

## East Berlin Theatre Diary

### Leanore Lieblein

In the summer of 1989 I began to prepare a visit to Germany to gather research material on the contribution of dramaturgs to the production of plays. By the time I went to East Berlin, I was living in Paris and the wall had fallen. The following entries are excerpts from notes on my trip.

**August 9, 1989.** At my request Maik Hamburger, a playwright, translator, dramaturg, and director at the Deutsches Theater, has described in a letter their 1989-90 season. I am especially interested in the mise-en-scene of texts that already have a stage history, and Heiner Muller is directing *Hamlet* (in his own translation) for performance together with his *Hamletmaschine*. I suggest I come in late September or early October when rehearsals are just beginning, and again after February to see the plays in production.

**October 7, 1989.** I have been following the newspapers closely, but have heard nothing from Maik Hamburger. I write briefly: "This must be a difficult period. . . . Will it still be possible for me to visit the Deutsches Theater, or shall I try to make alternative plans?"

**October 16, 1989.** A card: "Of course you can come and visit the Deutsches Theater and probably look in on the *Hamlet* production. I have talked to the dramaturg Alexander Weigel about this. I half expected you to turn up already, but it was quite good you did not come yet, as rehearsals have been somewhat sporadic."

**November 6, 1989.** I confirm my intention to come and propose the week of January 15, 1990. I call the GDR Embassy, but cannot get past a recorded message to determine whether I will be a "tourist" or an "official guest," since I seem to fit into neither category. However I learn that visas must be applied for, along with hotel reservations, through one of two specified Paris travel agents.

**November 9, 1989.** The Berlin Wall has fallen.

**December 3, 1989.** An all day "colloque" in Paris on "La tragedie grecque est-elle finie?" with the participation of directors, dramaturgs, translators,

classicists, historians, and psychoanalysts. Heiner Muller, announced as one of the participants, has not come. [Muller is widely known and performed in France. There have been issues of *Didascalies* (December, 1983), *Connnaissance de la RDA* (June, 1988), and *Theatre/Public* (Number 55, 1984 and Number 87, 1989) devoted to his work, productions of *Philoctete* (1970, 1984), *Mauser* and *Hamlet-Machine* (1979), *La Mission* (1982, 1984), and *Quartett* (1984, 1988). His 1988 Deutsches Theater production of his first play *Der Lohndrucker* (1956, published 1957, performed 1958), was presented in German at the Odeon (Theatre de l'Europe) in May, 1989. The current Paris season has seen productions of *Quartett* and *La Mission (Der Auftrag: The Task)*.

**December 6, 1989.** I haven't heard from Maik Hamburger, but after two days of unavailable circuits and busy lines, I reach him by phone. At first he takes me for yet another journalist. As an English-speaking founding member of New Forum, he has been in great demand for interviews. Artists and intellectuals have been active in the opposition of the recent months, theatre artists among them. Playwrights Christoph Hein and Heiner Muller are among those who addressed the massive demonstration in Berlin Alexanderplatz on November 4. In the absence of a free press, theatre in both its subsidized and guerrilla versions, has "had to act the part the media should play."<sup>1</sup> A special Berlin supplement of the newspaper *Liberation* describes a theatre evening in a remote suburban church in solidarity with seventeen opposition members arrested in Leipzig on September 11:

A blond Valkyrie, outrageously rouged, has burst through the black curtain stretched across the altar. . . . "The moon is over the Brandenburg Gate," intones the Valkyrie wryly. "In a society where everything is forbidden, you can't do anything; in a society where everything is permitted, you can do what's allowed." On church benches, the audience cracks up. With a violent gesture, the Valkyrie pulls out a copy of *Neues Deutschland*, the organ of the communist party, and makes a paper airplane that she sends gliding across the nave. "That's what happens to visa requests in the hands of a bureaucrat." (No. 4, December 1989, p.40; my translation.)

Maik Hamburger has confirmed my visit with Dieter Mann, the Deutsches Theater's *Intendant*, and suggests that if I run into trouble I call Elvira Hauschild, the English-speaking press representative and Dieter Mann's personal assistant.

**January 9, 1990.** I collect my visa at the travel agency and pick up a brochure on "theme" trips: "Discover the GDR through your favorite pastime": theatre of course, along with music, wildlife, photography, sports, etc.

**January 13, 1990 (Saturday).** The destination of my train is Moscow, and my couchette companions are doctors and nurses (*Medecins du monde*) who

will go as far as Warsaw on a *mission sanitaire* to bring medicines and medical supplies to pediatric hospitals across Poland.

**January 14, 1990 (Sunday).** Berlin. One and a half hours to get through passport control, one half hour to change money, and a one hour wait for a taxi to take me a few blocks.

But once I get to the hotel, a nice surprise. There is a letter waiting from Dr. Manfred Linke, director of the Federal Republic of Germany Centre of the ITI, to whom I have written of my plan to spend the following weekend in West Berlin. He has arranged tickets for *The Cherry Orchard* on Friday night at the Schaubuhne am Lehniner Platz and for *Ein Fest fur Boris* by Thomas Bernhard at the Freie Volksbuhne on Saturday night.

The hotel is a Christian hospice. It is spartan--very clean and overheated, with cardboard toilet paper, and very hospitable. It was the evangelical churches who sheltered the resistance movement while it was still unable to declare itself.

After dinner I check out the theatre listings posted in the hotel lobby. What a feast. Counting opera, theatre for children, and second stages, there are fourteen theatres. I focus on the schedule of the five main houses: Berliner Ensemble, Deutsches Theater, Kammerspiele (which is administered by the Deutsches Theater), Maxim Gorki Theater, and Volksbuhne. Each of them in the nine-day period from January 13 - 21 is offering between five and seven different plays.

Their programs do not seem as different as their mandates imply. Of the state theatres, the Deutsches Theater, proud of the heritage of Otto Brahm and Max Reinhardt and a history that goes back more than a hundred years, has a double commitment to both the classical and the ground-breaking. The Berliner Ensemble is dedicated to the tradition of Brecht--his plays and those of his predecessors and successors. But it too also seeks out and produces new work. The municipally sponsored Volksbuhne, which originated in a movement to bring theatre to the "people," remains tied to a broadbased audience. Yet in the repertoires of all three one can find a mix of German-language plays (including Hauptmann, Lessing, and Schiller, Barlach, Bernhard, von Horvath, and Plenzdorf), translations from the Russian (such as Nikolai Erdman, Turgenev, Bulgakov) and Polish (Mrozek), and a host of Western classical and modern plays including Moliere, Claudel, Ibsen, Pirandello, Dario Fo, Manuel Puig, and Neil Simon.

The schedule of the Maxim Gorki Theater, also a municipal theatre, serves as an example. The Gorki was founded in 1952 to introduce Russian and Eastern bloc playwriting to a German audience after the interruption of cultural relations during the Nazi period. It has particularly become associated with the performance of contemporary political plays. However, programmed for the month of January are plays by Lessing, Gorki, and Michail Schatrow, two plays by Volker Braun, one of them an adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* which is also being performed, plays by Roger Vitrac and Peter Shaffer,

adaptations of Beaumarchais and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and a play by Ulrich Plenzdorf, who at the moment seems to be the most performed contemporary East German playwright. Also in the repertory are plays by Alexander Galin, Garcia Lorca, Athol Fugard, and Jean Genet.

Contrary to my expectation after Paris, the theatres are not closed on Sunday evening. And the last performance for the week of Heiner Müller's *Germania Tod in Berlin* has just started at 7:00 p.m. I dash the two blocks to the Berliner Ensemble, and am quietly admitted to a front row side seat by an usher.

*Germania* was written between 1956 and 1971 and premiered in Munich in 1978. The Berliner Ensemble production, directed by Fritz Marquardt (1989), is its first in the GDR. In a string of tableaux, the play presents a mordant view of recent German history beginning with the aftermath of World War I and including Stalingrad, Hitler's bunker, the founding of the German Democratic Republic in 1949, the death of Stalin, and the massive strike of 1953. The episodes are not arranged chronologically and draw on a variety of theatrical styles. In one scene the King of Prussia and the Miller of Potsdam are played by clowns; in another Napoleon, Caesar, and the *Nibelungen* participate in cannibalism on the battlefield. There are film clips, long narrative passages, mime, and song. In the scene of grotesquely oversized characters called "The Holy Family," Goebbels, assisted by the midwife Germania, gives birth to a monster fathered by a Hitler who drinks gasoline, and is visited by the Magi in the form of France, Britain, and the United States. Alternating with such scenes, however, are those which focus on the experience of the "people" (soldiers, bricklayers, prostitutes) in relation to the rulers and ideologies that fail them. These scenes, though more "realistic," are "distaniciated" in the Brechtian sense. Some of the Munich reviews, which someone shows me, objected to what was considered the reductiveness of the communist propaganda, but the writing in fact discourages the oversimplification of any ostensible message in such scenes as the meeting between the communist and fascist brothers in prison or the dying bricklayer's vision of Rosa Luxemburg at the end. The GDR of January 1990 is no longer that of the 1950's or the 1970's, but that seems to make the historical perspective more poignant and relevant than ever.

The context of the performance itself is a comment on German history and German theatre history. With brutal simplicity, the enormous raked playing space sits starkly on top of bloody ramparts that thrust their way into the baroque auditorium (displacing some four to six rows of seats) above the eye level of at least the front rows of spectators. Outside, in the upstairs lobby of the theatre, is a display of photos of Berlin, November 1989--my first glimpse of the way in which the theatres here publicly identify themselves with the recent events.

The audience is mixed, middle-aged and dressed for the theatre near the front, mostly young people as one goes further back. Even by East German

standards tickets are inexpensive. I learn later that increasing numbers of spectators come over from West Berlin; however, since they cannot order by telephone from there, they pay up to four times as much for a ticket booked through an agent in advance.

9:50 p.m. Home from the theatre. I call Hamburger only to learn that he is rehearsing a play in Zurich and not due back until February! However his daughter is able to tell me that rehearsals at the Deutsches Theater start at 10:00 a.m.

**January 15, 1990 (Monday).** 7:00 a.m. I hear what sounds like an army of marching feet. From the window I see hordes of people hurrying to work from the S-bahn station down the street. There is a smell of burning coal in the wet air.

I arrive at the stage entrance of the Deutsches Theater at 9:00 a.m. Elvira Hauschild is sick; Alexander Weigel is not there yet. On a bulletin board is an announcement calling for food, clothes, and books for Romania. I offer to return in half an hour. Outside I see posters announcing new Deutsches Theater productions: *Nicht runte nicht fern* by Plenzdorf, and Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*.

When I get back I am told Weigel is on his way to the rehearsal hall, so I go over. I get there before he does, but am invited to wait.

Weigel's English is less certain and more self-conscious than I had been led to believe. He doesn't recall having spoken with Hamburger about me. However he consults with Muller, and though it is not normally permitted, because I have come from so far (Canada) I am allowed to stay. As soon as the actress playing Gertrude--this seems to be a "young" *Hamlet*; I mistake her for Ophelia, and the other characters also seem strikingly young--returns in costume, everyone enters the rehearsal room.

As in the rehearsals I watched in Paris, there is no sign of warmups or formal preparation for the work. Also as in Paris, rehearsals even early on take place in a very close approximation of the final versions of set, costumes, and props.

They are rehearsing the closet scene in *Hamlet*. On the floor is a huge double mattress covered with a white satin cloth.

The first run-through of the scene seems so authoritative, that I have the impression that the main lines of interpretation, style, even blocking have already been laid down. In fact I discover from subsequent work that the actors are encouraged to explore and experiment freely, and that what I am seeing may be far from what emerges in production.

The luxury of experimentation is a by-product of the repertory system. With over a dozen plays actively in the repertoire, and scheduling announced a relatively short time in advance, the opening of a new production can easily be postponed if necessary, as in the case of this *Hamlet* and *Hamletmachine*, originally planned for February but put off until March.

Muller, who in interviews can be impatient and acerbic, appears to have enormous respect for the actors. He rarely interrupts a scene, and almost never raises his voice, but leaves his table to speak quietly on stage with the actors about what they have done and might do. According to Alexander Weigel,<sup>2</sup> in spite of the elaborate dramaturgical work that precedes any production, Muller deliberately tries to enter rehearsals without preconceptions in order to leave himself open to what the actors might come up with.

For me the most interesting, if disconcerting, feature of the work is the lack of eye contact between actors (or characters). I noticed some of this in the production of *Germania* last night as well. Actors tend to face--or turn profiles to--the audience rather than each other when they speak. But the lines are not delivered *to* the audience. Nor are they introspective. And unlike Brechtian performance, the actor does not seem to put quotation marks around the character's lines.

Alexander Weigel maintains that this is a feature of early rehearsals that will become less conspicuous as the work advances, but because it is part of a fundamental conception of the relationship of speech to gesture, it will not totally disappear. For Muller the first challenge is to understand the text and make it clear. Thus the actors are urged at the beginning to speak slowly, even inexpressively, and gradually to find the *gestus* that will convey the sense of the text. The result, which is decidedly not "realistic," explicitly runs counter to what Weigel calls the "TV aesthetic," and for Muller is one of the strengths of theatre. The *gestus* is articulated in time and space, and movement through the stage space is carefully choreographed.

The issue of time is central to Muller's conception of the play. It was decided from the beginning that this would not be a "short" *Hamlet*. Taken together with *Hamletmachine*, the total playing time will be seven to eight hours, and although this was initially foreseen as two evenings (*Hamlet* from the beginning to the departure for England on the first night, and *Hamletmachine* followed by the return from England to the end of *Hamlet* on the second night), it is now being thought of as a single performance with a long intermission, though given that public transportation stops running early, the logistics of making it possible for the East Berlin audience to attend are still to be worked out.

At 11:30 the actors take a half-hour break and, to my surprise, resume the next scene (IV.i.) on the same set. The stage direction in the New Penguin edition I've brought along ends III.iv. with "Exeunt Hamlet, tugging in Polonius, and the Queen," and begins the new scene with "Enter the King and Queen with Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern"; every production I've ever seen changes the location. However, when I check the textual notes I discover that in fact neither the "good" Q2 nor the Folio makes provision for the Queen to exit. And according to the Riverside edition, "Q2-4, F1, Q1 indicate no scene or act break here, the Queen remaining on stage to meet Claudius." Weigel says that early on he and Muller talked about this scene,

once Hamlet becomes a murderer and a hunted man, as a turning point. The bed as the focal point of the changing relations between Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius is still an idea in the process of being tested.

On the bed are played scenes between Hamlet and Gertrude, Gertrude and Claudius, Hamlet and Claudius (Some of these scenes are tried in other ways as well). After Hamlet exits Gertrude pulls herself together by making the bed (or in one version while flailing hysterically and ineffectually at the cover while wailing). Claudius in anger tears the bed apart at one point, kicking its irregularly shaped styrofoam components in various directions. The level of eroticism, violence, and possible incest is still being explored.

Domestic violence runs very close to the surface. One time Claudius smears blood on the face of Gertrude. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern dump the corpse of Polonius on the bed in two stuffed halves.

The rehearsal ends around 2:15. Most of the rest of the week will be devoted to technical aspects or preparing for the work on *Hamletmachine* that is yet to begin. It has been assumed that Muller's play, which speaks of such things as the privileged position of artists in society, addresses the experience of the actors more directly and will require less preparation time.

It is nearly 4:00 p.m. when I make it over to the Berliner Ensemble where things are mostly closed up, since there is no performance on Monday. I want to find Professor Joachim Tenschert, the Chefdramaturg to whom I've written, but he is not around, and Frau Bartel who had answered one of my letters to Tenschert is no longer working there. I am directed instead to the office of the Archivist Frau Schlosser.

I knock on the open door and interrupt a conversation. Tenschert will be difficult to see without an appointment. I leave copies of our correspondence; Schlosser is surprised not to have seen the letter I wrote a month ago stating the dates of my visit.

The conversation I interrupted continues in German. There is discussion of changes in the GDR and their impact, and especially fear that events are moving too fast. Frau Schlosser's daughter, who is a filmmaker, expresses concern that the quality of artistic production will be compromised, and gives the example of the too hasty and sloppy editing of previously censored film footage in order to take advantage of the current thaw. She is also concerned about the erasure of memory that seems to come with the current euphoria. "Don't forget," adds Schlosser, "communism was an answer to fascism."

As soon as I can, I go to the Maxim Gorki Theater to try to get a ticket to a play by East German playwright Volker Braun. I do get a seat, near the back, and wander through the foyer picking up flyers describing over twenty plays in the current repertory.

In the main lobby is a poster-sized blowup of a statement on theatre letterhead dated November 21, 1989 and titled *Erklärung*:

The members of the Gorki Theater support the fight of the Czech people for reform and democracy in their country. After the brutal suppression and arrests of recent days, theatre people of Prague have gone on strike. Theatre is a place for discussion, for the meeting of people. We affirm our solidarity with our Czech colleagues. It was with the help of GDR armed forces in 1968 that the movement towards democratic socialism was interrupted. On that occasion we left the people of the CSSR alone. Contrary to our previous silence, we affirm our solidarity with the Czech people today. (Abridged; my rough translation.)

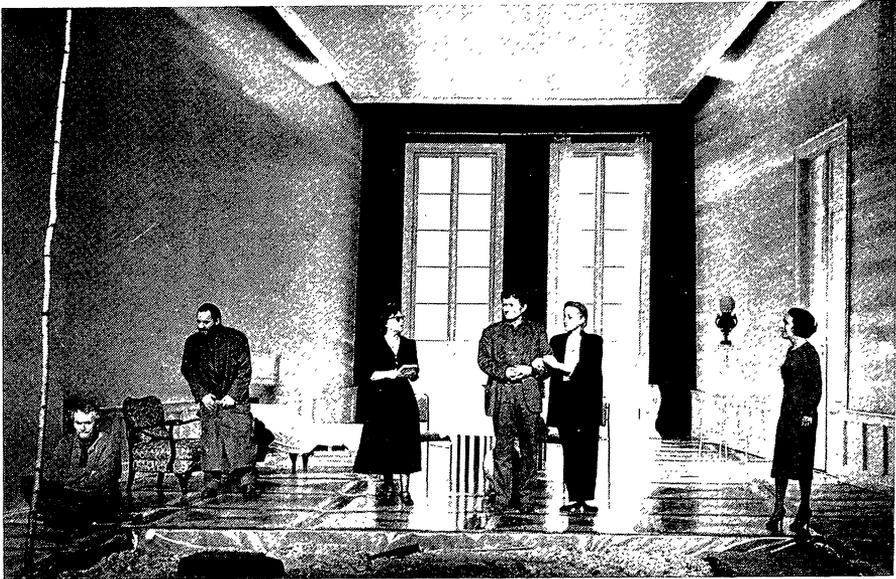
Copies have been sent to various Czech theatre and government groups and to all Berlin theatres.

Also in the lobby in the form of posters is a reprint from *Der Morgen* No 254 (28/29 October 1989), of an interview with Volker Braun that originally appeared in the Hungarian daily newspaper *Nepszabasag*. Braun, who has been associated with the Berliner Ensemble and the Deutsches Theater, currently has two plays in the performance at the Gorki Theater, *Der Übergangsgesellschaft*, which I will see tonight, and *Transit Europa*. In the interview Braun affirms the enormous significance for the GDR of the opening of Hungary's borders and speculates on the future of socialism in East Germany.

There are two other items of interest in the lobby. The first is a ballot box. The Gorki is conducting a poll of its audience. Current starting time, widespread in East Berlin, is 7:00 p.m. Respondents are asked to choose between 7:00, 7:30, and 8:00. Such a simple matter, but it implies changing social patterns. The second is the monthly program for the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in West Berlin, something that was surely not possible even a few months ago. Clearly audiences are being wooed from both directions.

*Die Übergangsgesellschaft* (1982) is a rewriting of *Three Sisters*. This first GDR production (1988) is directed by Thomas Langhoff. Langhoff also directed the production of Chekhov's play that has been in the repertory for some nine or more years, and the recent production is replete with allusions to the earlier one. For example the sets, turned at ninety degrees, quote each other, and the same actors play the corresponding roles in both productions. There are even parallels in the blocking of certain scenes, as one can see from adjacent photos of the two productions in the program. The stability of subsidized companies with actors on "permanent contract"<sup>3</sup> creates shared institutional and artistic memories. And such explicit citation is meaningful for audiences when they can see both plays performed in a given month.

Braun's play is set in the present, and frames the poetic realism of Chekhov with a self-conscious theatricality. His Olga, Mascha, Irina, and their



*Die Übergangsgesellschaft.* Maxim Gorki Theater, directed by Thomas Langhoff. Volker Braun Szenenfoto

brother Walter are the children not of a general, but of a communist who survived the Nazi period in exile in Moscow, hence the place of their childhood, their dreams, and their hopes. The tedium of their lives, realistically portrayed, blends with the lyricism of their nostalgia, ironically figured in the delicate garden scene which opens the play, in which the characters emerge from plastic coverings. Near the end of the play the dreariness breaks out into a violent fantasy.

**January 16, 1990 (Tuesday).** By the time I return to the Berliner Ensemble an interview in English with dramaturg Jorg Mihan has been arranged. Before we begin to talk, Tenschert comes in to introduce himself, jovially waving my letter that has just arrived. He explains that they take their important mail across the border to post; it can sometimes mean the difference between four weeks to Paris (as with my letter) and four days. He assures me that Mihan will be helpful, invites me to use the archives, and promises to meet with me, however briefly, before my departure.

Mihan is fascinating. We talk for over an hour and a half, focusing mostly on his work as a dramaturg. I had assumed that dramaturgical practice in Germany, where it is institutionalized and has a long tradition, would display less flexibility and spontaneity than I had encountered elsewhere. In Mihan's description it seems very much a function of the personality of the individual dramaturg and his/her relationship with an individual director. Also, given the massive dramaturgical work that precedes the rehearsal period, there seems

to be a subtle process of self-effacement at work to make room for the actors' freedom.

Inevitably we touch on the involvement of the theatres in recent events, and the implications of those events for the future of theatre in East Germany. Will the intrusion of capitalism threaten the secure working conditions that has enabled theatre here to thrive? According to Mihan, "The question of surviving is of how to keep and develop your own profile in accordance with the audience, who must need you." Will the audience need persist, and what form will it take? The Berliner Ensemble, more than other Berlin theatres, attracts a tourist audience as well. "But this cannot be the solution of the problem, to make only a theatre for tourists. I don't think we will become like the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford. . . . I would like much better to follow the Brechtian ambitions in making a theatre which isn't unnecessary in the society in which it exists." However the Brechtian model cannot always apply. For example, "Brecht said the didactic plays should be the way of making theatre in the future. Well, by now we don't have this future."

Until now theatre has been practiced in spite of, or in resistance to, censorship, with "a certain amount of tactical thoughts on how to get this play through or not," and "a good deal of self-censorship as well." All of a sudden, "We don't have any censorship at all, and we are completely responsible for ourselves." "Do you welcome that?" I ask. "Yes of course, yes of course. I haven't noticed any differences by now in the way we are making theatre, but I hope we will notice it in the near future."

In the evening I go to see Austrian playwright Thomas Bernhard's *Der Theatermacher* (1983; first GDR production directed by Peter Schroth and Peter Kleinert) at the Kammerspiele. I have encountered Bernhard's work in France, where there seems to be much interest, especially since his recent death. Jean-Pierre Vincent's production of *Le Faiseur de theatre* (1988) is widely spoken of, and *Avant la retraite (Vor dem Ruhestand)* is about to open there at the Theatre National de la Colline.

The program photos of Max Reinhardt before 1905 (intermittently Director of the Deutsches Theater between 1905 and 1933) and Wolfgang Heinz (Intendant of the Deutsches Theater 1963-1970) suggest sources of inspiration for costume, gesture, even facial expression. The play calls for a *tour de force* of acting which Kurt Bove as Bruscon, the actor-manager who tyrannizes over his "company" (family), delivers. Wife, son, and daughter, in delicately understated performances, are the grotesques he has made them. As in the case of *Die Übergangsgesellschaft* last night, the depth of the stage is used to tunnel-like effect. The impossible, stylized dilapidation of the village inn-turned-theatre set for the production contrasts with the Georgian elegance of the Kammerspiele and the broad internationalism of the exhibition of posters in the lounge. Also in the lounge flyers announce a trade union demonstration ("for the renewal of trade unions on the basis of a sovereign GDR"), and the program of the Hebbel Theater in West Berlin.

January 17, 1990 (Wednesday). 10:00 a.m. Berliner Ensemble Archives. I have chosen to look at, as an example of Mihan's dramaturgical work, the *Inszenierung* of *Days of the Commune*, directed by Carlos Medina in 1983. Frau Schlosser helpfully brings me as well material on the 1962 production directed by Manfred Wekwerth and Joachim Tenschert for purposes of comparison. The 1983 production, set in contemporary Chile, appears to have been controversial. The archival material will enable me to explore the similarities and differences in the dramaturgy and productions of 1962 and 1983, the tension in 1983 between what appears to be classical dramaturgical procedure and a non-traditional (for the Berliner Ensemble) *mise-en-scene*, and the relationship of the work of Medina and Mihan to Brecht's own comments on epic theatre.

The Berliner Ensemble archives are rich and detailed, but resources are limited. Documents must be removed to be photocopied, and I am urged to handle old binders with care, since they will be difficult to replace if broken.

After lunch I walk to the Brecht house only to find that it is closed on Wednesday afternoons. The Brecht-Zentrum bookstore next door, however, is due to open at 3.00 p.m., so I join the lineup outside. I am in search of volume 4 of *Theaterarbeit in der DDR*, a publication of the Brecht-Zentrum that focuses on the 1980 production of *The Exception and the Rule* directed by Medina with dramaturgy by Mihan. Most of the others are there for the three-volume paperback translation of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, a current "bestseller" in the RDA, and by the time I leave, it has sold out.

I arrive in good time for my 4:00 p.m. interview with dramaturg Manfred Mockel at the Gorki Theater. He has brought information on *Die Übergangsgesellschaft* as well as the production photos and a copy of the Volker Braun interview I requested. His training and function seem much more traditional than Mihan's, but he too stresses the importance of the dramaturg's working relationship with a director ("*Wenn man sich kennt, ist das leichter*"). He also speaks highly of the Intendant Albert Hetterle who, as a theatre artist himself, has a close working relationship with the performers. For Mockel, the most exciting feature of the recent events is the possibility of contact with artists from abroad.

The Gorki Theatre has abandoned its subscription program. Last year, with 96.8% attendance, it was impossible for non-subscribers to see the plays.

I walk down Unter den Linden to the Brandenburg Gate. The light peters out and the street gets deserted as I go past a string of closed and dark Eastern bloc embassies, but I realize that since my arrival I have seen no clochards or beggars and have in no way been harrassed. Even the road underpasses are safe, and free from the smell of urine so common in Paris.

Unlike 1986, the other time I was here, I can walk right up to and under the "gate." The wall--with a low fence to keep people about three meters away--has some holes in it. Also grafitti such as "1990--year of freedom,"

"Bobby Sands still lives," and "motherfucker." To one side, a gap in the wall is a pedestrian border crossing. All it takes is a German passport or identity card (Foreigners must use more official entry points like Checkpoint Charlie or the railroad station). I privately celebrate the opening in a cafe on Unter den Linden.

*Der Eingebildet Kranke* (Moliere's *Malade imaginaire*) is not the play I would have chosen to see at the Volksbuhne, but *Zeit der Wolfe* by Plenzdorf is unexpectedly cancelled because of an illness. According to the flyer I pick up in the theatre lobby, playing Moliere at the Volksbuhne is a fifty-year old tradition. The previous Moliere *mise-en-scene*, a 1981 production of *The Miser*, is still being performed.

The set, as usual, is spectacular. The Volksbuhne theatre building and its stage are in the shape of a wedge, also evoked by the "V" of its name which appears in all posters, programs, and other announcements. This shape is echoed in the shape of the "squares" of the parquet floor, as well as in the banner identifying the play (and insisting that it *is* a play) hung on the back wall. The production also insists that the play is a "classic," and replaces the upstage title with a portrait of Moliere set within the same shape at the end. The costumes are recognizably traditional (and very beautiful), but the stylized gestures and dance movements draw on *commedia dell'arte* and are deliberately parodic.

This is Argan's play. He is impossibly radiant with a cheshire cat smile, a nightcap (or is it a bandage?), and white knit longjohns that are a patchwork of textures and shapes. At his signal walls descend to create his room, with an elegant white decor that is a cross between a drawing room and a hospital room. Most of the members of his household are in white too, subjugated to his aesthetic and his needs, and he stage manages their performance. Those like his wife whom he does not master become the white-masked figures of his danced nightmare that begins the second half.

The audience--especially the large groups of secondary school students--enjoys the production, which is full of such amusing "shticks" as Argan on an oversized chamber pot. But it seems to me that the "bits" are more important than the lines, and that the performance lacks (or has lost?) a certain amount of thoughtfulness. (The following night I see Hans-Peter Minetti, who plays Argan, in the role of the priest in *Mother Courage* at the Berliner Ensemble. Is there a problem of maintaining quality when so many productions are being juggled at once?)

In the lobby is once again a poster blow-up of a letter, this time addressed in bold green painted letters "*An unsere freunde*," at the Deutsches Theater, Berliner Ensemble, Maxim Gorki Theater, and the Volksbuhne from the ensemble of the Deutsche Staatsoper, expressing thanks for the support of theatre colleagues in the activities of 4 November 1989. In the center of the page is a black on white reproduction of the Picasso drawing of a hand holding a bunch of flowers; signatures are scattered around the page. On a billboard

in the entrance hallway are announcements of various union and feminist group meetings.

To come home I take the S-bahn to Friedrichstrasse, and leave the station via the bridge that crosses the river. The staircase that leads to the street on which my hotel is located is completely enclosed by heavy metal grilles, making it practically impossible to get down to the water that not so long ago was a possible escape route. And now people casually take the train across the border to mail letters, to make photocopies, or to telephone, since it takes forever to get a line through to West Berlin from here.

**January 18, 1990 (Thursday).** 10:00 a.m. While waiting for my appointment with Professor Tenschert at the Berliner Ensemble, I look at an *Inszenierung* book (one of eight containing records of the dramaturgical work!) from the 1962 *Days of the Commune* and a sample *Regiebuch*. I am astonished by how clear, readable, and precise it is, quite unlike those promptbooks I've looked at at the RSC.

Tenschert suggests that, instead of describing the day-to-day work of dramaturgs, which my interviews with others surely cover, he offer some reflexions on how the position of the dramaturg evolved. He starts with a historical overview, and goes on to raise such fascinating issues as the relationship between aristocratic, bourgeois, and proletarian theatre, and the position occupied by dramaturgs in times of political and cultural transition.

In the afternoon I walk to the Volksbühne by way of the shell of the synagogue that was burned on "Reich Crystal Night" in 1938 and bombed in 1942. It is under renovation. Holger Adolf, the Intendant and Chef dramaturg of the Volksbühne, takes some time to speak with me. He describes the dramaturg as a philosophical and conceptual coworker in the theatre and an intermediary between the theatre and its audience. At the Volksbühne they no longer commonly write out "conceptions"; they certainly never communicate them to actors.

He also fills me in on the latest news. Arrangements are being made to sell West Berlin productions to the East and vice versa. Similarly, an article I happen to see in an evening newspaper describes negotiations for proposed joint subscriptions between theatres in the East and West.

*Mother Courage* at the Berliner Ensemble seems like a tired production, though it occurs to me that I may be the one who is tired. However it is, in fact, a revival of the production of 1978 by Peter Kupke, the first at the Berliner Ensemble since the famous one of 1949. Hans-Peter Minetti who plays the priest and whom the previous evening I have seen as Argan, does not appear for a curtain call. Perhaps he is tired too.

Gisela May is an exuberant *Courage* who maintains her youthfulness even as she ages during the play. For me the most striking feature, one that changes the play's balance, is the role played by Katrin. Werner Mittenzwei points out in a note in the program that the play is commonly charged with the lack of an antagonist. In this production *Courage's* antagonist is her daughter,

who actively opposes her, makes choices and takes risks: "*In dem Stuck stehen Lebensklugheit (Courage) und engagiertes Leben (Katrin) gegenüber.*"

As I leave I notice the large number of West German cars and buses parked around the theatre, and am reminded of my conversation with Holger Adolph in the afternoon. There is not much difference between the audiences of the various East Berlin theatres, he said, except for the additional audience from outside for whom the Berliner Ensemble is Mecca.

**January 19, 1990 (Friday).** *Hamlet* rehearsal, 10:00 a.m. When I enter the auditorium of the Deutsches Theater with Alexander Weigel, Heiner Muller is alone on the stage. I am presented and asked to take a seat near the back. Weigel goes up, and together they check out the flexibility of the gravediggers' shovel, which is inverted and fixed to the floor on a spring, like a punching bag. The stage is hung with black velvet, with a large rhomboidal opening in the centre through which the shovel and behind it the white backdrop is visible. Downstage of this opening is a pile of bones. It creates for the audience the perspective from within the grave.

Both gravediggers are wearing evening dress, and one has an extraordinarily tall stovepipe hat. Ophelia lies perpendicular to the front of the stage, her hair hanging over the edge. Between interchanges, the gravediggers on either side of the shovel solemnly pass a whiskey bottle between them, each holding the shovel pointed towards a shoulder in turn while the other one drinks. It is a fascinatingly static representation of a scene which is usually animated by the inflections and movements of drunkenness.

The performance of this scene emphasizes the macabre. When the first Clown comes forward for a song, he kisses the hand of the dead Ophelia and dances with her. The skulls that he digs up are white and grey rubber balls, and he plays pool with them. When Hamlet addresses Yorrick's skull, he crawls through the opening on hands and knees and hits the "skull" with his own head to make it roll.

Time out for discussion of the set. They consider the possibility of suspending a skeleton from above, and indeed have done so by the time people return from a half hour break.

As a result of unforeseen problems which require a production meeting immediately after the rehearsal, my interview with Alexander Weigel is postponed. It is late afternoon before he is free.

Weigel talks at generous length about his career as a dramaturg. After working in a provincial theatre, he wrote reviews. It was a negative review in 1964 of a production of *Hamlet* directed by a politically comfortable friend of Ulbricht that got him into trouble and brought him back to dramaturgy. With the path of theatre journalism closed to him, he was "rescued" by the director of the Deutsches Theater who invited him to work there.

His work on the Muller *Hamlet* grew out of previous work with Muller on *Der Lohndrucker*. When I ask whether recent political events have changed his view of the play, he says no, especially since he and Muller have never felt

that the play is saying only one thing. But he acknowledges that the audience will have changed and may see the same things differently. The first review I see in France takes it as a play about power and its overthrow. Muller's Elsinore is seen as a failed utopia. The Fortinbras in a business suit who succeeds a Stalinist Claudius and engulfs a frail Hamlet is an image of "the GDR at the hour of the Deutsche Bank," and the slight, bespectacled, disillusioned Horatio is taken for a possible allusion to Heiner Muller himself.<sup>4</sup>

Weigel gives as an example Scene Four of *Hamletmaschine*, which describes events in Hungary in 1956. Until now this scene has been taken to show the impossibility of a popular democratic revolution. But in fact the events recounted are remarkably close to what has actually occurred, if not in Hungary, in Romania. He also cites changing reactions to *Der Lohndrucker*. When first presented at the Deutsches Theater in 1988, it was exhilarating for the audience even to be able to see a text that so explicitly implied the fascist sources of East German communism. (Muller directed the play himself, because he didn't expect to find a director willing to do it, and in the course of his research Weigel dug into previously classified archival material.) By now spectators have become more blasé, but are freer to see the play in greater depth.

We leave to get my suitcase at the hotel, so I can take the train to West Berlin. Weigel talks about his trips to Paris, in February with Muller to see Patrice Chereau's *Hamlet* (They also went to see Bogdanov's *Hamlet* in Hamburg), and in May with the production of *Der Lohndrucker*. "It was wonderful," he says, "but imagine seeing Paris for the first time at age 50! I wished I were twenty years younger." That thought reminds him of the massive demonstration of artists in Berlin on November 4, 1989. It went on far into the night, with hours of walking followed by hours of listening to speeches. Once again, this time because his bones and muscles were aching, he wished himself twenty years younger. We laugh, and he turns serious. "It was thrilling, but it was tragic too, to think of those twenty years of creative life that so many people had lost."

### Postscript

I returned to East Berlin for a few days at the end of June. My arrival coincided with the official closing of Checkpoint Charlie on the eve of the consolidation of the East and West German currencies. The wall around the Brandenburg Gate had been dismantled and the area overrun with tourists, souvenir sellers, and refugees from countries further East.

*Hamlet/Maschine* at the Deutsches Theater was sold out, but theatre attendance in general had dropped by thirty percent. People no longer needed to go to the theatre to hear spoken what could not be said elsewhere. "Now they go to the shopping centres" commented Klaus Volker, a free-lance

dramaturg in the West. Even the theatre professionals were harder to find. One theatre scholar was delayed for an appointment because he was buying a new car. Another rushed home to his telephone in the hope of selling the used Lada he had advertised before its resale value completely disappeared.

There was anxiety about which theatres would survive. Most major German cities have two theatres, one subsidized by the state and one subsidized by the city. But both Berlins have more than one of each. What would happen when the two governments that had been subsidizing the existing theatres became one? Would there continue to be support for the Schiller Theater and the Deutsches Theater, "state" theatres both of them? And for two Volksbuhnen? Theatres were engaged in a process of self-examination. It was becoming necessary for them to reflect upon their identity, define their uniqueness, reconsider their mandate.

The process of pruning had already begun. In East Berlin senior officials of cultural organizations had been massively informed of their dismissal, though invited to reapply. Among them, to much protest, was Albert Hetterle, the respected Intendant of the Maxim Gorki Theater.

As the situation was changing, so was the repertoire. One director who had been working on *Woyzek* and had substituted *Leonce and Lena*, which he felt was more appropriate, as events heated up, had finally settled on *The Lower Depths* as an image of what the DDR was likely to become.

Audience reactions too were changing. According to Maik Hamburger, "Formerly people were listening to the subtext. They were listening to things that were said between the lines. Now they're listening to the lines; they're listening to the text." Directors still wished to reflect upon local and contemporary problems; but given the reality of a new audience from the West, they also recognized the need to entertain without becoming trivial.

The question of audience emerged most clearly in conversation with Rudiger Mangel, a dramaturg at the Freie Volksbuhne in West Berlin who was working on a production of *Germania Tod in Berlin* for the season to come. Their production would have to be much more concrete than the one at the Berliner Ensemble he explained, because as products of a completely different education, the actors as well as the spectators in the West would need more and different information to understand Muller's representation of German history.

It was evident, at the time of my visit, that Berlin theatre was very vulnerable and in a state of flux. But no less evident was the fact that it is an extremely sensitive instrument, one that is able to participate in and reflect the changes going on around it.

*Montreal, Canada*

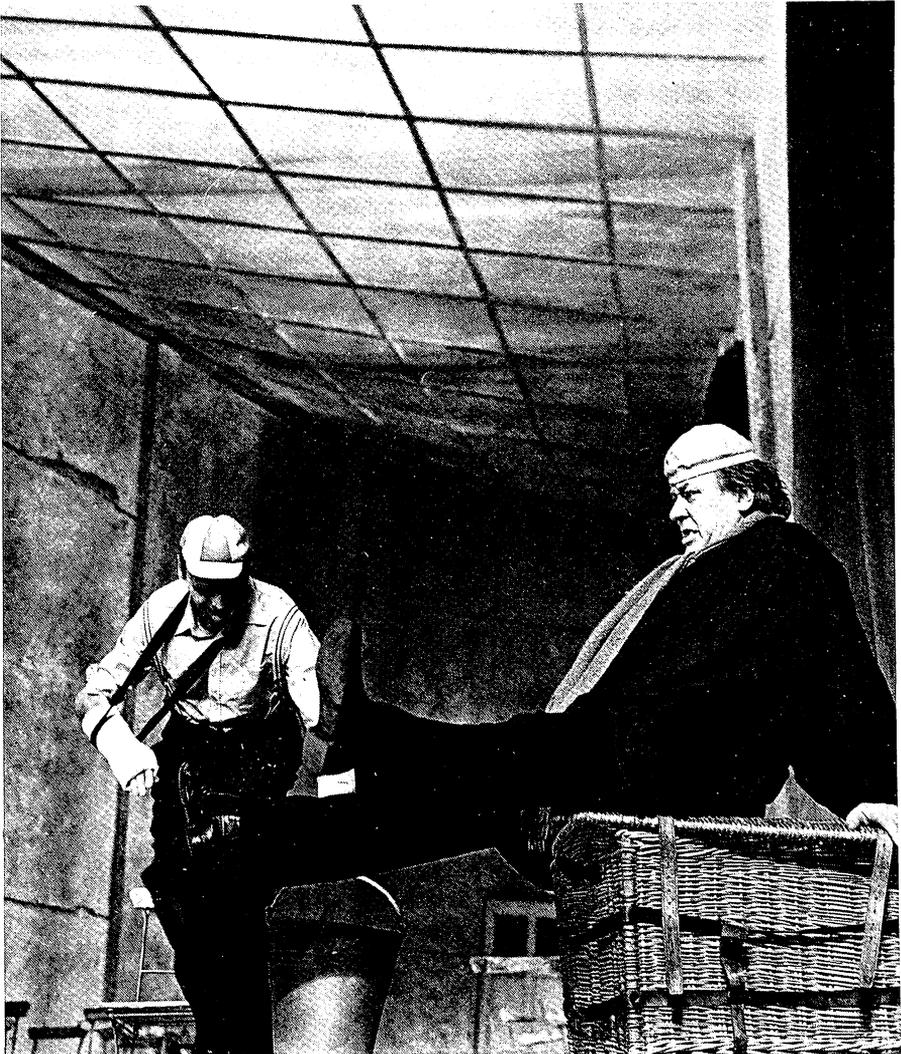
## Notes

1. Johanna Schall, Brecht's granddaughter, quoted in an article in *The Chicago Tribune*, November 23, 1989, subtitled "East Berlin Deutsches Theater emerges as a force for change." I am grateful to Dr. Lawrence Guntner for drawing my attention to this article.

2. Many of the comments attributed to Herr Weigel come from the interview recorded later in the week.

3. Elvira Hauschild of the Deutsches Theater in a letter of February 26, 1990.

4. Alain Auffray, "Berlin: dernier Hamlet avant unification," *Liberation*, 27 March 1990, 42.



*Der Theatermacher* by Thomas Bernhard. Kammerspiele, Deutsches Theater. Photo by Wolfhard Theile

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