

Volker Braun: Berlin Theatre and Politics, 1988

Interviewed by Yvonne Sharer

Volker Braun was born in Dresden (later part of East Germany) in 1939. As a school child he was taken to the theatre to see *William Tell* and was very impressed by the scene in which the citizens swear to stand together against tyranny. In the DDR, when he was growing up, it was usual for all men, whether they intended to study at a university or not, to work for some time as laborers or craftsmen of some kind, so he worked the compulsory two years as a construction worker for deep excavation in conditions of filth and slime. He has stated that although it was against his will, it was a very important time for him because he started to ask himself important questions which later informed his plays, such as "What is this for a life? What is this for a daily job for a *whole life*?" He put this experience in his play *Die Kipper (Dumptrucks)*. This contained a line which has often been quoted since: "Be free. You have the power." After his work in the depths of excavation, Braun studied philosophy at the University of Leipzig, beginning in 1960. His plays reveal a knowledge of and a love of philosophy, history, poetry, and literature. Helene Weigel invited him to come to the Berliner Ensemble in 1965 as a dramaturg. After this, he worked at the Deutsches Theater until Manfred Wekwarth came to the Berliner Ensemble and brought Braun back there. As a working playwright he has worked with Wekwarth and others at the Berliner Ensemble, with Albert Hetterle, Intendant of the Maxim Gorki Theater, and Dieter Mann, Intendant of the Deutsches Theater.

The Kipper was the first of Braun's many controversial plays (1962-1965). As a sharp critic of society, he confronted many of the problems that the authorities did not wish to see addressed. In his play *Übergangsgesellschaft (Society in Transition)*, the writer Anton says, "Literature has only one sense, to demolish what the ideologues build." As a playwright and poet he published many works, but the censors kept some of his work from the public. His play *Lenin's Death* was finally performed in 1988 at the Berliner Ensemble after being blocked by the censors for

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eighteen years. In the same year *Society in Transition* was presented at the Maxim Gorki Theater. The play has been characterized as a paraphrase or extension of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. The action begins in a desolate garden in which three sisters, who at first seem to be garden ornaments wrapped in plastic against the winter, emerge and speak the last lines of Chekhov's play. Then Braun moves the action into the actuality of the DDR with the characters criticizing the regime, each other, and themselves. One newspaper characterized it as "an outstanding example of a play from that period which mirrored the situation of change in the former DDR." In that time and since, writers have frequently quoted such lines as, "We will never understand ourselves if we do not speak out our dreams," "We have forgotten something, we must go back . . . It is possible to go forwards, but this is no country for us. It is occupied by the enemy, this is a colony. We pay tribute to the dead future. Yes, once it was true and right, it was all true and tight. We have unfurled the dawn, only to live in the dusk."¹ Other provocative lines were "The revolution cannot reach its goal under a dictatorship," and "If we don't free ourselves, we cannot achieve anything." The production was successful in igniting passions in audiences in Berlin and was subsequently performed in the West at the Mulheim Theatre Days, the first time a DDR production appeared there, and at the Ruhrfestspielen in Recklinghausen (also in the West). In the discussions in Berlin and other cities where the play was performed there was intense interest in the audience and close coverage from the media regarding the political implications of such a daring critique of DDR society. 1988 was a turning point in theatre and politics in the DDR with theatre onstage and in the streets which ultimately led to the fall of the Berlin wall and the reunification of Germany. After playing a major role in the activities of that time Braun has continued to work as a poet and playwright and to travel to various locations reading from his works.²

YS: It is now ten years since *Society in Transition* was first performed in Berlin. I'd like to ask you about the history of that play and your own particular problems with the censor during the DDR era.

VB: That play was a major challenge. I hoped it might be presented at the Berliner Ensemble, but in the years after it was written they didn't have so much courage in the house. Naturally, there were other theatres that wanted it. Alexander Lang wanted to direct it, and I said, yes, do it at this house, but they still said, we can't, we can't.

YS: I heard you had to wait five years for a production because of problems with the censor.

VB: No, longer. It was written in 1982 and then in 1988 it was finally done, Thomas Langhoff wanted to do it in 1985 in the Maxim Gorki Theater, but the BE said no it is ours. But they never would do it and naturally I had a contract with the BE. So no other theatre was allowed to do it.

YS: Let me be sure I understand this . . .

VB: (Laughing) It is not possible to understand it.

YS: The BE dared not produce it. But did they speak to anyone in the ministry? Did someone from the ministry speak to you and directly say it must not be done? Did you discuss it at the theatre?

VB: Oh, naturally we spoke about it. Every six months, but then the answer always was, "This we can't do."

YS: Then Thomas Langhoff wanted to do it at the Gorki Theater. Didn't you have to submit the text to someone? It seems that there was a mysterious aspect to the process as opposed to a clear process.



"Society in Transition," Gorki Theatre, the three sisters front left. Photo: Wolfram Schmidt

VB: Oh, the theatre had to ask for permission, and the ministry would or wouldn't grant it, the author didn't do it. But the theatre did not dare it and that was oppressive to me. Then it became possible in 1988; whoever wanted to do it at the Berliner Ensemble could. However, there was still Langhoff's intention to direct it, but at the Gorki Theater. Then I had this luck. In 1988 it was also possible to present *Lenin's Death*. So, then I arranged it so the BE would present *Lenin's Death* and, at the Gorki, Langhoff would direct *Society in Transition*. And I made no mistake. He directed it wonderfully. It was so human. And, of course, he used all the wonderful actors he had in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* which he had directed at the Gorki in a beautiful, sympathetic production running since 1979.

YS: Would you credit much of the success of this daring play, then, to the direction of Langhoff and the fine acting?

VB: Yes, certainly. If you look at the reviews, not only for the premiere in Berlin, but later when we took it out to the West, to theatre festivals, the critics called it a great success and praised Langhoff's interpretation of the text which brought out the themes and ideas I had put in. But you see, the staging and the interpretation were particularly important because the play was so critical. And other places there were productions—I think a dozen in Germany. Some of them were unacceptable. For example in Dresden there was an ugly, well, just vile production. There was much more anger and quarreling. I think it was taken off after it opened. Then in Weimar a woman who was a student of Castdorf directed it. It was a mad, reckless production which I myself could not acknowledge, but the audience seemed to enjoy the text. It was a wild production with all the men in pajamas and the women in very peculiar clothes—just monstrous. (Laughing) After ten minutes all the government officials in the dress circle in the National Theatre in Weimar got up together and marched out. Imagine if that had been the staging in Berlin. The play could not have made its impact. It would simply have disappeared. But the luck was that Langhoff had made it so human and so clear that it would have been very difficult to say it should be taken off. With a bad production the audience would simply have said, "This can't be, this can't be. This is not reality." But at the Gorki, the audience embraced it as reality because of the way in which it was presented. Very fortuitous and important, yes? And I believe that at the Berliner Ensemble there would have been much more angst in the staging and the points would have been too strongly underlined.

YS: In these times Albert Hetterle was Intendant at the Gorki Theater and I know he tried in many productions, such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, to circumvent censorship. Of course he played the doctor in *Three Sisters* and the

parallel figure in your play. Many of the critics identified his character as the main critic of the regime, the one to whom you gave many sentences which could be described as revolutionary or at least provocative. He told me that in the DDR it was very unclear, that a theatre or an Intendant must not always give a text to a censor for approval. That sometimes one could do something and nobody would say no, but another time or another place, one tried to do a play, even got it as far as the final rehearsals, and someone would telephone and say, no, you can't do it.

VB: Yes that's right. My play, *Guevera oder Der Sonnenstadt* was in the final stages of rehearsal in an excellent production at the Deutsches Theater with Alexander Lang as Che Geuvara. The Cuban Embassy protested my depiction of the characters, and the play was canceled. It was difficult to predict what would happen. In some cities where a different minister of culture was more liberal, in Karl-Marx-Stadt, for example, or Schwerin—in the provinces people often dared to do more, but in Berlin it was harder.

YS: Yes, I have been told by Dieter Mann that plays and actions in Berlin theatres attracted the attention of the media, and so the government wanted to keep a tighter hold on the theatres. Even in Potsdam, which is so close, a play might be allowed, but in Berlin it was forbidden.³



Die Übergangsgesellschaft by Volker Braun. Premiered 30 March 1988, Director: Thomas Langhoff. Left to right: Uwe Kockisch (Paul Anton), Ursula Werner (Mascha), Klaus Machen (Walter Höchst), Monika Lennartz (Olga). Photo: Wolfram Schmidt

VB: That is so, and one must certainly say that it was really in 1987 that the situation of cultural politics began to change for the better because the uncertainty at the top, high up in the organization, was so great, because one could see in Moscow the Perestroika, the Glasnost, and so on. And the factions in the party here were attacking each other—the liberal faction and the more conservative—but basically they didn't know what they should do. Here, Perestroika had been rejected, walled out, really, in the not entirely false conjecture that it was just a fantastic idea which would be crushed and would disappear. That was a gut feeling, but still one should do what was possible. So, it happened that there was some movement and . . . but the top sank in apathy. And when a minister, for example a book minister, who earlier might have kept a book of mine for a year, or a play, would be there for months or a half year. Now there was no answer, which means that the ministers for the state organization, the specialists, were dependent on the party organization, but it was not functioning. And then came the moment when such a minister said, "Now we've had enough. Now we'll do it." And then the books came out. For example, a book of short stories written in 1964 was finally published in 1988, and Heiner Müller's *Germania, Quartet*, and so many things were put on the stage. 1988 was the premiere of *Lenin's Death*; 1988 was *Society in Transition*. I have heard that the minister for books, who has nothing to do with the theatre but was aware of this senseless, endless discussion over *Lenin's Death* which had gone on for years, called Moscow and started to describe what is in the play: "This is a play about a high functionary who has been dead many years, and he is surrounded by, etc., etc., etc.," and he was told [dramatic pause], "You can do what you want to in your country." And this was the moment, in 1988, of the Russian collapse, and they had really given their provinces freedom; and, therefore, the play could be performed without diplomatic concerns.

YS: I know that in that same period there were very important discussions after the plays which were a part of the building emotion and the demand for change.

VB: Yes, after plays such as *Society in Transition*, the Intendant and the director, often the playwright and the actors were on the stage, and the entire audience would stay to discuss it. But the discussion—and this was noted in the papers in the West, too, in Mulheim,⁴ for example—was very little about the staging or acting, but turned quickly to the political situation.

YS: Many of the writers noted the importance of such lines as "If we don't free ourselves, we cannot achieve anything," and, "The revolution cannot reach its goal under a dictatorship." And in the final scene, when Irina purposefully sets fire to

the house, Walter says, "Rotten wood. Stand back!" The line was taken as a metaphor for the condition of the DDR. Could you comment on the audience reaction?

VB: The audience was stunned because this was a reality which was entirely different from the "reality," official opinion, etc., and people were daring to say things which had only been thought. So, Irina puts her feet on the globe of the world and asks what good it is since she is not free to travel, and a man says that he teaches in school about capitalism without ever having experienced or seen capitalism. Naturally, my play was a questioning of ourselves, and the people experienced a great shock seeing it and hearing the characters saying ugly, hurtful things to each other.

YS: In addition to the plays, you and many writers, actors, etc. took part in public readings which fueled the activity in the streets and the demands for freedom of all kinds. I remember vividly the Gorki Theater matinee reading of the Russian play *Further, Further, Further* with depictions of Stalin and other Soviet officials, all of which were read by actresses from several East Berlin theatres. Following the reading, there was an emotional discussion with the author, Michael Schatrow, and Albert Hetterle onstage with the actresses. Perhaps even more important was the reading after the revival of Heiner Müller's *The Scab* at the Deutsches Theater. The production itself was a bold statement, and, during the run at a Sunday matinee which was naturally sold-out, you and Müller read from texts which had not been publicly performed before.

VB: Yes, it was a very memorable occasion, and the people outside were trying to get tickets to come in. The theatre was packed.

YS: Dieter Mann told me that these were "texts which were not exactly forbidden, but they were never approved, or passed. They were not printed and were not publicly presented under that regime." I asked him if the reading was a daring act, and he responded that it was a "decision of a theatre man who had his work to do," but that, naturally, things done at the Deutsches Theater attracted attention.⁵ So, I think it was a very daring thing for him as Intendant and for you and Müller to do. Now ten years have gone by, and there have been many changes in society, a great transition, some things—especially in theatre—for the better, some for the worse. Could you comment on the experience of that time?

VB: I would say that the theatre can be more important in some times than in others. In the late 1980s we found theatre and literature urgent, even colossal.

Through the public reading of banned texts, the shock of the texts made a tremendous impact on the public mind, as if the people in the audience spoke, too, and everyone was engaged in a kind of conspiracy. A vigorous excitement existed with the anguish. People asked themselves why we were so lifeless, so unproductive, and essentially unhappy, to use Chekhov's terms from the last scene of *The Three Sisters*. Then they heard these questions asked from the stage, and these questions were asked in the discussions which followed. I believe that the development of these great changes in recent years would not have been the same without the theatre and theatre artists.



Matinee: "Further . . . Further . . . Further" by Michael Schatrow. Left to right: Christoph Schooth, Dr. Susanne Rödel, Michael Schatrow, Albert Hetterle. *Photo: F.H. Bromme*

Notes

1. See, for example, Rolf Jucker, "Wir Befinden Uns Soweit Wohl. Wir Sind Erst Einmal Am Ende," *Sinn und Form* (Sept. 1994): 893.

2. This interview was conducted in German in Berlin on January 8, 1998.

3. Yvonne Shafer, "Interview with Dieter Mann: From the DDR to Reunification," *Western European Stages* (Spring 1992): 12-16.

4. Major articles appeared in papers in Mulheim, Munich and elsewhere noting the significance of the discussion and the fact that the DDR Cultural Attache was present.

5. Shafer, "Interview with Dieter Mann."