book provides a toolkit for understanding and enacting the strategies of his advanced contemporary approach to staging dramatic texts. The book includes:

- Ostermeier's seminal essays, lectures and manifestos translated into English for the first time.
- Over 140 photos from the archive of Arno Declair, who has documented Ostermeier's work at the Schaubühne Berlin for many years, and by others.
- In-depth 'casebook' studies of two of his productions: Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (2012) and Shakespeare's *Richard III* (2015)
- Contributions from Ostermeier's actors and his closest collaborators to show how his principles are put into practice.

An extraordinary, richly illustrated insight into Ostermeier's working methods, this volume will be of interest to practitioners and scholars of contemporary European theatre alike.

Peter M. Boenisch is Professor of European Theatre at the University of Kent, and a Fellow at the International Research Centre 'Interweaving Performance Cultures' at Berlin. He is the author of *Directing Scenes and Senses: The Thinking of Regie* (2015).

Thomas Ostermeier is the most internationally recognised German theatre director of the present. He is best known for his acclaimed productions of *Hedda Gabler*, *Shopping and Fucking*, and *Hamlet*. Since 1999, he has been Artistic Director of the Schaubühne Berlin, and since 2005, he has also been Professor for *Regie* at Ernst-Busch-Theatre Academy Berlin. He became the youngest ever recipient of the Golden Lion award for his life's work at the 2011 Venice Biennial.

Thomas Ostermeier. © Ute Mahler & Werner Mahler/OSTKREUZ.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Names: Ostermeier, Thomas, 1968– author. | Boenisch, Peter, author.
Title: The theatre of Thomas Ostermeier / Thomas Ostermeier & Peter Boenisch.
Description: Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2016.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015039801| ISBN 9781138914469 (hardback) | ISBN 9781138914476 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781315690810 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Ostermeier, Thomas, 1968—Criticism and interpretation. | Theater—Production and direction.
Classification: LCC PN2658.O77 O77 2016 | DDC 792.02/33092—dc23LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015039801

ISBN: 978-1-138-91446-9 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-91447-6 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-69081-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Book Now Ltd, London

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Foreword

Simon McBurney

'Will you write the foreword?'

Thomas Ostermeier looks at me, or more properly looks down at me. Being 6'4", he is eight inches taller. He is always asking questions. This one is unexpectedly specific.

'Foreword' comes from the Latin praefatio, 'to speak before'. If you have picked up this volume, it is the main speaker you are here for. So what to say, before? What is there to say that is not already within the book? I can tell you a little about Thomas.

He is tall. He stoops a bit, perhaps as a consequence of leaning over scripts in darkened theatres. He is restless, and when he laughs, and he laughs a lot, it is infectious, on the in-breath, like a delighted horse.

'I can't keep still ...', he once told me. 'In school I think I had what would now be called ADS, I couldn't stop moving and talking. But when we did theatre I found my energy could suddenly be productive. I did not come to it through literature or art. I mean my family were a very working class Bavarian family. There were at most three books in the whole house. My father was a soldier and my mother a shop assistant. But in the school theatre, all my energy found a place. I could speak, I could move. I could play.'

And before I have answered, we are off down the corridor of the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, converted from the Universum cinema designed by Erich Mendelsohn in 1928. This oval modernist building sits like a boat on the Ku-damm. Heavily damaged in World War II, it was rebuilt and re-opened as a cinema, then from 1969 was a dance hall and also used for musical theatre. In the late 1970s, when the Schaubühne was under the artistic direction of Peter Stein, the interior was gutted and changed to allow an infinitely flexible space in which all parts could move and be adjusted. It is a dream space for any theatre maker. Unimaginable in any country other than Germany with its enlightened subsidy of the arts. Currently, Ostermeier and his team have divided the theatre into three spaces. The newest one he wants to show me. It was designed specifically for his production of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, adapted and translated by Marius von Mayenburg.

Thomas flings open the door.

'What do you think?' I see an extremely shallow semi-circular thrust stage, a cylindrical auditorium of three galleries, rising to the ceiling.

'I have built the Globe in our theatre!' He laughs.

This is not so much the Globe as a vertical snow-boarder's half-pipe. The audience is so perilously close to the actors that they will be inseparable from the action. As they were in Shakespeare's Globe which, as we know, addressed an audience not of passive observers but active participants. Everyone was in the same space. Lit, of course, by the same light. One of the most revealing qualities of the reconstructed Globe in Southwark, for example, was to show us that the soliloquies were not private meditations, but public debates. But this 'Globe' in the Schaubühne, while it engages the audience similarly, is no reconstruction. It is a space for now. For the twenty-first century and, as with all of Thomas' work, it addresses the immediate present. It demands (you could almost say forces) the audience to pay attention. There is no possibility of disengagement. Because of how we are seated we will be obliged to be part of whatever takes place on the stage, to interrogate and be interrogated. Which is what Ostermeier does. He interrogates.

> I am mainly used to Germans telling me what to do ... so how does it feel to be welcomed with such warmth in France?

François Hollande leans forward for an answer. Thomas leans his huge frame forward over his plate. For a moment, in front of the French President, he looks uncharacteristically vulnerable. Now it is he who is being interrogated. He frowns.

'Not every German is like Angela Merkel.'

Hollande roars with laughter. The table relaxes. It is only weeks since his election. He is optimistic, razor sharp, and extremely witty. Together with the artistic directors of the 2012 Avignon Festival, and other assorted French directors we, the only two foreign directors at the festival, have been summoned to a dinner to celebrate this fact while he makes his first official visit to the city.

A few days earlier, at the climax of the opening night of Ostermeier's remarkable production of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, a harsher voice screams from the audience: 'What is a German doing telling us how to think about our lives, when you think what you did here, or have you forgotten?!?'

This would be somewhat alarming in the middle of a normal production, but for Ostermeier and his team it is meat and drink. Dismantling the barrier between audience and the stage in the fourth act, they switch the play from a stage bound drama into a public referendum on the current state of political and social culture – and mayhem breaks out in the audience.

Back at the Schaubühne in 2015, I remind Thomas of our dinner with Hollande three years previously. 'You were not so complementary about Cameron either', he laughs. The delighted horse again. 'Listen I have to deal with some stuff to do with *Hamlet*. An actor is sick ...' And he is off.

Thomas Ostermeier's *Hamlet* still runs in rep, and tours globally, even though it was created seven years ago, in 2008. A permanent ensemble of actors ensures this longevity; just one of the remarkable aspects of the work of the Berlin Schaubühne. When Ostermeier was installed as artistic director in 1999, at just thirty-one years old, critics and aficionados were alarmed imagining the hallowed Schaubühne being overrun by barbarians. They needn't have worried. Ostermeier's tenure has been a life force bringing a whole new generation of audiences to the theatre. Actors, dramaturgs and technicians from his previous life in the tiny anarchic Baracke which he ran at Deutsches Theater strengthened the collective atmosphere of the building. 'Making an ensemble is an art', he tells me. 'It is a way of life.' Despite being elected to run one of the most influential theatres in the German-speaking world, and therefore someone who now could legitimately be thought to be firmly 'established', he remains relentlessly questioning. He has changed much in this iconic theatre. For example abandoning some long held traditions such as only using a clique of German directors, and instead inviting ground-breaking theatremakers from round the world whose work he deeply admires. If he is the worst amongst these directors, he declares, then he would be the best artistic director the theatre could have.

I look back at the vertiginous multi-galleried space before me. There will be no hiding here from being drawn into Richard's world. The world of his consciousness, the world inside his head.

'Dive, thoughts down to my soul.'

Richard confides in us just before the entrance of Clarence. Dive thoughts, let's hide together, he says to us, the audience, his fellow collaborators who share in all he thinks and feels – us, his fellow collaborators who laugh at his outrageous behaviour because we know what the other characters in the play are not privy to. It is a monstrous joke of Shakespeare's: placing us in Richard's mind, to delight in his infamy, his brutality, his violence. Like that we become complicit in his every thought. He tells us. Everything. And the visual metaphor of compression that is this vertical snowboarder's half-pipe fits the piece exactly. We are compressed into Richard's mind.

This visual clarity is a striking aspect of Ostermeier's work. Never literal, his settings are kinetic, playful environments in which everything you see reflects meaning. His *Hamlet* was a single rectangular space, earth filled, the dead ever present, a site of rot and corruption in which the characters slipped and stumbled, each gesture revealing the inadequacy of the human condition. In *An Enemy of the People* the walls are blackboards, furniture drawn onto them in chalk, then scrawled over, crossed out, defaced and, brilliantly, just before Stockman's big moment, whitewashed. The sparse simplicity of the space throws the emphasis onto the actors, the text, and the moral question at the heart of the piece.

'I never wanted to do this play, I found the characters too one-dimensional', he tells me. 'But I have had it on the list for a long time, and it came up at weekly meetings with my collaborators, the dramaturgs. All very smart guys, unlike me.' He laughs. '"You cannot wait any longer to do this play", they told me.

"Yah but its not that good ... it's too simple!"

"But this is the moment to do it."

"Yah but I am not a fan ..."

But then I found a few solutions. I made the mother and the daughter into one character ...'

His production of *Enemy* is of course not just a psychological drama about courage and moral rectitude. In it we are forced to consider the urgency of the social context, how people live in a society that privileges economic relations above personal ones. Stockman, brilliantly played as disaffected young political radical who only wants to play in his indie band, discovers there is a serious health problem with the town's baths which are the source of the town's wealth. The water is toxic. The town doesn't want to admit it for fear of impoverishment. But Stockman blows the whistle on it ... 'And then a year after we were touring this show, Snowden blows a slightly bigger whistle ... I guess my dramaturgs were really smart ...', Thomas says.

At every moment I am reminded this is a collective process. Making an ensemble is an art. Ostermeier's insatiable curiosity has its root in genuine uncertainty. He does not know. He uncovers.

Exposing the political and social wounds of plays he directs, touching the actual concerns of the audience and infecting them with the urgency of these issues, is his intent. But, as he says self-deprecatingly, far from being 'in-yer-face', and someone who 'shakes up of the classical repertoire', he considers himself quite conservative: '... I am just trying to be honest with the play, get to the core of the text.'

He acknowledges the early influence of teachers like Einar Schleef and the director Manfred Karge who were '... guys in the East German tradition, with a high estimation of skill, who were not so much interested in the psychological, but looking out at the kind of society you live in'. But that is not to suggest that for him, with his army of dramaturges and thinkers this is an intellectual exercise. Ostermeier's theatre is embodied. The meaning lives through bodily exertion and physical engagement. This brings an immediacy and a challenge.

The half-pipe is packed the night I come to see *Richard*. From the opening the body is centre stage. The clouds have lifted and men are dancing, violently rejoicing, engaged in their 'lascivious' capering, dancing 'nimbly to my lady's chamber', music blasting out in celebration. But Richard will not, as consequence of his bodily shape, get to partake of this Dionysian celebration. And so he reveals to us:

> ... Since I cannot prove a lover
> I am determined to prove a villain ...

Lars Eidinger is on fire. At once mesmeric and grotesque, his demeanor simultaneously repels and sucks you in. It is unrestrained, replete with urgent embodied desires, right in front of you. And within you. His instincts, once confided to us, are there within us, part of what it means to be a human animal. Richard is absolutely conscious of what he is doing. And we enjoy it. Indeed we laugh at it.

And then suddenly the 'playing' stops ...

'I've been watching you throughout the show!' Eidinger suddenly yells at a member of the audience in the second balcony which because of the space is only yards away from his spittle-flecked lips. 'I've been watching you. I can see the light on your iPhone! You're f***ing filming, turn that f***ing thing off!'

If there was any illusion of being an observer it is shattered now. I have no idea if this is intended, but that is irrelevant because in all Ostermeier's productions something like this can happen at any moment. Everyone is alive to what is happening in the here and now. And the point is made in this production of *Richard*. The political and the personal are inseparable. Our inner world determines what happens in the outer world. The journey of *Richard* is about the journey of the dark trails that cross all our souls, a theme the poet returns to time again through his life. We are complicit in that journey not just in *Richard*, but in *Timon*, in *Hamlet*, crucially in *Macbeth* where he chooses to make his bloodiest murderer the most beautiful poet. And so the climax of this *Richard* on the battlefield is him fighting. Desperately. For his life. Against all the odds. And losing. But here the clarity for Ostermeier is absolute. Because he has chosen to show Richard fighting against himself. There is no enemy except within. And the shadows he thrusts and cuts against are those that haunt our generation, our society, our dark culture, our selves. And we recognise once more that this century of violence, corruption, brutality and injustice is also the century of the 'self'. To change without we have to change within ... and to see within we must be confronted with what darkness is there. We have to ask the hard questions. We have to interrogate our own selves.

But alongside this 'social vision' of the exterior world is also a profound musicality in Ostermeier's work. I don't just mean that he uses music, which he does to hilarious effect in *Enemy* when Stockmann and his pals attempt to rehearse the band they have together and play David Bowie's 'Changes'. Rather something deeper that contributes profoundly to the emotional power of the plays he directs.

'One of my first memories', he tells me, 'was that every Sunday we had visits from the family. My uncle, grandfather on the sofa, my mother serving coffee and cake. It was then, aged 7 or 8, that I loved to perform the conductor. Classical music on the stereo, with something like a chopstick, I would stand on a chair and then imagine an orchestra in front of me. They would all roar with laughter. Me, I was completely exposed, but in my own world, completely lost in a musical passion ...'

Music is beyond words. It leaps past logic to another deeper human truth. And the wordless, the un-sayable, the unreasonable and the instinctive and

incidental also form part of any work in the theatre. And it is there always in Ostermeier's work. Something happens because it appears just like that. Not because it is worked out. Not because it has an intellectual place, a specific meaning but because it simply is. There is a poetic dimension which, by definition, cannot be defined by any book. So don't look for answers. Here, perhaps, in this book is a description of a journey that is as much to do a kind of self-interrogation as the revelation of a 'method'.

Richard fights with himself. In contradiction to what is there on the page. In this huge and lonely battle, curiously moving, strangely beautiful, meaning is implied but not explicit. This is not what Shakespeare wrote. But it is what he intended. What he intended was for the final moments of Richard's life, in which his tragic fate is exposed, to come alive for us. Almost the only question we ask of any piece of theatre: Is it alive? And here it absolutely is.

Perhaps this book answers how Thomas effects this, or perhaps it does not. But what I do know is that common to all Thomas' work is a simple sense of human exposure. In all the fierce and brutal passion there is also great vulnerability. The effect is both touching and disturbing. The personal and political are inseparably entwined, as are dissonance and musicality, brutality and compassion. His work leaves us in a state of uncertainty. The final judgement is up to us.

Talking about *Enemy of the People* he said, 'this production is about my friends, about myself, about us ... you know, vegetarian, politically informed, online, always a bit angry, upset with political scandals, corruption. But when it truly comes to doing something what do we do? What action do we take? ... So the end of the play in our version is where we are standing politically at the moment ... I mean all of us who think we are politically alive and yet live in the richest so called Democracies in the world ...' Stockman and his wife look at the shares on the table ... they look at each other ... then they look at the shares ... They look at each other ... then they look at the shares ...

Simon McBurney co-founded Complicite in 1983. He is an actor, writer, and director, and was the first British Artiste Associé at the Avignon Festival in 2012. His 2015 solo piece for Complicite, *The Encounter*, was co-produced with Schaubühne Berlin. In 2015, McBurney directed a stage adaptation of Stefan Zweig's novel *Impatience of the Heart* at the Schaubühne – his first production for Thomas Ostermeier's company, and also his first German-language work.

Acknowledgements

Without the opportunities provided by a Small Research Grant awarded by the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust, I would not have been able to immerse myself so intensely into Thomas Ostermeier's work at the Berlin Schaubühne. These periods of research residence at Berlin were further complemented by study leave provided by the University of Kent during Spring 2014. At Kent, I am particularly indebted to the former Dean of Humanities, Professor Karl Leydecker (now at the University of Dundee), for his most generous personal efforts in re-directing my career as I briefly took to the stage at the wrong theatre, disregarding his sagacious *Regie*-instructions. Above all, though, my thanks are due to Thomas Ostermeier for his unreserved enthusiasm that turned what was once planned as a book about his work into a collaborative effort to articulate and document his methods, craft and technique as well as the intellectual context of his work. Thomas, his actors and colleagues at the Schaubühne, and his students have welcomed me most warmly whenever I intruded on their work in rehearsals, workshops and seminar sessions. As a pure theatre theorist by trade – a 'theatre scientist' even, as they say in Germany – these past few years at and around the Schaubühne have been genuinely transformative not only for my own understanding of *Regie*, but also of the true task of theatre scholarship. At the Schaubühne, I owe particular thanks to Maren Dey, Florian Borchmeyer, Christoph Schletz, Eva Meckbach, Johanna Lühr, Rebecca Berg, Leila Frieling and Carsten Höth for their generous support of this project. To Elisa Leroy, assistant to Thomas Ostermeier, a special thank you for contributing with such great interest, care and curiosity, and with untiring effort and commitment even during your rare holidays! Arno Declair, Florence von Gerkan and Jan Pappelbaum have assisted us by providing images, and Robert Shaughnessy, David Barnett and Clare Finburgh have kindly commented on draft versions, not least helping us out in our at times vague command of the English language. And finally, thanks to Ben Piggott, Kate Edwards and Talia Rodgers at Routledge who have helped us with great patience to bring the seed of an idea to its eventual fruition.

Peter M. Boenisch
London and Berlin, September 2015

This book about my methodological experiences over the last twenty years would never have been possible without the initiative of Peter M. Boenisch. I would never have taken the time, and would not have had the diligence to do this work without him: he deserves my infinite thanks. Without the collaboration, help and patience of my wonderful personal assistant Elisa Leroy, this book would not have seen the light of day. That is why I would also like to thank her profoundly.

This is a book mostly about directing actors: Without the troupe of actors who have accompanied me all these years at Schaubühne, I would not have had the possibility to conduct my research on acting. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my loyal set designer, Jan Pappelbaum, with whom I've been working for twenty years now; the costume designers Nina Wetzel and Florence von Gerkan; the video artist Sébastien Dupouey; the musicians Nils Ostendorf, Malte Beckenbach and Thomas Witte; the dramaturg Florian Borchmeyer, and the Schaubühne's vice director and my long-term collaborator Tobias Veit. I also thank Jürgen Schitthelm, co-founder and former proprietor of the Schaubühne, as well as Schaubühne's former vice director and nowadays managing director Friedrich Barner, who trusted me with the artistic direction of the Schaubühne; and last but not least: my closest collaborator of all these years, the wonderful playwright Marius von Mayenburg, who also provided me with beautiful translations of Shakespeare and Ibsen. Without these, I would not have been able to delve into the realms of these two writers as deeply as I have.

Thomas Ostermeier
Berlin, September 2015

Chapter 1

Playing with the R(ealism) effect

An introduction to Thomas Ostermeier's theatre work

Peter M. Boenisch

No other German theatre company, and no other contemporary German theatre artist, is as present around the world today as Thomas Ostermeier (b. 1968) and the Berlin Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, the theatre ensemble he has been leading as Artistic Director since autumn 1999. In addition to servicing the four venues at its Berlin Kurfürstendamm home with a continuous repertoire programme of around 500 performances per season, the company also plays around 100 performances abroad each year. In the course of the 2014/15 theatre season, approximately 68,000 spectators saw Schaubühne works outside Berlin – of course not exclusively, but mostly productions directed by Ostermeier himself. In the twelve months between July 2014 and July 2015, the company travelled to Avignon (where they began and ended the season with performances at the Avignon Festival), Oslo, London, Seoul, Dublin, Moscow (on three occasions with three different productions), Belfast, Cluj Napoca, Amsterdam (with two different productions on two occasions), Lausanne, Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai, São Paolo, Rennes, Montreal, Wiesbaden, Macau, Recklinghausen, Tianjin and Beijing (with two productions), Naples, Athens, Paris, Lisbon and Venice (with two productions at the Biennale). As a result of this global presence, Thomas Ostermeier's theatre, above all his own globally celebrated productions of *Hedda Gabler* (2005), *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (2007/14), *Hamlet* (2008), *An Enemy of the People* (2012), *Little Foxes* (2014) and *Richard III* (2015), has come to represent German theatre to the wider world, far beyond Europe. In 2011, aged 43, Ostermeier became the youngest ever recipient of the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion for his lifetime achievement in theatre. It was with good reason, therefore, that the German weekly *Zeit Magazin* described him as 'the face of modern German theatre'.[1]

And yet, there could hardly be a director less typical of contemporary German theatre than Ostermeier. In stark contrast to his popularity with audiences abroad and at home (at the Schaubühne, tickets for his productions regularly sell out the day they are released), German theatre critics – after an initial hype around the director's work at the 'Baracke', which he led from 1996 onwards – have rarely been more than lukewarm even about his

most celebrated works, such as *Hamlet*. Since taking over the Schaubühne in late 1999, Ostermeier has only received three nominations for the Berlin Theatertreffen, the annual showcase of the season's ten best productions as voted by a jury of theatre critics.[2] Comparing the Berlin reviews of his recent *Richard III* (2015) to the production's critical reception in France (where its Avignon premiere made front page news in the national broadsheet *Le Monde* and two other newspapers) reveals a baffling discrepancy. In his native country, Ostermeier's work seems largely to slip through the net of mainstream critical categories, and German theatre scholarship equally has remained largely silent about his oeuvre.[3] Unlike most other theatre artists from the country that has invented 'directors' theatre', his work cannot easily be summed up by a handful of aesthetic principles that recur with each production. At first sight at least, he seems to lack a trademark 'directorial signature', and despite giving plays by Ibsen, Shakespeare, Lillian Hellman and Tennessee Williams a distinctly contemporary feel, Ostermeier steers clear of idiosyncratic, authorial interpretation; these are, of course, all the hallmarks of German *Regietheater* that most professional as well as academic critics consider as gold standard to measure directorial achievement. The Anglo-American perspective that tends to frame his work as that of a directorial *auteur* likewise misses the crucial tenets and core values of his work, which this introductory chapter seeks to outline.

Ostermeier himself positions his approach to theatre, first and foremost, as outside, after and against postmodern deconstruction and postdramatic performing, German theatre's prevalent aesthetic paradigms in recent decades. Above all, he rejects the aesthetically self-referential theatricality of contemporary theatre-making (in Germany, in particular, and certainly elsewhere, too). In his analysis, much of it has become stuck in epigonic clichés of deconstruction while having long lost most, if not all of the critical impetus that originally drove the post-modern provocations against modern certainties in the wake of the 1968 year of revolt, as exemplarily articulated by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Ostermeier describes himself as 'the deconstructionists' little brother' who finds himself tidying up after them.[4] For him, theatre is, first and foremost, a forum for critical self-reflection – not an aesthetically secluded self-referentiality, though, but the self-critical interrogation of our selves and of the world around us, of our self-assured positions, of all apparently self-evident truths in and of the society that surrounds and conditions us. His own key writings about theatre, from the late 1990s to today, make this central intention very clear (see Chapters 2, 4 and 8 below). He unites these essentially political core values of his theatre work in the notion of 'realism' that underpins his work, which he understands as something very different from any theatrical 'kitchen-sink realism' or plain naturalism. The original Schaubühne manifesto entitled 'The Mission' (*Der Auftrag*), with which Ostermeier and his then co-director, choreographer Sasha Waltz, launched their joint tenure of the venue in January 2000, succinctly summarised some of these 'neo-realist' essentials:[5]

> Theatre can be one of these places where attempts to comprehend the world in a different way intensify into a shared world-view and into an attitude. Theatre can be a place for society to gain consciousness, thus to be re-politicised.
>
> For this aim, we need a contemporary theatre [...]. We need a new realism, because realism counters a 'false consciousness', which these days is much more a lack of any consciousness. Realism is not the simple depiction of the world as it looks. It is a view on the world with an attitude that demands change.[6]

Ostermeier's idea of realism could not be more distinct from representations of face-value, literal realities which in their recognisability affirm the world as we believe we know it. Against the soap-operatic 'capitalist realism' of mainstream media, yet also against much post-dramatic performance work, his materialist realism uses the feel of 'authenticity' in order to confront audiences with some deep rooted, perhaps even disavowed conflicts and contradictions at the heart of our present-day society. In a stance that appears almost outmoded today, his theatre thereby holds up the original values of bourgeois citizenship – liberty, equality, solidarity – combining them with a belief in an enlightened humanism, and a Brechtian utopia that a recognition triggered by the de-naturalisation of our standard perception may result in reflection, insight, a critical attitude, and potentially even in an act to make a change; in his Baracke-years, Ostermeier proclaimed, 'After the victory of communism, theatre will be redundant'.[7] It is in these terms, far beyond the surface of aesthetics, intentions, and interpretations, that Thomas Ostermeier's theatre indeed reveals a surprisingly consistent pathway that leads straight from his early work at the Baracke, where he staged mainly Anglo-American 'in-yer-face theatre', right down to his recent productions of dramatic classics and modern plays at the Schaubühne.

The main motor to trigger this recognition and the defamiliarisation of a normative perspective in his work is theatral play.[8] Ostermeier's directorial approach, introduced in detail in Chapter 6, still remains true to some fundamental principles which he already articulated way back in 1998. Above all, his *Regie* believes without reservation in the actors as 'original creators':

> [...] the prime function of the director is to describe and communicate with the actor. You discuss a dialogue, you agree on a situation in a play – and then it's up to the actor. [...] When something happens in rehearsals which I don't control, when something is liberated in the actors, then I leave the rehearsal room in bliss. I don't get that from feeling 'fine, my concept works'.[9]

Instead of imposing his vision and concepts on a play, which Ostermeier describes as 'deductive method of directing' (see Chapter 6), he follows the principle of an 'inductive' *Regie*. In this respect, he adds to his Brechtian

political commitment an aesthetic approach in the tradition of Max Reinhardt, based on the conviction that each play demands its specific directorial approach and way of producing it, while also taking further Reinhardt's sense for captivating, at times spectacular, and certainly popular and accessible theatrality. Ostermeier's work thereby makes an important contribution to theatre direction as it draws together the two German directing traditions defined by Reinhardt (crudely spoken, the 'German Stanislavsky') and Brecht, with an amalgam of Meyerhold's very concrete psychophysical technique and Artaud's visionary 'cruelty' providing the medium to bring the two together.[10]

'Jumping into people's faces with our bare bottoms': Existential theatre at the Baracke

Thomas Ostermeier's 'meteoric rise'[11] commenced while he was still a directing student at Berlin's Ernst-Busch-Theatre Academy, the leading theatre training institution of former East Germany, which has managed to remain a central and distinct voice in German theatre training to date, following a distinctly 'Eastern European' theatre pedagogy in the traditions of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Brecht.[12] In 1996, Michael Eberth, the then outgoing head dramaturg at Deutsches Theater (DT), had secured a grant from the patrons' organisation to turn a disused wooden cabin next to the theatre that had variously served as workshop, canteen and storage space into a small auditorium to stage new, experimental work. Having noted Ostermeier's student productions, Eberth appointed him to run this venture, aptly named Baracke (literally, 'the shack'; in German, the word does not carry the English association of military barracks). Eberth, who himself moved on from his DT position at the same time, left Ostermeier a bunch of playscripts and translations whose productions would quickly make the small, improvised and rather dilapidated space famous far beyond Berlin: *Fat Men in Skirts* by New York playwright Nicky Silver opened the Baracke in December 1996, followed by David Harrower's *Knives in Hens*, Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, plays by Martin Crimp, Enda Walsh, and not least Sarah Kane. Between autumn 1996 and summer 1999, eight productions premiered at the Baracke, seven of which directed by Ostermeier himself, supported by his dramaturg Jens Hillje (with whom he went to school in his Bavarian hometown of Landshut) and architect-stage designer Jan Pappelbaum, who had turned the wooden hut into a flexible, empty space, while adding portacabins as dressing rooms and box office at the rear (see Chapter 3.1 and Figures 3.2 and 3.3). They had only limited financial and technical support from the DT-main house and were constrained by the availability of the DT ensemble actors to a certain number of performances. Therefore, they ran the Baracke more like a subcultural arts centre, hosting in addition to the performances readings, exhibitions, club nights, political discussions, and concerts, including those of Ostermeier's own punk-rock band, where he played the bass. Breaking with the elitism and conservatism

associated with most theatres, they envisioned a theatre that was open, inviting, and accessible for everyone. Continuing a trend started a few years before by Frank Castorf's equally alternative and highly successful Volksbühne, the Baracke managed to turn theatre into a 'hip' and 'cool' destination for a young, fashionable crowd, mainly in their twenties. Eventually, the Baracke team was offered the reins of the prestigious Schaubühne, made famous in the 1970s by Peter Stein. He accepted and decided to start out in a joint venture with choreographer Sasha Waltz and her producer-partner Jochen Sandig that would last until 2005.[13] Together they moved from their make-shift quarters in the former East to the impressive Bauhaus-building by architect Erich Mendelsohn at Lehniner Platz in the affluent (Western) district of Charlottenburg in January 2000, precisely coinciding with the new millennium. Ostermeier was thirty-two at the time – the same age as Peter Stein when he took over the original Schaubühne in 1970.

Ostermeier had dedicated the Baracke to 'material that is relevant', and to making 'theatre that interests us'.[14] The affiliation with the Deutsches Theater allowed him to pursue these aims, working from the very start with actors from one of the country's finest theatre ensembles, such as Thomas Bading, who is still in the Schaubühne ensemble today as one of several long-standing members of Ostermeier's company who have followed the director since his early productions.[15] Bading was already in his late thirties when he played the role of Mark in the young director's legendary production of *Shopping and Fucking*, which became the Baracke's signature piece and subsequently remained in the Schaubühne repertoire to celebrate its tenth stage anniversary in 2008. The actor remembered the work with Ostermeier at the Baracke, and the move to the Schaubühne in a recent conversation:

> At the Baracke, Thomas [Ostermeier] was more naive, more aggressive, more existential and much crazier. He was able to do anything, because the Baracke started off as a no-name-theatre and he had no obligation to fill seats. Free from any pressure, he created works that were very socially conscious, and above all, very disturbing. We always played characters on the edge: characters on the fringe of society, on the verge of social decline and destitution, and at times on the brink of their life – at the edge of death. This is what I mean by 'existential'. The early period at the Schaubühne was similar. In Noréns *Personenkreis 3.1* we all played homeless tramps and junkies.
>
> Back then we quite literally jumped into people's faces with our bare bottoms. It was most hard-hitting theatre, which made audience members pass out in every single performance – our record number in *Shopping and Fucking* was eight on a single night, and that amongst an audience of only ninety-nine! When we came over here [to the Schaubühne], we thought that it would not happen in a space with five hundred seats and air conditioning – but it did, and people still fainted during our performances; it was such aggressive, powerful theatre. The theatre's existing audience was of

> course appalled, and they stopped coming. It took us several years to find a new audience, and we had to learn to make work that does not punch our audience right in their face, but instead to seduce and attract them in different ways that suit the circumstances here. Some may say that Thomas' work has become more pleasing and more shallow for this, but no – you just cannot have people running out of the performance or passing out all the time, and so he has found ways for his productions still to go under your skin, but without us putting our arse in people's faces.[16]

What has not changed with Ostermeier's move from hard-hitting, rather literal 'in-yer-face' productions to the formally more contained work of recent years, such as Hellman's *Little Foxes* (2014) and Yasmina Reza's *Bella Figura* (2015), the latter specifically written for the director and his Schaubühne actors, is the realist attitude through which his productions seismographically chronicle German society. As Ostermeier himself moved from the position of 'no name outsider' to the core of Germany's theatre establishment at the helm of the Schaubühne, the emphasis of his theatre shifted from the radical, harrowing 'realism of the outcast' towards a more directly recognisable 'reality of people of this age, of this class', as he expressed it in his 2005 conversation with Catalan director Àlex Rigola (see Chapter 4.1). The almost exclusive focus on new writing of the Baracke years and of the initial Schaubühne period gave way to an exploration of classical texts that continued to supply Ostermeier with reverberations of current, 'relevant' material. This development set in with his production of Büchner's *Danton's Death* in 2001 and culminated in his major cycles of Ibsen and Shakespeare plays (see Chapters 4, 5 and 7).

Ostermeier's turn to classical plays: Telling stories about us and our disavowed abyss

Whether transporting the living rooms of Nora, Hedda Gabler or Thomas Stockmann directly into the regenerated flats of affluent Berlin Mitte, or whether introducing figments of contemporary reality into the open playing fields of his *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Measure for Measure* and *Richard III*, the canonical drama as staged by Ostermeier prompts our reflection of our selves and the recognition of our own world, rather than empathising with characters in a distant world that we watch from a safe distance. As Ostermeier argues in Chapter 6,

> [T]he fundamental role of theatre in our culture is to tell stories about us, about our lives, about our problems, about our society. That's why theatre exists. The characters on stage are our vicarious representatives who act, take action, make decisions on our behalf.

In Ostermeier's theatre, the playtexts thus provide a (dramatic) narration whose constituent situations are put into theatral play(ing) so that they offer models

of the existential conflicts within our societies. These conflicts are multifaceted and cannot be reduced to singular 'issues' that could be dramatised in isolation. Characters are accordingly not seen as psychological entities the audience ought to empathise with, but as agents within these model situations whose capacity to act is simultaneously determined by the situation. I have previously drawn on Raymond Williams's cultural materialist notion of 'structures of feeling' to outline the political as well as ethical realist core of Ostermeier's work.[17] Williams's term emphasises the individuals' bodily and sensory entanglement within their immediate socio-cultural and economic context, thereby highlighting the role of actual experience in the shaping of meaning and of a Marxian 'consciousness'. As a constant of Ostermeier's work – referring here both to his productions and his mode of direction – a shared 'structure of feeling' (rather than a mere *Zeitgeist*) crucially contributes to the R(ealism)-effect of his productions, by establishing immediate affective connections with the audience and thereby triggering the spectators' recognition. At the same time, the shared 'structure of feeling' (rather than any psychological approach) is also evoked in rehearsal to aid his performers to unlock their characters (see exemplarily Chapter 5.2). As a result, Ostermeier's theatre also reflects the emotional sensibilities of his generation, 'the first generation in Germany who with certainty will not be better off than their parents.'[18] His work echoes the trajectory of an energetic, hedonistic post-reunification 'Generation Golf' of the 1990s into a crisis-ridden, stagnant, and conservative 'Generation Angst', even more so in recent years of global (not only) financial unrest.[19] Looking back in a 2014 interview, Ostermeier describes it as his (in his modest words: sole) achievement to have 'given a face' on his stage to his peer-group's new bourgeois mentality:

> This generation is corruptible; everyone is only after money, success, and security. The longing to come home in the evening, to crawl back into the protected nest, this retreat from society, this fear of not being able to master liberty ...[20]

Not at all an end in themselves, the classics – and Ibsen's work in particular – thereby add to the means at the director's disposal in order to scrutinise the 'structures of feeling' of the 'new bourgeoisie' around him. Ostermeier was never after a 'modern' interpretation of a classic, but above all after an interpretation of society and its disavowed abyss, with Shakespeare offering a particular opening to the latter.

In this aesthetico-political pursuit of staging the drama of the German middle-classes on their way through the early twenty-first century, Ostermeier finds artistic allies not so much in fellow stage directors, but in film-makers such as Michael Haneke, Hans-Christian Schmid, or Christian Petzold. In the 2014 interview, he even associated himself with a role model that had been hitherto rarely considered in relation to his work – the US-American art-cinema director John Cassavetes:

> He just gets it right! His films succeed in portraying these bourgeois, petty bourgeois worlds; they document interpersonal controversies, they lead into a deep abyss, but never in a forced way, or just for the sake of the resulting horror.[21]

Unlike numerous other contemporary European directors, Ostermeier however has never shown a penchant for recreating art movies for the theatre stage, with the exception of Fassbinder's *Ehe der Maria Braun*, and even here, Ostermeier worked from the screenplay by Peter Märthesheimer and Pea Fröhlich, and insists that he watched the movie again only after his production's premiere. Far more than just aping cinema's capacity for spectacle on the theatre stage, Ostermeier seeks to offer his audience a spectatorial experience that reflects their viewing habits. His theatre sets out to speak in a formal language audiences are familiar with; the attribute 'pop' has been much overused in reviews and analysis of his work. Yet, while a filmic mode of narration has been influential and aspirational for his way of bringing both new writing and canonical classics to the stage – he uses quick scenic cuts and a fast narrative pace, and intersperses his productions with recognisable, well-known pop- and rock-songs as well as video-projections – Ostermeier importantly employs such contemporary means of expression only in order to emphasise and extend the unique quality of live acting and theatral play. Along with his actors' pronounced play(ing), these means are then carefully woven together into a precisely scored theatral rhythm. His combination of uncompromising contemporaneity with theatral craft and technique was – and still is – Ostermeier's formula for his success; it was precisely this mixture that overcame a younger audience's preconception of theatre as 'conservative', 'elitist' or 'not for them', while it nowadays appeals to a wide audience demographic who frequents the Schaubühne.

A laboratory for methodical enquiry into the craft of theatre direction

Throughout his career, Ostermeier has paid a lot of attention to directing technique. Rehearsing a production, the director concentrates on fine nuances in the way sentences are spoken, or the pitch of an actor's voice, and he composes a meticulously timed pattern of tension and release, speech, action, pauses, outbursts, frantic pace, slowness, deafening noise, silences, huge and tiny gestures. This scenic rhythm finds a crucial inspiration in Sergei Eisenstein's classic idea of the 'montage of attractions' (see also Chapter 6). Even early work at the Baracke already displayed a strong sense for effectively constructed scenic work, for delicate physicalisation and rhythmic scoring. In fact, in addition to the new playwriting, Ostermeier's precise use of acting and scenic technique contributed in an important way not only to the novelty of his work at the time, but even more so to the at times overwhelming affective impact these

productions had on their audience, as noted by Thomas Bading in his comment cited earlier. It was an entirely silent, but intensely visceral scene that led audience members to break down in tears or even faint in *Shopping and Fucking*. Where Mark Ravenhill's script has the young rent-boy Gary invite Mark to penetrate him with a knife and then cuts straight to the next scene, Ostermeier's production showed the deadly sex full on and almost in slow-motion. In a way that should remain significant for his work until today, this endless, wordless scene physicalised, instead of psychologised, all the rage, frustration, desperation, and hunger for love, all the 'real' sensibilities that drove the characters' act. Precisely by going beyond empathy and pity and appealing to a pure affective response, this scene became so intense, and so outrageous.[22]

Much of Ostermeier's work over the past two decades can be seen as a continuation of an encompassing methodical enquiry into the craft of theatre direction within a twenty-first century cultural environment. His encounter with Artaud, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, in particular, during his studies at Ernst-Busch-Theatre Academy in the class of former BE-actor and director Manfred Karge, was a first formative experience in this respect. Ostermeier's initial pitch for the Baracke to DT *Intendant* Thomas Langhoff and head dramaturg Eberth already reflected this interest in practically interrogating theatre theory: rather than a new writing venue, the area in which the small venue eventually found its fame, he had originally proposed to install at the Baracke a 'laboratory for a methodical study of acting', modelled on the studios of the Moscow Art Theatre – an intention Ostermeier pursued during the venue's first season with his 1997 production of Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* (*Man Equals Man*), for which he brought in the Russian biomechanics-teacher Gennadi Bogdanov (for Jan Pappelbaum's memories of this crucial production, see Chapter 3.1).

Over the years, Ostermeier kept further refining the vocal and physical range of his actors' performances as well as their capacity for ensemble work. In the years of co-directing the Schaubühne with Sasha Waltz, his actors and her dancers attended joint training sessions. Later, Argentinian-born choreographer Constanza Macras and playwright-director Falk Richter became regulars at his theatre, the latter creating both Tanztheater-type works with his longtime choreographer-partner Annouk van Dijk while also venturing into contemporary opera with *For the Disconnected Child*, the 2013 co-production between the Schaubühne and the Berlin Staatsoper. In all of these productions, Schaubühne company members performed alongside dancers and singers from Macras' and Van Dijk's companies, or the state opera. Meanwhile, Ostermeier himself kept developing his own exploration of scenic, affective rhythms that characterise his *mises en scène*. As a result, the emphasis of his work as Artistic Director equally shifted, moving on from the earlier concentration on new writing, which he pursued at a time when few other German theatres opened their stages for radical new playwrights and their development. Nowadays, new work has become a staple at most Berlin theatres, from Deutsches Theater to the Maxim Gorki theatre, which is now led by Ostermeier's former associate

Jens Hillje, together with Shermin Langhoff. Ostermeier meanwhile steered his Schaubühne on a course to eventually become what he initially envisioned the Baracke to be: turning the Schaubühne into the place for radical *Regietheater* of the twenty-first century, Ostermeier, instead of employing a group of permanent directors, keeps bringing in internationally renowned directors to work regularly and continuously with the Schaubühne ensemble actors, and to offer them an exposure to a wide range of approaches to test and develop their craft and talent, in addition to his own way of directing. Over recent years, directors such as Katie Mitchell, Romeo Castellucci, Alvis Hermanis, Ivo van Hove, Michael Thalheimer, Nicolas Stemann and – for the first time in 2015 – Simon McBurney have directed his company, while the regular work with long-time collaborators such as Falk Richter, Marius von Mayenburg and Patrick Wengenroth continues, too. The Schaubühne has thus become that laboratory Ostermeier envisaged, yet now neither focusing exclusively on the methodical study of acting or on new writing, but on 'new directions' and more generally on a systematic exploration of various means of theatre-making today.

Complementing Ostermeier's pedagogic commitment to teaching and training students and emerging directors, this book is a further part and preliminary result of this ongoing practical research in fundamental theatre methodology and its application in the present. In addition to selected key texts on realism, on directing Ibsen, Shakespeare and on the political potential of theatre today, which Ostermeier wrote between 1999 and 2014 (many of which have been translated into English for the first time here; see Chapters 2, 4 and 8), his directing practice is introduced and elucidated through original contributions from some of his core collaborators (Chapter 3), and through two exemplary case studies in Chapters 5 and 7: The latter follows his production of Shakespeare's *Richard III* from early thoughts to its Berlin premiere in February 2015, and it is framed by Ostermeier's own plans, preparatory research as well as a retrospective evaluation. Chapter 5, meanwhile, gives insights into the (after-)life of his production of Ibsen's *Ein Volksfeind* (*An Enemy of the People*) from the points of view of the dramaturg, the actors, the assistant director and other artists involved, as it follows the production's trajectory from its Avignon premiere in July 2012 around the world and back to Berlin, through three theatre seasons until its 131st (and by no means last) performance in the summer of 2015. These sources on 'Ostermeier at work' are then further complemented by our attempt to summarise the fundamental principles behind his directorial method in Chapter 6.

Yet, Ostermeier's reflections on and explorations of theatre, its craft, laws, mechanisms, and techniques, have at all times been in the immediate service of the societal and political function of theatre that he aspires to. Not unlike Brecht, their purpose is in assisting his creation of entertaining, accessible, and meaningful theatre art that skilfully entices the theatre spectators to recognise their own situation and to start thinking about their own life. To express this purpose which his theatre work has been pursuing for twenty years now,

Ostermeier, at the beginning of his career, once more looked not least at the cultural role of cinema, or at least, the kind of cinema he attended. In his 1999 text on 'Theatre in the age of its acceleration' (see Chapter 2.1), he stated that at the time not theatre but cinema was

> the place I frequent [...] when I want to learn a thing or two about life. The place where I am able to make experiences which can challenge my way of life, encourage me to think differently, to appreciate things differently, to act differently, to live differently, and to be different – because someone shows me the world in a way I have never seen it before, and reveals an entirely new world to me.

In a nutshell, and somewhat *ex negativo*, because he actually described the effect cinema had on him, Ostermeier expresses in this statement rather precisely the ultimate ideal that he seeks to realise with his theatral realism, whether staging new work or classics from the Western canon, whether putting the actors' behinds in his audience's face, or whether producing what some consider pleasing performances: to turn theatre into a place which – while being 'cool', open and inviting just like the Baracke was in its days – encourages audiences to think differently, and challenges spectators in their way of seeing the world.

Notes

1 Stephan Lebert, 'Thomas Ostermeier: Der Radikale', in *Zeit Magazin* 50, 8 December 2011, pp. 14–25, here 14.
2 He was invited with *Nora – A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, and for *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, the latter originally created for Kammerspiele Munich before its transfer to the Schaubühne.
3 The first German-language book publication on the director's work was the interview volume *Backstage Ostermeier* by senior theatre critic Gerhard Jörder (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2014). The first two academic monographs on his work were published in French: Jitka Pelechová, *Le Théâtre de Thomas Ostermeier*, Louvain: Études Théâtrales Vol. 58 (2013), and *Le théâtre et la peur*, Actes Sud, 2016.
4 Jörder, *Backstage*, p. 9. Ostermeier describes himself as putting the broken fragments together again, but in a way that leaves the cracks and fractures exposed: 'Japanese culture has a name for this idea: *kintsugi*. A piece of pottery is most beautiful after it has been smashed and reconstructed again. The purpose of this aesthetic is to make the cracks visible' (ibid.).
5 I used the term 'neo(n)realism' in 'Thomas Ostermeier: Mission neo(n)realism and a theatre of actors and authors', in Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato, eds, *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge 2010, pp. 339–57. In the present chapter, I revisit and develop some of the arguments and analysis of this earlier text.
6 Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, 'Der Auftrag', originally published in the inaugural programme brochure for the spring season 2000, and reprinted as 'Wir müssen von vorn anfangen' in *Die Tageszeitung*, 20 January 2000, p. 15. We decided not to include this document in the present volume since Ostermeier's contribution to the co-authored manifesto drew heavily on revised sections from his more detailed 1999 lecture 'Theatre in the age of its acceleration' that had not yet been published in print at the time (see Chapter 2.1 below).

7 Barbara Burckhardt, 'Der Bassist als erste Geige: Ein Meister-Musterschüler will zurück zu den Wurzeln und ganz nach oben – Thomas Ostermeier, Nachwuchsregisseur des Jahres', in *Theater Heute* Yearbook 1998, pp. 96–102, here 102.
8 Drawing on the work of Rudolf Münz and Helmar Schramm, I make a distinction between 'theatrality', pointing to the 'magic play' of theatre, and 'theatricality' that is associated with fake and deception. See Peter M. Boenisch, *Directing Scenes and Senses: The Thinking of Regie*, Chapter 2, 'The restless spirit of *Regie*: Hegel, theatrality and the magic of speculative thinking', Manchester: Manchester University Press 2015, pp. 33–53.
9 Thomas Ostermeier, '"Ich muss es einfach versuchen": Ein Theater Heute-Gespräch mit Thomas Ostermeier', in *Theater Heute* 5 (1998), pp. 26–30, here 30.
10 Considering Ostermeier's 'directorial balance sheet' at the time, I still wondered, writing in 2008, whether 'it may be all too premature to celebrate Ostermeier as Reinhardt's and Brecht's legitimate heir yet' ('Mission neo(n)realism', p. 356). Today, seven years later, such caution may have become redundant.
11 Marvin Carlson, 'Thomas Ostermeier', in *Theatre is more beautiful than war: German stage directing in the late twentieth century*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2009, pp. 160–80, here 161.
12 In a French interview from 2001, Ostermeier corrected the interviewer's association of his work with the (West-)German *Regietheater* tradition of former Schaubühne-leader Peter Stein. Instead he evokes the legacy of some East German theatre makers passed down to him at the Ernst-Busch-Theatre Academy as most formative:

> The comparison with Peter Stein is not at all pertinent – my work is entirely inspired by the tradition of the Berliner Ensemble: by Matthias Langhoff and Manfred Karge, or even Benno Besson.
>
> (Quoted in Pelechová, *Le Théâtre de Thomas Ostermeier*, p. 84; my transl.)

Max Reinhardt, erstwhile director of the Deutsches Theater, which not only launched Ostermeier's Baracke as an offspring, but much earlier also Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, also founded Germany's first theatre training school, and thereby the roots of today's Ernst-Busch-Theatre Academy (that still maintains its traditional close links to the DT).
13 Waltz and Sandig had set up an equally innovative powerhouse of performing arts at their Sophiensäle, a former trade union hall that had played a significant role in the Berlin workers' movement at the turn of the twentieth century.
14 Thomas Ostermeier, 'Auf der Suche nach dem Trojanischen Pferd: Ein Theater Heute-Gespräch', in *Theater Heute* Yearbook 1998, pp. 24–38, here 24.
15 Other than Bading, these are Jule Böwe, Kay Bartholomäus Schulze and Ostermeier's former fellow-students from the Ernst-Busch-Theatre Academy, Robert Beyer and Mark Waschke, while the other fellow 'Busch'-students Ursina Lardi and Nina Hoss (re-)joined the Schaubühne company more recently.
16 Thomas Bading, personal conversation, May 2015.
17 Boenisch, 'Mission neo(n)realism', p. 344.
18 Jörder, *Backstage*, p. 87.
19 The generation of (essentially West-)Germans who had grown up in the 1970s and 1980s and profited from the post-reunification economic boom got its brand name from the book *Generation Golf* by journalist Florian Illies, himself born in 1971; the title referred to his peers' preferred car, not the sport.
20 Jörder, *Backstage*, pp. 9 and 23.
21 Jörder, *Backstage*, p. 127.
22 I develop this point further in 'Mission neo(n)realism', pp. 353–5.

Chapter 2

Ostermeier writings [1]

Towards a new realism

2.1 THEATRE IN THE AGE OF ITS ACCELERATION (1999)

This text was one of Thomas Ostermeier's first prominent public interventions. It originated from a public lecture given Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art, on 20 May 1999, shortly after the announcement of his appointment as new Artistic Director of Schaubühne Berlin. The text was subsequently published in the German theatre monthly Theater der Zeit *(July 1999), and reprinted in the book* 40 Years Schaubühne, 1962–2002, *(eds Harald Müller and Jürgen Schitthelm, Berlin: Theater der Zeit 2002). It is here published, for the first time, in English. The following slightly abridged and annotated translation is based on the original manuscript. While Thomas Ostermeier would express some points differently today, and while he came up with a number of proposed corrections and amendments to this text he had written more than fifteen years ago, we have eventually decided not to intervene in the text (nor in any other document contained in the three 'Writings' sections) and to present translations of the original versions to retain their documentary character. The text was translated by Peter M. Boenisch and authorised by Thomas Ostermeier.*

I

Every significant move by the innovators in twentieth century theatre has attempted to rejoin the umbilical cord between theatre and reality. Most of the time, they turned to the playwrights' uncorrupted, close observation of everyday realities. Each of their battles was fundamentally fought in the name of a new realism for the stage. Chekhov found in Stanislavsky his (rarely really loved) *metteur en scène* of the misery and the boredom of Russian countryfolk, while Meyerhold discovered his authors in Nikolai Erdman and Vladimir Majakovsky, the latter a relentless chronicler of Byzantine Soviet bureaucracy. Brecht's Epic Theatre, and in particular his *Lehrstücke* (the 'learning-plays', to maintain his own controversial translation into English), already pursued more nuanced aims, for instance to instruct individuals about their

role in the class struggle. Still, we should not overlook in this context that Brecht also celebrated the anarchic, anti-social artist, and that, time and again, he dissected the petty bourgeois gone wild, thereby articulating early on the very German curse that would eventually drive him into exile. Marieluise Fleisser, meanwhile, gave her voice to ordinary people from the Bavarian provinces, and her heirs Franz Xaver Kroetz and Rainer Werner Fassbinder continued this tradition, while further extending the view to include different aspects of the life-worlds of so-called 'little people'.[1]

Today, we need a new realism.

Who makes theatre today? Who is auditioning for our acting schools? The pampered sons and daughters of the middle class. They look to find in 'show business' something their dull, everyday German life denies them. Year after year, more young people sign up to audition. They are prepared to accept any frustrated tutor's kitchen-sink psychology as a true measure of the art of acting. The feedback, 'Oh, I just couldn't believe you', causes psycho-pathological seizures in the poor, insecure youngsters, and leads to long pauses, pregnant with meaning, during which they are trying desperately to feel something. Where are the blithe spirit of enlightenment and the lively musicality, which are fuelled, at their very core, in every great spirit, by pain and anger? Only contradiction, through the search for counterpoints, makes things representable on stage and allows for real emotional experience. But, after all, one should not heap reproaches on the actors. As the final link in the chain, they have to struggle with the distortions of the German system of funded repertory theatre. Following the ultimate triumph of 'directors' theatre' in the 1970s, this system began to revolve exclusively around itself, with productions citing, quoting, and cross-referencing each other. Detaching itself entirely from the world around it, it lost two layers of foundation from under its feet: firstly and primarily, the grounding in reality 'out there', and secondly, its own grounding. This affected the understanding, or rather, the utter misunderstanding of its own role. Theatre became ever more marginalised in German society while its directing titans overestimated themselves on an ever grander, ever more deluded, and ever more excessive scale. They forgot that they had actually been employed to help out those beyond the theatres' walls (the playwrights), making their voices heard for a wider public, and not at all to stand between these two groups.

II

The predominance of 'directors' theatre' led to the exclusion of playwrights from German theatre. To count as a proper theatre director, one had to stage the classics. Today, a critical review can still utterly annihilate a director by accusing him of 'only illustrating the script', an allegation just recently brought up against Peter Zadek after his German premiere of Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*.[2]

No wonder then that younger German playwrights eked out a shadowy existence. Not called up, not called for. A vicious circle: no one wanted to put (young) writers on stage and no one wanted to write for (young) directors and their actors. This state of affairs could only lead to a crisis. With the death of Werner Schwab and Heiner Müller, and following the withdrawal of Botho Strauss and Peter Handke into somewhat altogether different spheres, this crisis became obvious.[3] And as the old titans of German *Regie* began to run out of steam, the crisis has eventually consumed German theatre, with the exception of Frank Castorf and his Volksbühne. What is to be done?

The crisis of contemporary German drama after Heiner Müller and Werner Schwab is a crisis of content, of form, and of the mission to which it might commit itself. This crisis reflects the wider crisis of our society. The wealthy constituency of communism's Western conquerors no longer sets itself the task of recognising and analysing the misery and the dependencies of many within this society, in order to then address and change this situation. It is a crisis of a politics that merely manages its day-to-day business, unless it happens to be waging a war somewhere. The majority of people are now no longer aware of the misery and of the dependencies that exist within the rich, cold world of global neoliberal capitalism. The individualised human confines him- or herself to being a flexible part-time employee, always ready to serve for fear of losing their place in the community of functioning consumers: the only community that still exists. Freedom is only found in your spare time, and happiness means that you are spared the misfortune of being poor, unemployed, or homeless. Community and solidarity no longer matter as an emancipated individual's ideal. The collective, understood as a community of free, self-determined and responsible human beings, however, lives on as a nostalgic yearning, even where it prostitutes itself in the form of 'teamwork' in the service of enhanced capitalist productivity. The discontented can only aim for a radical change of this society.

Since the early days of the Enlightenment, theatre's mission has been to put itself at the service of the liberation of mankind, of creating and sharpening our awareness of the misfortune of, and the limitations posed to individuals and marginalised groups. In the twentieth century, this was particularly the case in a society, like the erstwhile West Germany, which too often believed to have already reached its final destination, with its 'least worst' political system of representational democracy and capitalist economy. This calls for telling the stories of individuals who fail in society, in the world, and in their lives – today, in the here and now. The eternal return of undead classics does not do this mission justice, and their revival rarely succeeds.

At this moment in history, where an analysis of society and its conditions has lost its clarity and its purpose, where, to put it another way, it appears to have become impossible to even think an alternative, theatre can no longer remain the site of the formerly evident ideological controversies of yesteryear. It drowns in self pity, or in