

# CULTUREBOT ARTS + CULTURE + IDEAS

## Notes From Berlin (Part I)

by Andrew Horwitz

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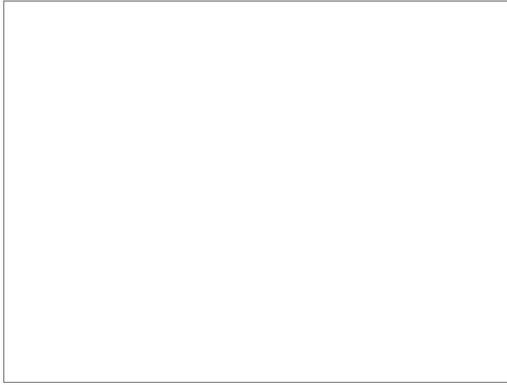
Every time I come out from America I feel as if I am waking from a dream. The plane descends, I disembark, proceed through passport control and out into the air of wherever I am; the fog lifts, the curtains part – choose your metaphor. We are so insulated here: by geography, by media, marketing and materialism, by the overwhelming multitude of consumer choices between virtually indistinguishable products and services; by our luxurious distance from the brutality and violence in the world of which we are largely unaware.

On Saturday May 4, 2013 I landed in Berlin, Germany, for the first time in my life. A generous colleague at the Goethe-Institut in New York, Wenzel Bilger, had recommended me to be included along with 30+ other theater professionals from around the world – producers, curators, writers and academics– for a week long symposium at the 50<sup>th</sup> annual [Theatertreffen](#), curated and produced by [The Berliner Festspiele](#) (more info [here](#).) It was an extraordinary, thought-provoking week of remarkable insights and challenged assumptions. I found myself simultaneously wrestling with three pillars of my identity: curator/critic, American and Jew.

Given the scope of the experience and the conceptual landscape covered, I feel compelled to divide this into two essays, the first a series of critical reflections on theater inspired by the symposium and the plays themselves, the second a series of more personal thoughts inspired by the city of Berlin and the companions with whom I spent a very rigorously scheduled but extremely fulfilling week.

I would like to thank Dr. Rene Rubbeling of the German Consulate General in NYC and Wenzel Bilger of The Goethe-Institut New York for making the trip possible. I am also most pleased to thank Ms. Susanne Traub, Desk Officer for Theater and Dance at the Goethe-Institut's head office in Munich, for organizing and leading the symposia, and the fantastic team from Goethe-Institut Berlin – Boris Abel, Özlem Cosen, Natalija Yefimkina and Moritz Meutzner - for their above-and-beyond efforts to make this trip meaningful, informative and great fun.

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Theater in Germany is [serious business](#). From the ideas and work of the iconic Bertolt Brecht to the more recent innovations of Frank Castorf at the Volksbuhne and the pioneering theoretical and applied work of Hans-Thies Lehmann at the [University of Giessen](#), the scope, reach and global influence of German theater is undeniable. While one may agree or disagree with the particular merits of the Stadttheater acting style (lots of shouting) and the pronounced (if complex and conflicted) chauvinism of German theatre culture, one must certainly admire the ambition, artistic excellence and rigor of the work, the system of support, the commitment to the form and Germany's underlying belief in theater as a space for lofty civic discourse.

Over the course of seven days at Theatertreffen in Berlin I saw as many productions, met directors, dramaturges, critics and curators and began to get a sense of how this system works, how it operates in the culture at large and what it might mean.

Every performance I attended, each in a massive theater, was full. Partially this is due to the role of theater in German public life – more on this in a moment – but I would venture to guess that this is also due in some part to the intentional development of what I have been told is called [Bildungsbürgertum](#) – basically an educated upper middle class. From what I've gathered in my cursory research, Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian philosopher and founder of the University of Berlin, developed a set of educational ideals in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century based on Classicism and the notion of human perfectibility through education. These ideas influenced the cultural discourse on the relationship of the individual to the State and form the underpinning for an ongoing commitment to educational access for the citizens of Germany. [NB: this is anecdotal inference on my part and subject to verification/revision]. So not only does Germany have a commitment to theater as a form, they have invested in building audiences through education.

The centrality of theater to civic life in Germany is supported by a Stadttheater (State Theater) system that nearly defies the comprehension of most non-Germans. [The Federal Republic of Germany](#) consists of sixteen partly sovereign constituent states each of which has at least one State Theater, often more. (Once again, this is based on sketchy notes written under the influence of jet lag, so this may require fact checking). The theaters are amply supported through both state and federal funding and citizens are as invested in the success and reputation of their hometown State Theater as they are in a soccer team, in part because every year they are competing to make it to Theatertreffen in Berlin.

Now fifty years old, Theatertreffen is like the Super Bowl or Final Four of German Language Theater. For the 2013 festival the [jury of critics](#) saw and considered more than 420 productions from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. At their final meeting, the seven jurors chose the ten "[most remarkable](#)" productions of the last season to be presented during the festival in Berlin. The festival attracts people from all over the country and the world to see the state of Germany's State Theater – who is up, who

is down, who is the new talent and what is the condition of the old masters, who are the new actors to watch, who are the new playwrights and what are the new ideas.



*Constanze Becker in Thalheimer's "Medea"*

My colleague Meiyin Wang and I arrived in Berlin on **Saturday**, May 4, a day before the conference officially began. We spent the morning and afternoon wandering the city, warm and leafy green, acclimating to the new environment and makes Vines of me reading advertisements and street signs an a bad German accent. That evening I saw my first Theatertreffen production, [Michael Thalheimer's \*Medea\*](#), produced by [Schauspiel Frankfurt](#) at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele.

I use the possessive when referring to Thalheimer because Germany's system is known as regietheater, or "Director's Theater". The underlying premise of the German State Theater system seems predicated on the idea that the Ancient Greek Classics are the highest form of theatrical aspiration and accomplishment, followed by the German greats like Goethe and Schiller and then, maybe, other Western greats such as Shakespeare, perhaps Chekhov or Ibsen. In this system, a director builds his reputation by his staging of the classics. His task (and it is almost always a "he") is to engage with the Greeks in a new way, to find a distinctive presentational aesthetic that conveys his singular interpretive vision of the grand themes of Classical texts.

Thalheimer's aesthetic is stark and spare. The stage design is minimal, the play opens on a darkly massive empty stage across which a single old woman, Medea's elderly nurse, tramps slowly and deliberately, to convey the story thus far. As I recall she is then joined by another woman, the sole representative of the chorus of Corinthian women, to narrate the unfolding horror. But the true moment of startling awakening is when Constanze Becker enters as Medea. It is quite impossible to convey in words Ms. Becker's charisma, power, authority and presence. With a laser focus of intention supported by incredible physical and emotional intensity, her embodiment of Medea was stunning and moving. She was the perfect complement to Thalheimer's clean visual aesthetic and spare style delivering Peter Krumme's economic, effective translation of Euripides' text with alternately fury, guile and despair. (I actually don't know how it sounded in German, since I don't speak it, but the English surtitles were quite good.)

Thalheimer has reduced the cast to seven actors total, a not unprecedented idea and one we see later in other productions in the festival. But his staging is one of precision and stillness where actors enter with clear physical identities, establish a strong base stance and deliver the text from deep in the diaphragm. To my imagining it refers to an operatic style of delivery that one might associate with classical oratory. It is a welcome rejection of psychological realism and suggest a belief that the total commitment of physical embodiment in service of the text will create the necessary scope of heightened emotion and drama.

This aesthetic clarity allows us to see the grand themes and conflicts as if in relief, unobscured by the reductive psychological conceits of modernity. Perhaps it is because I have been reading David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, that I felt Jason's betrayal of Medea so strongly. Graeber proposes the existence of what he calls "human economies" in the ancient world where societies "held

a radically different conception of debt and social relations, based on the radical incalculability of human life and the constant creation and recreation of social bonds through gifts, marriages and general sociability.” ([Wikipedia](#)) In this construction, Medea's actions in service of Jason create a debt that cannot possibly be repaid. Medea has intentionally ripped herself from her social context and all the cultural attributes that form her status in her native land. She has, for love, enslaved herself to Jason and become subject to his whim. His betrayal, made all the worse by his revealing of himself to be callow and opportunistic, not only eviscerates the core meaning of Medea's existence, but demonstrates that he was not worth her sacrifice to begin with. Thus the inexorable path towards tragedy and destruction.

As the tragic plot is set unstoppably in motion, the entire back wall of the set, with Medea on it as if on a balcony addressing the chorus, moves to the foot of the stage sweeping Jason and the sole chorus member along with it. It is at once completely unsubtle and obvious and incredibly powerful. The rest of the horror unfolds at the foot of the stage with one mournful soliloquy after another recounting the gore and terror Medea has unleashed as she seeks her revenge – or more accurately, some form of justice.

For perhaps the first time I was not only deeply attached to the plot itself, but the entire production actually resonated as metaphor with implications for the relationship of the individual and the state, interpersonal relationships, the complexity of social negotiations, the fragility of individual status and esteem and the perilous role of political and military diplomacy in determining the conditions of everyday life. This richness of meaning and experience was hardly expected.

I have to admit I entered the theater with no small amount of trepidation. Two hours of Greek tragedy in German with no interval, after a transatlantic flight with no sleep, did not seem promising. But even before the Theaterreffen Symposium had officially begun I had already been presented with some of the key themes, ideas and issues that would unfold over the next week.

Later in the week people told me that in this production Thalheimer was recycling his old tricks, tried and true. This may be the case, but for an American theatergoer conditioned to watching mediocre Method actors over-emoting in overstuffed, over-conceptualized, dramaturgically unsound and visually cluttered vanity productions of the Classics, this *Medea* was a welcome salve and promising augur of things to come.



*The Cast of "Murmel Murmel"*

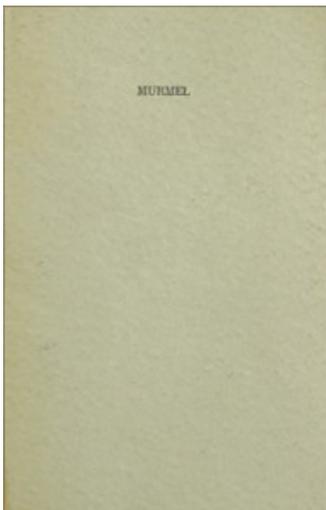
The next day, **Sunday**, we went on a bus tour of the city and were served a lovely luncheon in an artist space in Kreuzberg where we met our companions. I will address this further in Part 2. That evening we made our first trip to the [Volksbühne Berlin](#) to see [Herbert Fritsch's Murmel Murmel](#) (Mumbling).

Once again I walked in knowing very little about the production other than the fact that “murmel” means “marbles” or “mumble” in German and that these were the only words in the entire play. The show starts with a military band conductor entering from the house and taking a position in the orchestra pit. Soon a sole actor enters and the conductor cues him to begin saying “murmel” over and over again in varying rhythms and intonations. He is joined by another actor and, gradually over the course of ten or twenty minutes, they are joined onstage by an actress and another until finally the entire ensemble of eleven is onstage. They are costumed in the trim suits and minidresses of early-60's *Mad Men* kitsch, the set a candy colored cube of curtains moving in slapstick rhythms. The choreography is oversized and hysterical, bordering on camp. Over the course of 80 minutes or so, the ensemble use the word “murmel” as the base of a nonsense language from which to build short, comic scenes of physical theater, playing with status, incongruity and pathos in jump-cut time, like a dadaist [Laugh-In](#).

The first act is set in this farcical Sixties world and explores language, the second act is set in a goofily abstract “performance art” environment reminiscent of the old Saturday Night Live sketch “[Sprockets](#)” meant to satirize dance or perhaps [eurythmics](#), and the third act begins with ensemble members in a line at the foot of the stage playing [melodicas](#) (mostly poorly) and riffing on the idea of music. So I sat through an absurdist physical theater piece performed in three acts over the course of 80 minutes without an interval and with only a single nonsense word repeated over and over again. After about 20 minutes I was no longer amused and the entire project seemed like an exercise in frivolity. It was a funny sketch of an idea, a clever conceit, but certainly insufficient to sustain more than an hour of attention and interest. I left the theater cranky and disappointed.

However, the next morning Mr. Fritsch and his incisively intellectual dramaturge, Ms. Sabrina Zwach, joined us for the symposium to shed light on what we had seen. It is interesting to note how much context can change our appreciation of any given work of art.

What we didn't know going into *Murmel, Murmel* the night before was that Fritsch was actually staging an unstageable “play” by the Fluxus-associated artist [Dieter Roth](#).



*Dieter Roth's "Murmel"*

Published in 1974 as an art object book of concrete poetry, Roth's *Murmel* was proposed as the most boring play imaginable and, from what I gather, was meant to be unstageable. The text is arranged visually on the page as a play script with characters, stage directions, pagination, scenes and acts, but all using the single word “murmel”. Apparently a colleague of Roth's staged the piece sometime in the

80's and Roth so hated the production that he severed the friendship. But (as I understand it) Fritsch met Roth in the 90's, making him a deathbed promise to stage it again. Daunted, Fritsch avoided the project until now, when Zwach finally convinced him to take it on.

Fritsch, a former actor, works more collaboratively than one might expect from a German director, and the early improvisatory creative process with the ensemble led to rather dark and dour outcomes. Finally Fritsch, known for his brightly colored and outlandish visual aesthetic and an entertainment-oriented sensibility, decided that if the project was doomed to fail, it would fail big. In come the teased hair, crazy costumes and swinging music; the slapstick, physical theater and references to Jacques Tati's *Playtime*.

But the piece gets even more interesting when we start to consider the set. Developing the work in an old theater, Fritsch encounters the stage drapery of an earlier era – the teasers and tormentors, legs and borders that frame the stage, sometimes moved to indicate scenic transitions or direct the audience's focus. Both director and scenic designer, Fritsch begins to play with these stage elements until they come together as a character. Fritsch uses the brightly colored panels as both frame for the action and actor. They change shape, move in and out in slapstick cadences, they shrink the playing space to a cramped cube or withdraw completely into the wings, leaving only stark whiteness (as I recall).

*Murmel, Murmel* actually becomes much more interesting when we consider it as a time-based art object rather than a work of theater. As theater it is unsatisfying because the conceptual depth of the physical investigation is so limited. In compare this shallow physicality to the visceral and sometimes terrifying extreme *bouffon* of *The Red Bastard* who begins with familiar tropes of clowning and physical theater and pushes the audience far beyond their comfort zone. As theater *Murmel, Murmel* feels slight and facile, but viewed as a time-based expression of Dieter Roth's text-based art object it becomes a nuanced and thoughtful work of choreography, a tightly wound living clockwork sculpture of light, sound, objects and embodied motion expressed in mutable space over fixed time. We can begin to see Fritsch's re-framing of the theatrical space as calling attention simultaneously to its performativity and its plasticity, his frequent disregard for the fourth wall undermining the tacit assumptions the space implies. The actors, relegated to one word of text, force us to confront the insufficiency of language and narrative to accurately convey meaning, thus turning the entire theater space itself into a white cube, a nonsensical immersive multimedia art installation. Or perhaps not.

Fritsch's profile on the Goethe-Institut website, written by Christine Wahl, says:

*'Ultraconceptualised political theatre that has been mediated and remediated over and over again does not interest me,' he proclaims repeatedly from podiums with an air of grandeur. 'The fundamental driving force of theatre is entertainment, even when it is telling a sad story!'*

And:

*...there are also less successful Fritsch productions, from which it is evident that the director's methodology is not risk-free. This is noticeable when the staging lacks what could be called substructure and – instead of translating the internal deformations of their characters into specific, extreme external actions – the actors seem to rummage through a dressing-up trunk of the protruding tongues, rolling eyes and infantile stumbling that are so common in Fritsch's theatre to pick out and quickly slip into the appropriate mannerism for each scene. When this happens, the audience is not offered a compelling externalisation of internal processes, but standardised comedy routines delivered with total detachment.*

I don't imagine we will ever learn for certain whether *Murmel, Murmel* is a brilliant work of conceptual

art or a slight work of slapstick physical theater. But having been made aware of the starting point for the work made me rethink the experience of seeing it.



A scene from "Jeder Stirbt Fur Sich Allein"

**Monday** evening we went to see Luk Perceval's *Jeder Stirbt Fur Sich Allein*, a staged adaptation of the [Hans Fallada](#) novel *Everyone Dies Alone*, produced by [Hamburg's Thalia Theater](#) and presented at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele. Clocking in at four hours and twenty minutes, *Everyone Dies Alone* set the bar for sheer duration of epic German state theater on this trip, exceeded only by the production of Sebastian Hartmann's *Krieg Und Frieden* that clocked in at a little over five hours. But *Krieg Und Frieden* was worth it (more on that later) while *Everyone Dies Alone* felt like a cruel exercise in obviousness and tedium.

Hans Fallada was a moderately successful German author prior to World War II who remained in the country throughout the Nazi era. While the details of his life seem to be in some dispute, it appears that he was ambivalent about his resistance to the regime, falling in and out of favor with the Nazis at different times and winning praise from master propagandist Joseph Goebbels for his novel *Wolf unter Wölfen* ([Wolf Among Wolves](#)). This interest subsequently led Goebbels to commission a pro-Nazi novel: *Der eiserne Gustav* (*Iron Gustav*).

Fallada subsequently fell out of favor again, was committed to a mental institution and released in the last days of the Nazi regime, destitute, broken and drug addicted. Written over 24 days in a morphine haze, *Every Man Dies Alone* is "an anti-fascist novel based on the true story of a German couple, [Otto and Elise Hampel](#), who were executed for producing and distributing anti-fascist material in Berlin during the war." ([Wikipedia](#)). Fallada died nearly penniless and mostly obscure just days before it was published in 1947, the first anti-Nazi novel to be published in Germany after the war. Well-received and regarded in Germany it was less well known outside the country.

Published in the U.S. by Melville House in 2009 as *Every Man Dies Alone*, Fallada's novel won significant international acclaim. NPR's John Powers [said](#), "...this story of ordinary resistance to Nazism is at once a riveting page turner and a memorable portrait of wartime Berlin..." and Primo Levi is quoted as saying it is "The greatest book ever written about German resistance to the Nazis."

Director Luk Perceval, under the misapprehension that *Every Man Dies Alone* continued to be well-known and much-discussed in the UK and USA, apparently felt that the story had wider resonance and merited a stage interpretation. One can imagine that, given the subject matter and Fallada's complicated history, a German audience would find the material compelling and there is no doubt that the story strikes at the very core conflict of contemporary German identity. From what I understand the production received excellent reviews in the German press, but I was decidedly underwhelmed.

My thoughts on being a Jew visiting Germany for the first time are too many and too complex to be

articulated here briefly; I will meditate more expansively on this in a subsequent essay. But Perceval's *Every Man Dies Alone* disappointed me on two distinct levels, the first and foremost that it was shallow, facile theater.

When I was at Northwestern University in the late 1980's the performance studies program was jokingly called The Department of Reading Out Loud. From [Frank Galati](#) to [Paul Edwards](#) to [Mary Zimmerman](#) (who was a grad student at the time), there was no shortage of staged adaptations of literature. By 2013 the presentational staging of literary works is familiar and well-worn territory, though it remains difficult to do well. Elevator Repair Service achieved a genre-defining moment with [Gatz](#) and nobody, including ERS, has done anything to rival it since.

Perceval's *Every Man Dies Alone* did nothing to improve or innovate the form. Using the most familiar and obvious staging techniques, and working from what seemed to be a turgid and largely unedited script, the play most accurately resembled the experience of reading a homework assignment the night before an exam. If I wanted to read a novel, I would read a novel.

Complete with actors shouting their lines with an inflated sense of self-importance, Perceval – who is not German, but Belgian – delivered a production that reinforced the worst stereotypes of German theater with none of its many merits. The overarching aesthetic impact was one of being clubbed repeatedly over the head with a blunt object. Had the production been in English it would not have been out of place as a thesis project at the graduate directing program of an elite American university or as the pet project of the Artistic Director of a well-funded American regional theater. This is not a compliment.

Having been honored with an invitation to Theatertreffen to see the most remarkable theater from German stages of the past year, having seen Thalheimer's powerful staging of *Medea* and Fritsch's flawed but extravagantly daring experiment *Murmel, Murmel*, I was deeply disappointed. I had been repeatedly informed of Perceval's talent and imagination as a director, but here it was not in evidence.

My second objection to the piece is one that I have about much Nazi-themed art in general. There is no need for me to recapitulate [Arendt](#) and [Adorno](#), but if we think we can convey the scope of the Nazi horror through comprehensible narratives, we are *de facto* reducing the collective hypnosis of an entire nation through psychic terror on a mythological scale to a single person's inadequate moral struggle.

Even within the limits of conventional narrative, *Every Man Dies Alone* is the *opposite* of insightful. It is psychically comforting, even palliative, to see a story of resistance, no matter how futile. Through empathy with the lead characters, this narrative reinforces the desire of the individual spectator to imagine that he would have behaved differently, that he too would have struggled to maintain a shred of moral outrage and resistance in the face of evil. But it is an indulgent fantasy since most people did not, or would not, or could not resist the Nazi government.

It seems to me, now, after this long and bloody 20<sup>th</sup> Century and its international legacy of genocide, the more pressing concern is not to retrospectively reaffirm our belief in individual acts of meaningless resistance but rather to undertake a rigorous examination of complicity. In this extraordinary global moment of political and economic transition, how do we as individuals, and collectively as a society, succumb to group-think? How do we, in the name of homeland security and economic stability, incrementally give up our civil rights and individual liberties until we are living in a fascist sea of amoral brutality and genocide? How are we enticed or compelled to incrementally abandon our humanity and become complicit in acts of barbarity and senseless destruction? Germany inherits a difficult but essential position of responsibility in leading that conversation.

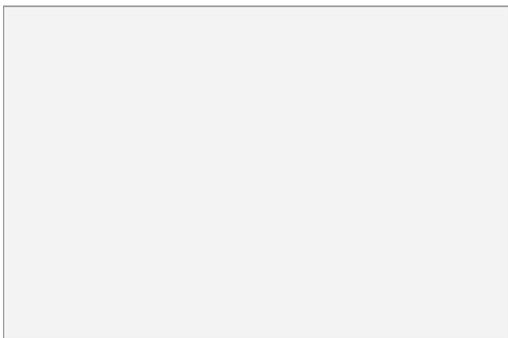
Perceval's production of *Every Man Dies Alone* doesn't tackle these questions, which is not his fault but that of the text. Perceval's fault lies in choosing to stage the work in a manner faithful to the original source without truly investigating the contemporary implications and resonance of the novel. That instinct, and the rather facile notion that love is, somehow, redemptive in the face of fascism and genocide, is as much a capitulation to the quotidian as Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* and in that capitulation failed to live up to the epic demands of the subject and the intellectual rigor of the German stage.



Poster at Brecht-Weigel Memorial House

**Tuesday** morning we had another symposium at the hotel followed by a lovely lunch hosted by The Federal Foreign Office's Division of Interregional Cultural Projects, The Arts. After lunch we split up into two groups. My group took a field trip to the [Brecht-Weigel Memorial](#), informally known as Bertie's House. (Just kidding, it was the home of Bertolt Brecht and his wife Helene Weigel.) After Helene's death in 1953 the home was preserved exactly as she left it, and Brecht's books and belongings are placed in such a way as to suggest he has just stepped out for a walk or a drive. It is quite nice and the tour guide was very energetic and informative.

Having a few hours to spare between our visit to the Brecht-Weigel Memorial and that evening's performance, Meiyin and I took a short tourist-y boat trip on the Spree followed by a visit to the [Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe](#), which was very moving, and a quick visit to the [Brandenburg Gate](#). Sometimes it is nice just to be a tourist.



The cast of "Odipus Stadt" running up the half pipe.

Finally we ended up at The Deutsches Theater Berlin for Stephan Kimmig's *Ödipus Stadt*. If Constanze Becker was the center of Thalheimer's *Medea*, then [Susanne Wolff](#) was the vital, beating heart of Kimmig's *Ödipus Stadt*. The production linked Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* with Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and some selections from Euripides to create a chronological epic

of the downfall of Thebes. The resulting story was, surprisingly, a telling of Creon's reluctant rise to power and subsequent fall, emerging from Oedipus' shadow only to be crushed by the effort of purging Thebes of Oedipus' tainted legacy. It seemed to have special resonance given [the controversy around the burial of Tamerlan Tsarvaev](#) occurring back home.



*Susanne Wolff as Creon in "Oedipus Stadt"*

In Kimmig's production Creon is played by the charismatic Susanne Wolff, her lean, defined musculature swathed in black, her raven tresses slicked severely back, while the other actors are dressed in neutral beiges and earth tones, be-skirted regardless of gender, differentiated only by small accents of costume and accessories. The set was reminiscent of a skateboarder's half pipe as designed by Ikea - blonde wood on an incline, curving up the back wall of a spare, white stage.

By both talent and design Wolff offers an extraordinary performance, bringing the character of Creon into previously unseen clarity. Even as Oedipus proceeds to set his own tragic fate in motion, Creon is present, the embodiment of the Guardian of The State. The King is a Thing, but the State existed before and will exist after. We see Creon forced by circumstances (and then by desire) to move from civil servant to King, and the toll his unleashed ambition takes on his conscience and sense of moral certainty.

Wolff had two particularly striking moments as Creon in *Ödipus Stadt*: first when alone, trying on the crown and imagining himself King. Like Prince Hal at Henry IV's bedside, Creon is weighing both the opportunity and the burden of being King. Wolff, a deft and agile performer, tries on dispositions, demeanors and tones in rapid fire sequence creating a scene that is at once humorous and fraught. Her second extraordinary display of masterful acting was a slow procession across stage bearing the dead body of Creon's son Haemon. This moment brilliantly complicates Wolff's heretofore gender-neutral presentation of Creon, she is at once masculine guardian of order in the *polis* and mother bereft at the loss of her only and much-loved son.

These sorts of complications and nuances run throughout the production and once again, my pre-show trepidation turned to engagement and admiration as the familiar characters of *Ödipus Stadt* set out inexorably on their tragic journey, no less horrible for being familiar.

After Kimmig's *Ödipus Stadt* I began to appreciate the German model. While it is not the *only* model for producing theater of scale, it has its advantages. There have been numerous times over the years in NYC where I have seen a director's original work and then seen them take on a classic only to be more impressed and satisfied with their work on the classic. There seems to be something about approaching the well-known and familiar that is liberating, that allows the director to focus more purely on creating the *gestalt* of the play without getting distracted by irrelevancies, getting mired in debates with living playwrights or arguments with self-important actors. The conceptual structure of Director's theater and its associated aesthetic conditions and frameworks support a level of investigation and

ambition that is unlikely to be supported in any other context.

That being said, the system is not without its flaws. **Wednesday** morning the dramaturge for *Ödipus Stadt*, Mr. John von Düffel, arrived at our symposium to answer our questions. Most of the feedback was positive, but one of our colleagues from Greece pointed out that it was dramaturgically unsound to mix Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides together in one presentation without at least calling attention to it in some way. Each writer represents a different moment in Athenian democracy; their styles, themes and resonance were distinctly different than each other.

This raises more questions than can be addressed here, both in terms of this specific production and the larger issues about the aesthetic assumptions of German State Theater. The clarity and stability of the structures supporting the State Theater system allow directors to undertake ambitious projects that one might not imagine realizing elsewhere. At the same time, the thinking that undergirds this structure reinforces an adherence to order, a rigidity of process and fixity of construct that resists innovation. To the outside observer the State Theater system contains a pervasive but unrecognized blindness to the nuances of cultural difference and all that implies, thus inhibiting a rigorous interrogation of context. But more on that in the next essay.



*Participants in Rimini Protokoll's "Remote Berlin"*

Late afternoon Wednesday our group was invited to participate in [Rimini Protokoll's \*Remote Berlin\*](#), presented by the Hebbel am Ufer ([HAU](#)) Theater. *Remote Berlin* is the local iteration of Rimini Protokoll's ongoing project, *Remote X*, a site-responsive audio walking tour that is adapted to each city where it is presented. Each person is given a headset and receiver and the group sets out guided by a disembodied voice. I'm not sure how it works technically, but the group has a "minder" who seemed to have some kind of transmitter in her backpack. If one began to lose the signal, moving closer to the "minder" strengthened it. It was unclear whether this person was also controlling the pace and sequence of playback or just serving as a kind of radio tower, but the narrative soundscape itself did seem to be somewhat adaptive.

The concept was that this disembodied voice is an entity created by the technology of Artificial Intelligence and the narration served to frame the experience of every day life by calling attention to our interaction with, and dependence on, machines.

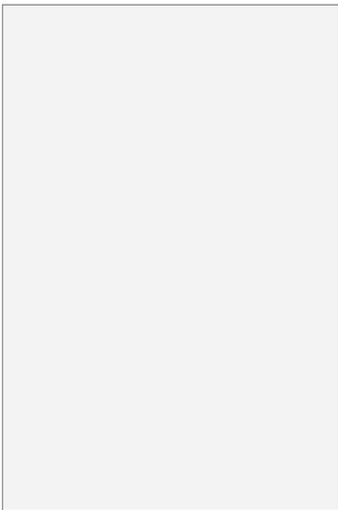
The creator, [Stefan Kaegi](#), used a computer-generated language program that constructed the sentences from phonemes taken from multiple sources. The narrative played with ideas of group-think and behavior, swarms, flocks and hordes, the omnipresence of technology, the varieties of experience in the urban landscape and moments of dissonance between interiority and exteriority.

Immediately upon completing the experience I was quite taken with it. Audio tours have been

something of a trend the past few years and I enjoyed *Remote Berlin's* writing, the light humor and the casually profound insights into the cityscape. But upon further reflection, though I still am favorably inclined towards the piece, I began to feel that it was perhaps less insightful than it could have been. I had a very striking personal moment when we stopped at a crosswalk, heeding the instructions of the "Walk/Don't Walk" sign where I was encouraged to reflect on our tacit agreement to abide by these signs. Kaegi's text, as I recall, framed this interaction as man/machine, but I thought about it differently, about the delicate balance between willing participation in the unspoken social contracts that underpin law and order versus the submission to the unmitigated power of the State that is manifest in every street sign giving orders and reinforcing normative behavior. Where, I thought, is the line between responsible citizenship and passive complicity?

Even later I wondered what *Remote X* would be like in different cities, how precisely it would be tailored to the history, culture and aesthetics of a specific city. Remote Berlin did not feel particularly tailored to Berlin except in the most surface-y ways. But Berlin, Tokyo, Paris, New York, Moscow, London, Sarajevo – every city in the world has a profoundly different history and street life, a different feel, a different set of conditions. What is visible and invisible, what is the nature of presence and absence in the urban environment? Which cities destroy their physical history and which preserve it? For that matter, the movement of population between city and countryside has fluctuated over time and the meaning and purpose of the city has been subject to change. How does this audio tour draw us into this kind of fundamental reconsideration of place? I found myself retrospectively wishing the narrative had gone deeper and been more challenging. That being said, the narrative as I experienced it did provoke these thoughts in me, so perhaps that is what it intended to do all along.

After completing *Remote Berlin* a few of us raced over to the [Schaubühne](#) to see Romeo Castellucci's *Hyperion: Letters of a Terrorist*, a new work presented as part of the Festival Internationale Neue Dramatik (or, [F.I.N.D.](#)) After seeing [On The Concept of the Face...](#) at Montclair earlier this year I wasn't quite sure I was in the mood for Castellucci, but I found myself quite engaged and appreciative of this new work.



*An early stage image from Castellucci's "Hyperion"*

Castellucci takes his inspiration from the revered German Romantic poet [Friedrich Hölderlin's](#) epistolary novel *Hyperion*. The novel is the story of Hyperion, a Greek who joins an uprising against foreign occupiers (perhaps inspired by the [Orlov Revolt of 1770](#)). From what I read in the program copy, the brutality and senselessness of the war and the subsequent failure of society to live up to his revolutionary ideals results in Hyperion's disillusionment and bitterness. Here Hyperion may be seen

as a stand-in for Hölderlin himself who, along with Hegel and Schelling, his classmates at Tübingen Seminary, were set ideologically adrift when the French Revolution descended into the Reign of Terror, ultimately to be superseded by Napoleon. Hegel and Schelling went on to develop the school of thought known as German Idealism. And that's about as much as I have been able to figure out thus far.

Going in to *Hyperion: Letters of a Terrorist* I knew almost none of the information cited above beyond the barest outlines and found myself struggling to make sense of it, at first. But when I stopped *trying* to find meaning, the meaning began to reveal itself.

The play opens on a beautifully detailed set of a chic modern apartment. A man picks up his briefcase, puts on a hat and overcoat and leaves the apartment, turning off the lights and firmly closing the door behind him. The audience sits and waits for what must be five minutes when we hear a scuffling and then shouting followed by a tactical assault by a S.W.A.T team of German *polizei*. They batter down the door, leading in bomb sniffing dogs and proceed to destroy the apartment, emptying all the drawers, ripping apart the furniture in search of incriminating evidence. The police move down into the audience and shout at the audience to leave, emptying the theater and forcing all the theatergoers into the street where we wait, without direction, for twenty minutes.

It was fascinating to see how many audience members were already hostile to the play at this point, how angry they were at this disruption of their expectations and how closed they were to the possibility of what might follow. You could hear it – in German, English and a few other languages – the audience was divided between people who were intrigued and looking forward to the next part and those who were, for all intents and purposes, disengaged and alienated, who would return to the theater only grudgingly.

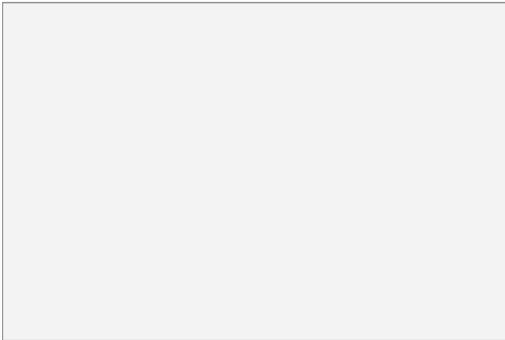
After about twenty minutes we were admitted back into the theater. The stage now looked like a more familiar Castellucci set: a huge white cube with small white objects center stage – a bed, a nightstand, a pedestal. Slides are projected that tell the story of an old injured dog with cataracts that has been cast for tonight's performance. The dog is led onstage and cued to react (looking in different directions, barking) from offstage as nouns appear in large projections on the three walls of the white cube. Eventually the dog is led offstage and a young girl in street clothes led to the stage by a woman, possibly her mother. The girl removes her outer garments until she is clad only in a classical white robe, wearing a garland of gold. She strikes a pose on the white pedestal and proceeds to intone sections of the Hölderlin text in a hushed whisper, heavily miked. She strikes one iconic pose after another, running through the physical vocabulary of Classical statuary.

After a few minutes the young girl is joined onstage by a young woman who eventually replaces the young girl, appearing naked and painted white as she picks up the text. After a certain time she steps down from the pedestal, removes her clothing, cuts her hair and puts on a new costume – a white shirt and loose grey pants, abstract but reminiscent of what one might imagine to be the uniform of a Romantic poet. The young woman is replaced by a middle aged woman and she, in turn, is replaced by a more mature woman, the remarkable [Angela Winkler](#).



*Angela Winkler in Castellucci's "Hyperion" © Arno Declair*

As I recall, Winkler concludes her speech and thus the mortal life of the individual poet. I didn't take notes but I recall that it was at this point there was a transition where the original apartment set was nudged in from the wings, framing the center white cube but never fully intruding. We see the *polizei* on the periphery but they never fully enter the white space. And then time passes – literally. Words projected on the back wall convey the passing of time – 10 minutes, 10 years, a thousand years, millenia, eons, ages and ages until we find ourselves back again in a new white space, smaller than before, closer to the foot of the stage and arrayed differently. [Eva Meckbach](#) takes the stage with an ocular microscope and a vibrator, continuing the recitation of Hölderlin's text in front of a massive projection.



*Odaliske mit Kamera am Auge und Vibrator am Fuss: Eva Meckbach © Arno Declair*

Consistent with the Utopian revolutionary ideals associated with Romanticism, Hölderlin's text laments the roughness of human behavior, its betrayal of the purity of primal nature and the corruption by the world of the unsullied artistic spirit. I don't have access to Castellucci's script but I found [a copy of Hyperion online](#) and culled a section that Castellucci excerpted for his production:

*So I arrived among the Germans. I did not demand much and was prepared to find even less. I came there humbly, like homeless, blind Oedipus to the gates of Athens, where the sacred grove received him; and fair souls came to greet him—*

*How different my experience!*

*Barbarians from the remotest past, whom industry and science and even religion have made yet more barbarous, profoundly incapable of any divine emotion, spoiled to the core for the delights of the sacred Graces, offensive to every well-conditioned soul through the whole range from pretense to pettiness, hollow and tuneless, like the shards of a discarded pot—such, my Bellarmin! were my comforters.*

*It is a hard saying, and yet I speak it because it is the truth: I can think of no people more at odds with themselves than the Germans. You see artisans, but no men, thinkers, but no men, priests, but no men, masters and servants, but no men, minors and adults, but no men—is this not like a battlefield on which hacked-off hands and arms and every other member are scattered about, while the lifeblood flows from them to vanish in the sand?*

*Everyone follows his own trade, you will tell me, and I say the same. Qnly, he must follow it with his whole soul, must not stifle every power in him that does not precisely accord with his official designation, must not, with this niggardly anxiety, literally and hypocritically be only what he is called; let him be what he is, earnestly, lovingly, then a spirit jives in all that he does; and if he is forced into an occupation in which the spirit may not live, let him cast it off with scorn and learn to plow! But your Germans choose not to go beyond the barest necessities, which is the reason why there is so much botched work among them and so little that is free, that gives any genuine pleasure. Yet that could be overlooked, were not such men of necessity insensitive to what is beautiful in life, did not the curse of godforsaken unnature everywhere lie upon such a people,—*

The dense and formal but extremely passionate writing, provocatively edited to goad the audience, exists in stark contrast to Castellucci's measured, painterly, almost serene presentational aesthetic. Yet both text and form operate in similar ways. The content overtly challenges the audiences by using the words of a revered, iconic German poet to accuse the audience of being pretentious, petty, insensitive barbarians while the form implicitly rejects the declamatory acting style and, mostly, adherence to classical narratives. The tension between Castellucci's deliberate pacing and the volatile text reinforces the tension he is attempting to create in the audience, which is a wider frame for the tension represented onstage between the "real" world of the apartment and the abstracted poetic world of the ideal.

Castellucci seems to intend that the white cube containing first the dog, then a series of women as Classical statues and the embodied poet, represent idealism and purity of thought; the simple clarity of the naive revolutionary. The aforementioned tension suggests that this Romantic impulse is at once noble and fatally flawed. Castellucci's tableaux unfold at a stately pace employing a filmic visual language to suggest reflective interiority. By partially reintroducing the destroyed apartment into the white space during a transitional moment in the work, he establishes a tension between the ideal and real, he suggests the threat of the unyielding idealist turned ideologue and poses a question about the relationship of the visionary artist to the visionary ideologue. Is the poetic impulse related to the terroristic impulse? Are they alternate manifestations of the same radical desire to change the world? Are they both, in some way, tied to an ageless human desire to escape mere temporality and mortality by linking oneself to the eternal? And when the state crushes the terrorist is it, by extension, crushing the idealist?

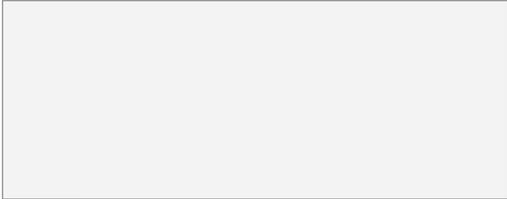
I found the production at once challenging and deeply gratifying. On an aesthetic level I was intrigued, as with *Murmel Murmel*, by the possibility of applying a more visual arts-based critical framework to the piece. Of late I have been thinking more deeply about the construction and operation of the performance object as dynamic embodiment expressed in fixed space over time, and in that context *Hyperion: Letters of a Terrorist* was a thought-provoking and intricate model. (See Aleida Assmann's essay "[How Long Is the Present? Time Structures in the Theater](#)") and my earlier,

preliminary essay on the subject, "[Some Thoughts on Attention, Language and Demand](#)").

On a cultural level I was curious to learn more about [Holderlin as a writer and his role in German history and ideas](#). I also wanted to try to understand how this particular production might read to a wider German audience, given what appears to be a longstanding cultural fixation on self-definition that seems to exist in a state of perpetual conflict between pride in a national character predicated on rigor, ideals and industriousness and the ever-present recent history of those positive qualities taken to their negative, tragic and brutal extremes. But like every experience of my visit to Berlin, each question led to new questions and deeper complexity. I have no doubt that these questions and the pursuit of answers will persist in perpetuity.

My favorable impressions of *Hyperion: Letters of a Terrorist* were not universally shared among my colleagues, and though I cannot read German to gauge the local reaction, I did find [a rather dismissive review in the Financial Times of London](#), and so will infer that I may well have held the minority opinion.

I spent Thursday morning at my leisure, wandering the neighborhood around the hotel and taking in the wonders of the historic and colossal luxury department store [KaDeWe](#) located directly across from the majestic Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn Station... that just happens to have been the embarkation point to some of the most notorious concentration camps of the Nazi regime.



*KaDeWe (left), Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn Station (right)*

That's what it's like to be in Berlin – it fucks with your head. And I haven't yet written about all the amazing, intense, thoughtful colleagues I was talking to every day at the symposium. That'll come later.

I have to admit, at this point of the trip my brain was just about overloaded – so many big ideas, so many big productions, so many thoughts, feelings, experiences – I started to wonder how I was ever going to sort through all of it. And it was in this mindset that I steeled myself for Sebastian Hartmann's *Krieg und Frieden*, presented at the [Volksbühne](#) in a production of the [Centraltheater Leipzig](#) and [Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen](#).



*Napoleon in "Krieg und Frieden"*

I knew nothing about the production at all and was prepared for a struggle. Even as I entered the theater I was bracing myself for a heroic act of endurance. At five hours, ten minutes long with two intervals, *Krieg und Frieden* trumped *Everyone Dies Alone* by almost an hour and at 1500 pages under the best of circumstances, Tolstoy trumped Fallada by about 1000 pages. I can be excused for never having read Fallada, but *War and Peace* is a classic, one I certainly should have read by now, one that I imagined all German students reading in high school. There was no chance that I was going to be able to follow this epic staging of a Russian masterpiece, performed in German and translated into English supertitles. After the faithful staged representation and declamatory acting of *Everyone Dies Alone*, I thought I knew what to expect from *War and Peace*. I suppose I should have read the website more closely, which describes the production thusly:

*Sebastian Hartmann and his cast find an intelligent and original answer to the challenge of Tolstoy's epic work of world literature....*

*This adaptation from Leipzig follows neither the rampant trend for Reader's Digest renditions nor the discursive method of breaking up material in the style of Frank Castorf. Instead of presenting linear plots, it is structured by motifs, condensing recurrent topoi into essential scenes with strong images, and it is only logical that they end up dealing with the ultimate issues. "I", "Death" or "Faith" are appropriately complex titles of some units of meaning from this five-hour performance, which takes place on a highly symbolic, tilting and lifting stage platform.....*



*the big, mechanical platform*

I started to pay attention before the play even started, when director Hartmann walked onstage to announce that one of the actresses had injured herself the previous evening and was being played by an understudy. He asked us to be supportive of her as she undertook the role. This was curious, I wondered if it was part of the performance or not. It was not, but it may as well have been. As I recall – and I admit my memory is a bit fuzzy – the lights went down and composer/musician Sascha Ring (aka Apparat) took the stage with his band. (See the Pitchfork review of the soundtrack [here](#).) At the same time the cast, clad in classic Russian costume, took their places in a row of seats below the apron of the stage, facing the audience from the orchestra pit. A familiar gimmick, but beautifully staged. They are the audience, watching the real audience while watching the musicians play moody, atmospheric art rock as if at a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian opera. It shouldn't have worked, but somehow it did.

The first scene rapidly gave way to a series of seemingly disconnected fragments of text and movement, little snippets of story that suggested Tolstoy while never cohering. Unsure what to expect I kept waiting for the performance to resolve into a narrative and found myself frustrated. Shouting and overacting, philosophizing, heavy-handed symbolism. I was about to give up but towards the end of the first act the massive mechanical lift that was the centerpiece of the set shifted position – yet again – with the downstage left corner raised like the prow of a ship moving confidently into the unknown, the only certainty being tragedy and death. One of the older actors struck a noble pose and spoke a speech in stately, rigorous tones that seemed to suggest noble resignation to his fate as the captain of a doomed ship. I don't recall the exact text but I remember being very moved by the power of the stage image alone, impressed by the tonal shift from sound and fury to hushed, ominous, resigned dignity.

I came back after the interval and gave myself over to the production. I realized with some relief that there was not going to be a narrative and I could stop looking. There was not going to be a story, or characters in the traditional sense. It was as if the first act dispensed with all the stereotypical surface tropes of Epic German State theater and dove in under the hood saying, “Now that we've got that out of the way, let's see what this baby can really do!”



*the massive video screens*

Over the course of the next four hours I marveled at this astonishing accomplishment. The sheer scale of the production is enough to do humble the most ambitious American director: a custom-designed, fully dynamic, mechanical platform/lift that is bigger than most stages, huge epic hi-tech video and lighting design, blisteringly loud hi-definition audio, luxurious costumes, rock star musicians, famous actresses. The only thing even comparable to *Krieg und Frieden's* staging is maybe LePage's colossal set for *Das Rheingold* at The Met. But Wagner is a known quantity and a guaranteed hit, and from what I hear LePage stuck pretty closely to the script on that one. *Krieg und Frieden* is a whole new

thing and Hartmann is a relative newcomer. I doubt anyone in the States would sink this much into a guaranteed hit jukebox musical on Broadway, much less a five-hour imagistic multimedia montage remix riff on Tolstoy.

But more even than the technical accomplishment was the theatrical ambition and its realization. Hartmann literally used every single theatrical device you could possibly imagine: direct address, breaking the fourth wall, meta-commentary, audience interaction, you name it. And it shouldn't have worked but somehow it did. More than once I found myself thinking this thing was just going to go completely off the rails into self-indulgent disaster, but somehow Hartmann's sheer willingness to push the form to the edge of complete failure – like pushing an automobile's engine beyond what it has been tested to withstand – made this epic ride a total thrill. And his stellar team of actors, musicians, designers and technicians managed to more than deliver what was needed.

*Krieg und Frieden* takes Tolstoy's proposition to create an iconic work of art so epic as to sufficiently engage with the biggest, most perpetually perplexing questions and seemingly intractable problems of human existence and meets the challenge. Using Tolstoy's narrative and characters as raw material, Hartmann constructs an elaborate, interlocking multimedia remix fever dream of a production. Imagine being bed-ridden with the flu with only a copy of *War and Peace*, a CD by The National and a television set stuck on a channel that only shows David Lynch films. Imagine you are [robotripping](#) and fitfully shifting between sleep and wake, unable to tell what is real and what is fiction; a hallucination of an epic battle in St. Petersburg blends into a werewolf manually pleasuring a female midget Napoleon.

The final act begins with an extended absurd quasi-Symbolist comic scene with bizarrely costumed characters representing ideas clowning around, it becomes “meta” as it falls apart and they acknowledge that it isn't working. They seem to be referencing both the scene itself and the entire premise of Tolstoy's endeavor to reconcile these issues of war and peace through dialectics. As I recall it's at this point that Heike Makatsch emerges from the ensemble and delivers a monologue in direct address that, basically, explains all the fundamental ideas under the play. It is not unlike the concluding monologue in Brecht's *Good Person of Szechwan* but, instead of concluding the play, another actor takes over and asks the audience what they think, and the ensemble talks with the audience for a few minutes.



*Heike Makatsch*

The whole thing is crazy and over the top and seems destined to fail but somehow it works. To continue the car metaphor, it is as if they gave Hartmann the keys to the Batmobile and, knowing he

might not get to drive it again, he wanted to use every possible device available to him. It should be Frankenstein's monster, a shambling patchwork disaster, but somehow the show cohered astonishingly well. The only disappointment was a mostly unnecessary and overly-long concluding video sequence. The visual effect of the projected video in the re-darkened theater was interesting for a few minutes but rapidly became boring. And the production quality of the animation was so far below the aesthetic values of the rest of the show that it looked amateurish in comparison, like an afterthought to be added on, but the budget was already spent elsewhere.

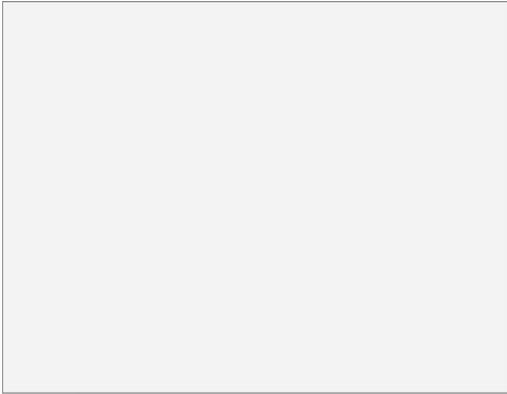
Still, *Krieg und Frieden* was an incredible accomplishment and in relation to other large scale work that I have seen, I would put this on the "greatest hits" shelf alongside Mnouchkine's *Les Éphémères*, Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz* and even *Einstein On The Beach*. I'm curious to see what Hartmann can do next.



*A scene from "Die Strasse. Die Stadt. Der Überfall"*

Friday morning we had a great seminar with Mr. Hartmann and a conversation with [Johan Simons](#), director and commissioner of Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Straße. Die Stadt. Der Überfall* (*The City. The Street. The Attack*) produced by the [Münchner Kammerspiele](#) and presented at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele. Simons, probably best known in the States as co-founder of Theatergroep Hollandia, was invited to head the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2010. He comes from outside the German system and, in fact, built much of his work over the years outside the theater altogether, beginning with the itinerant company Wespetheater in the 1970's and including his site-based work with Hollandia. He brings an anti-authoritarian sensibility to his theater practice that seems to contrast starkly with the structures in which he is currently operating. His approach to acting and actors, to text and performance seem pointedly more Dutch than German and it makes for an interesting aesthetic tension that is, in some ways, evident in *Die Straße. Die Stadt. Der Überfall*.

In the seminar we learned that Munich has a very fancy shopping boulevard known as [Maximilianstraße](#), where all the luxury retailers are located. According to [Wikipedia](#) shops such as [Dolce & Gabbana](#), [Versace](#), [Louis Vuitton](#), [Dior](#), [Chanel](#), [Escada](#), [Hugo Boss](#), [Gucci](#), [Gianfranco Ferré](#) and [Bulgari](#) have increasingly ousted the traditional shops, art galleries and restaurants. Maximilianstraße is where people park their Lamborghinis, Ferraris and other luxury cars as they shop, creating a luxury "see and be seen" bubble. This, we learned, has created some tension in Munich because the introduction of the luxury shops has brought an influx of extremely wealthy Arabs from the oil-producing states. This cultural tension was, perhaps, encapsulated by the 2005 murder of the extravagant Munich fashion designer [Rudolph Moshammer](#) by then-25 year-old [Iraqi asylum seeker](#) Herisch Ali Abdullah in a dispute over compensation for sexual services provided.



*Rudolph Moshammer with Daisy*

Nobel-prize winning writer [Elfriede Jelinek](#) lives in Munich and Simons approached her to write a play about Maximilianstraße, inspired by the Moshammer murder. The thing about Jelinek's plays is that her method is to write a block of text with almost nothing else and then turn it over to the theater maker to do what they will to stage it. It is totally radical and amazing and also completely dangerous. You can actually read the text of *Die Straße. Die Stadt. Der Überfall* [here](#) if you're interested. Its in German.

I was already excited to see a work of Jelinek's and, having learned about Simons' history and background, his artistic perspective and the premise of the production, I was really looking forward to the show. Unfortunately there was one major obstacles to my appreciation of the work: it was in German. Jelinek is an extraordinarily gifted writer and even with the best translation one can only hope to glean a sense of what she is doing. Here, in the theater, trying to read hastily translated supertitles, it was difficult to really get a grasp on what was happening with the text. Simon's staging was visually compelling, the actors were exceptional and the overall effect of watching the work without comprehending the text was interesting if not satisfying. But my persistent inability to understand the text only reinforced how much I was missing.

Secondly, at its root, the show is about the shallowness of materialism and fashion. For some reason the shallowness of fashion resists all critique and pretty much everything I've ever seen that tried to offer a substantial, thoughtful indictment of fashion has failed. I'm not sure why. Maybe it is just too easy a target, too obvious in its engagement with consumerism to support interrogation. The only truly amazing and insightful comment on fashion I can recall ever seeing was Meryl Streep's amazing monologue about "blue" in *The Devil Wears Prada*:



As a result I found myself frustrated with the entire experience. I very much wanted to like it, but couldn't find a way in. I hope at some point in the future to have the opportunity to see other work by Simons and a really excellent production of Jelinek. But this wasn't that opportunity.

After the show I was going to head back to the hotel as I had an early flight back to NYC on Saturday, but I was cajoled into going to a party with a bunch of young theater people in [Kreuzberg](#). It ended up being quite a late night and I shared a cab back to the hotel with my colleague Sinan Al-Azzawi from the Iraqi National Theater in Baghdad, staying up almost until morning talking about our art and our lives and, of course, the costs of war that America started and pulled out of, even as it continues to tear his country apart.

My trip to Berlin concluded as it began, with a profound personal encounter with a different culture, wrestling to connect despite our fraught, violent, complicated histories.

But that personal story will have to wait until the next essay. Stay tuned.