

## Research Opportunities in East Berlin

Yvonne Shafer

In recent months the atmosphere in East Berlin has been thrilling, and for the visitor in December and January the events in the streets almost overshadowed those in the theatre. There was such an interaction of theatre and politics, in fact, that it was often difficult to separate them. Early in the fall actors at the Deutsches Theatre held public discussions following performances which always turned to political questions. These discussions and readings of previously censored works were very important in the subsequent involvement of these actor and performers from the Gorki Theater, the Berliner Ensemble, and the Volksbühne in organizing the mass demonstration in Alexanderplatz on November 4--the largest in the history of the country. Several actors were among those speakers addressing the crowd and urging greater freedom and democracy. At the present time demonstrations continue in Alexanderplatz and extraordinary theatrical presentations, lectures, and staged readings reflect the dramatic social changes taking place.

For the past two or three years this change was foreshadowed in the productions at the theatres in East Berlin. Audiences from both East and West Berlin experienced a new wave of plays, some previously banned, some new, and many controversial. Now, more than ever, East Berlin offers the theatre scholar a wide variety of theatre experiences and many opportunities for theatre research. Twelve theatres operating in repertory provide an incredible range of plays from the newest East German writers to classics, musicals, opera, and pantomime. The International Theatre Institute,

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museums, and archives contain information and art regarding recent European theatre history and the theatre of the past.

The recent dramatic events in East Berlin have made it easier for the traveler to visit the city, but in recent years it has been relatively easy in any event. I took a number 8 bus from Tegel airport in West Berlin to the subway and went directly to Friederichstrasse Bahnhof. There I stood in a line about twenty minutes and got a visa to enter. I had made reservations at the Hotel Metropol which is one block from the Bahnhof and around the corner from the United States Embassy. This is an elegant hotel with all amenities and a gracious and helpful staff. Its chief advantage is that it is only from five to ten minutes walk from the ITI and nine theaters. Subways and buses from the Bahnhof provide easy, extremely inexpensive connections to other theatres and museums. I found Ulf Keyn and the staff of the ITI very helpful in getting tickets, but it is simple to go to the theatres and buy them. For a charge the hotel will arrange theatre tickets as well. Extremely popular plays such as *Danton's Death* and Heiner Müller's *The Lohndrucker* are usually sold out and have a long waiting line, but tickets for most plays are available. By Western standards the plays are extremely cheap because of subsidies: an orchestra seat in the elegant opera house is only about \$14 and prices in the theatres range from about \$2 to \$8. It is easy for Westerners to ignore the positive aspects of this society and forget that the government has put enormous amounts of money into the arts.

In my three visits in the past year I was able to see many plays I had been teaching and had never seen performed. There are so many plays that even after three weeks I was unable to see all that I wanted. One evening at the Deutsches Theater I had to choose between a notable production of *Ghosts* with a superb cast and Claudel's *Break of Noon* with an equally marvelous cast headed by the Intendant, Dieter Mann. The Deutsches Theatre has about twenty plays in repertory in the Schauspielhaus and about the same number in the Kammerspiele. Employed here are about 470 people including staff, five resident directors, and 70 actors.

Approaching this famous theatre I stop by the sculptures of Otto Brahm and Max Reinhardt to look at the impressive entrance. Most plays in the city begin at 7:00 and it is pleasant to get a sandwich plate and a drink in the elegant refreshment rooms of the theatres. The two theatres here, like the other theatres in East Berlin, have been beautifully restored after extensive damage in World War II. Some of the plays in repertory here include Mrozek's *Fox Quartet*, Dario Fo's *Open Relationship*, Calderón's *Life is a Dream*, O'Casey's *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*, Schiller's *Maria Stuart*, and a number of plays by contemporary German playwrights. Some of these are new productions of previously suppressed plays or premieres of new plays. In rehearsal I saw a new work called *Berlin* (in which the action of the play is set in front of a large cutout of the Brandenburg Gate) and a hilarious, but alarming, production of *The Bald Soprano*.

The focus of the Gorki Theatre is largely on plays with social comment and the theatre has had an impressive number of world premieres of important plays. The repertory currently includes Gorki's *Barbarians*, Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Genet's *The Maids*, and Volker Braun's *Transit Europa*. An exquisite production of *The Three Sisters* (a perfect balance of comedy and pathos) is in the repertory along with Volker Braun's highly dramatic *Society in Transition*. This begins with characters from *The Three Sisters* emerging from plastic wrapping and saying the final lines from Chekhov's play. They then move into a contemporary setting and play out a "comedy" which is a paraphrase of *The Three Sisters*. The same outstanding actors performed in both plays.

One of the most emotional and theatrically effective presentations in January was a reading of a formerly banned play by the Russian playwright Michail Shatrow called *Further..Further..Further*. The presence of the author was an indication of the new openness in East Germany. Actresses from the Gorki Theater and other theatres presented a staged reading which was followed by an emotionally charged discussion. Albert Hetterle, the Intendant of the Gorki Theater, told me he plans to bring that play into the repertory, perhaps retaining the idea of an all-female cast playing such figures as Stalin, Trotzki, and Rosa Luxembourg. The director stated he had come upon this idea because of the large role actresses played in achieving social change this year.

The famous Volksbühne Theatre was the setting for the Shatrow matinee, and presents a wide range of plays from Neil Simon's *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers* to Molière's *The Miser*. I found Bulgakov's 1923 play *Hundeherz* one of the most exciting productions in the city. The action took place on several levels and the use of sound and projections was highly effective. A marvelous cast was headed by the doctor who wants to create the "*Neue Mensch*" by putting the brain of a man into a dog's body. A fine young actor played both the good-natured dog and the obnoxious new man resulting from the operation. Another play based on Bulgakov's novel *Der Meister and Margarita* draws audiences to the theatre as well.

Even before the wall was opened, it might be noted, many people came to the theatres from West Berlin. A charming sixty-three year old West Berlin woman told me that she regularly came to the theatres in East Berlin because she thought the acting and directing was better than that in West Berlin. Naturally the Berliner Ensemble continues to draw in large crowds. People come to the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm to see perennial favorites such as *The Threepenny Opera* (which was first performed in the theatre in 1928) as well as new works including Volker Braun's *The Death of Lenin* and Heiner Müller's *Germania Death in Berlin*. The most impressive production I saw was a thoroughly decadent presentation of Brecht's *Baal* with Ekkehard Schall (Brecht's son-in-law) as the revolting, yet fascinating, central figure. Without any so-called gimmicks which often clutter productions of Brecht's plays in

America, the violence, decay, and perversion of this play was communicated to the audience. Several people in front of me left in the middle of the first act--obviously distressed and appalled, but certainly not bored.

The figure of Brecht seated on a bench outside the theatre is appropriately large-scale as the influence of Brecht in this city is great. In addition to seeing Brecht's plays, the theatre scholar has the opportunity to explore the facilities at the Brecht Center.

My visit to the Brecht Center began with some purchases at the Brecht Bookstore which "offers a wide selection of the latest Brecht literature and records as well as general theatre literature, new socialist writing, posters and brochures." This store is half a block away from the Dorotheenstadtische Cemetary in which Brecht and Weigel are buried and which their last home overlooked. Herr Werner Hecht is the director of the Brecht Center which is housed in a former apartment house in front of Brecht's home. Herr Hecht had the idea of establishing a center for the study of Brecht's work and in recent years has been a moving force in the development of various programs in the center. Each month there are films, videos, and speakers in the Center with a variety of very interesting presentations. Six times a year Herr Hecht edits an information brochure, the Brecht *Notate*. Other publications include *Brecht Studies* and *Theatre Documents*. For information or subscriptions write to the Center at Chausseestrasse 125, East Berlin 1040.

In addition to the weekly activities at the Center, there is an annual Brecht Conference (Brecht-Tage) which began in 1980. This draws a large group of international scholars to East Berlin. Naturally the scholars come in part because they want to use the Bertolt Brecht Archives and the Helene Weigel Archives.

The importance of the materials here has long been recognized by the government: in 1971 the Council of Ministers "declared that the conservation, maintenance and safeguarding of Bertolt Brecht's published and unpublished works and Helene Weigel's literary and artistic legacy are the responsibility of the German Democratic Republic, and appointed the Academy of Arts custodians of the Bertolt Brecht Archives." Of course this is the largest collection of Brecht material in the world. Drafts of plays, letters, financial records, and other materials are available for study. As there is a limited amount of space and only six staff members, it is important to write ahead to arrange to work in the center.

No advance arrangements are necessary to visit the Brecht House. The apartment in which the Brechts lived from 1953 on is naturally of great interest. The house, with its books, art furniture, and personal belongings are preserved as they were in the Brechts' lifetimes. Weigel's kitchen is of interest because she was a notable cook, and one can dine in the evenings in the Brecht Cellar Restaurant on meals prepared from her recipes. The Cellar is a gathering place for artists and intellectuals and the art and memorabilia add interest for the visitor.

Another important museum in East Berlin is the Märkisches Museum. This is a short ride from the center of the city and is housed in a building overlooking the meandering Spree River. There are two areas of interest for the theatre scholar in this museum. The first is a permanent display of material about German theatre from 1740 to 1933. Although the display fills only four rooms, there is a rich array of etchings, paintings, letters, scene designs, models, and photographs. In the early section there are marvelous etchings of Schinkel's design for Gluck's *Alceste*, costume plates for *The Magic Flute*, etchings from 1769 for *Minna von Barnhelm*, and other rare materials. Moving into the modern section there is a model for the *Merchant of Venice* designed by Ernst Stern and Emil Orlik for Reinhardt's production at the Deutsches Theater in 1905. The model revolves to show the four settings in Venice complete with canals and gondolas. A few more examples of the materials on hand are photos of Reinhardt in a 1900 production of *The Power of Darkness*, Reinhardt's *The Lower Depths*, Josef Kainz as Molière, Gerhart Hauptmann with Otto Brahm, Ibsen's *Ghosts* and *Nora*, a promptbook for *Macbeth*, and a poster for *An Enemy of the People*. Designs by Caspar Neher, Ernst Stern, and Oscar Strnad cover the walls. A glass case displays puppets from the famous Berlin children's theatres. Emil Pirchan is well represented here with designs for Jessner productions and a model of the famous *Richard III*. Students of theatre architecture will enjoy the photographs, designs, and models of the Volksbühne, the Komische Oper and other theatres. I was much amused by a detailed caricature of the Freie Bühne showing passersby holding their noses against the stench. Naturally Brecht is well represented here in the modern section: Peter Lorre in *Mann ist Mann* and many other photos, programs, and posters of his plays. Perhaps the most moving part of this fascinating collection is the material regarding anti-fascist theatre productions and the letters and photos of Ernst Toller. In addition to the public exhibit are archives in the museum which are administered by Dr. Ruth Freydanck. She is the author of the handsome, beautifully illustrated book, *The History of Theatre in Berlin*. She has also written a useful and attractive small book, *Berliner Theater* which describes the museum collection and reproduces some of the materials. This is available for about \$3 in the museum.

Naturally the collection of materials at the ITI is fascinating. I felt as I looked around at the many journals and books that I would like to settle in for a long period of research. There are theatre journals from many European countries and beautifully illustrated journals about productions in the many theatres in the DDR. Records, posters, newspapers, and other materials reflect the theatre of the twentieth century. The staff is helpful and accommodating so that work in the ITI is very pleasant for the visiting scholar.

A few moments walk down Französischestrasse from the ITI is a major costume collection. I felt very fortunate to be able to interview the notable costume designer Christine Stromberg, see some of her designs, and tour the vast space in which costumes are stored and constructed, and archives dealing

with costuming in Germany are preserved. Frau Stromberg is the Costume Director for the Staatsoper, and designs costumes for several theatres. Her often daring and innovative costumes can be seen in productions at the Deutsches Theater and the Berliner Ensemble. In 1955 she was hired as a designer by Brecht, and has since contributed to the theatre in Germany and abroad. Many readers will remember her costumes for the Anthony Hopkins *King Lear* at the National Theatre in London. I asked her if students could come to study with her and she replied that presently two students from Scandinavia and London are working with her. The archives of her work are available for study in the buildings and numerous costume plates and other materials are available for study elsewhere in the city.

Numbers are a little stupefying: the recent opening of the opera *Count Igor* involved 650 costumes! Within the eight story building are housed over 200,000 costumes for men alone! There are 120 workers constructing clothing and shoes in this and the workshop next door. Frau Stromberg informed me that there is a great tradition associated with this costume collection, and I realized that fully when I saw hand embroidered silk and wool costumes from the nineteenth century as well as *all* of the costumes from the Berliner Ensemble from 1949 on. Many of these are no longer used as new productions have been designed, and I asked if they were ever available for general view. She informed me that not infrequently the costumes are put on display as part of exhibitions in the several museums in the city. In addition to the offices and rooms for storage and construction there are rooms in which students learn tailoring and other skills. Naturally, all of this is made possible by government subsidies.

Another aspect of the government's interest in the arts is the subsidies for books. Because of the interest in providing books for the population at large, books are very inexpensive. In the bookstore on the Alexanderplatz *Bild und Szene: Bühnen, Bilder der DDR 1978-1986*, with full page color plates, cost about \$12. A detailed and fully illustrated history of the Deutsches Theater cost about \$7. In the Brecht Bookstore I bought the two volume Werner Mittenzwei 1988 biography of Brecht (1512 page) for about \$22. The Henschelverlag (Oranienburgerstrasse 67) is the major publishing house for art and theatre books. Herr Horst Wandrey was most helpful and one can write to him for catalogues of available publications. These range from scholarly works such as Rudiger Bernhardt's *Henrik Ibsen und die Deutschen* to the latest plays performed in the theatres.

The resources of East Berlin are enormous, and a theatre scholar would find it impossible to explore all of them in a short visit. In addition to the theatres there are productions at the Hochschule für Schauspielkunst Berlin and the Sektion Theaterwissenschaft at Humbolt University. Professor Joachim Fiebach (a noted author on theatre and editor of Heiner Müller's plays) in the latter institution was extremely helpful to me in obtaining information. When I lectured his class I found his students very lively and interested in learning

about the American theatre. In addition to the museums and collections listed above are the Academy of Arts, the famous Pergamon Museum with its treasures from Greece, and the National Library. A long visit to this city provides many opportunities for research in the theatres themselves and in the numerous collections.

Last June an East German citizen told me the people had hopes that in seven or eight years the wall might be gone. Now, astonishingly, the country is open and there is a thrill of freedom which was shared by people from all over the world at the Brandenburg Gate on New Year's Eve. The new freedom and excitement make the theatre in this highly theatrical city more attractive than ever.

*University of Colorado, Boulder*

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