PERFORMANCE & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Edited by
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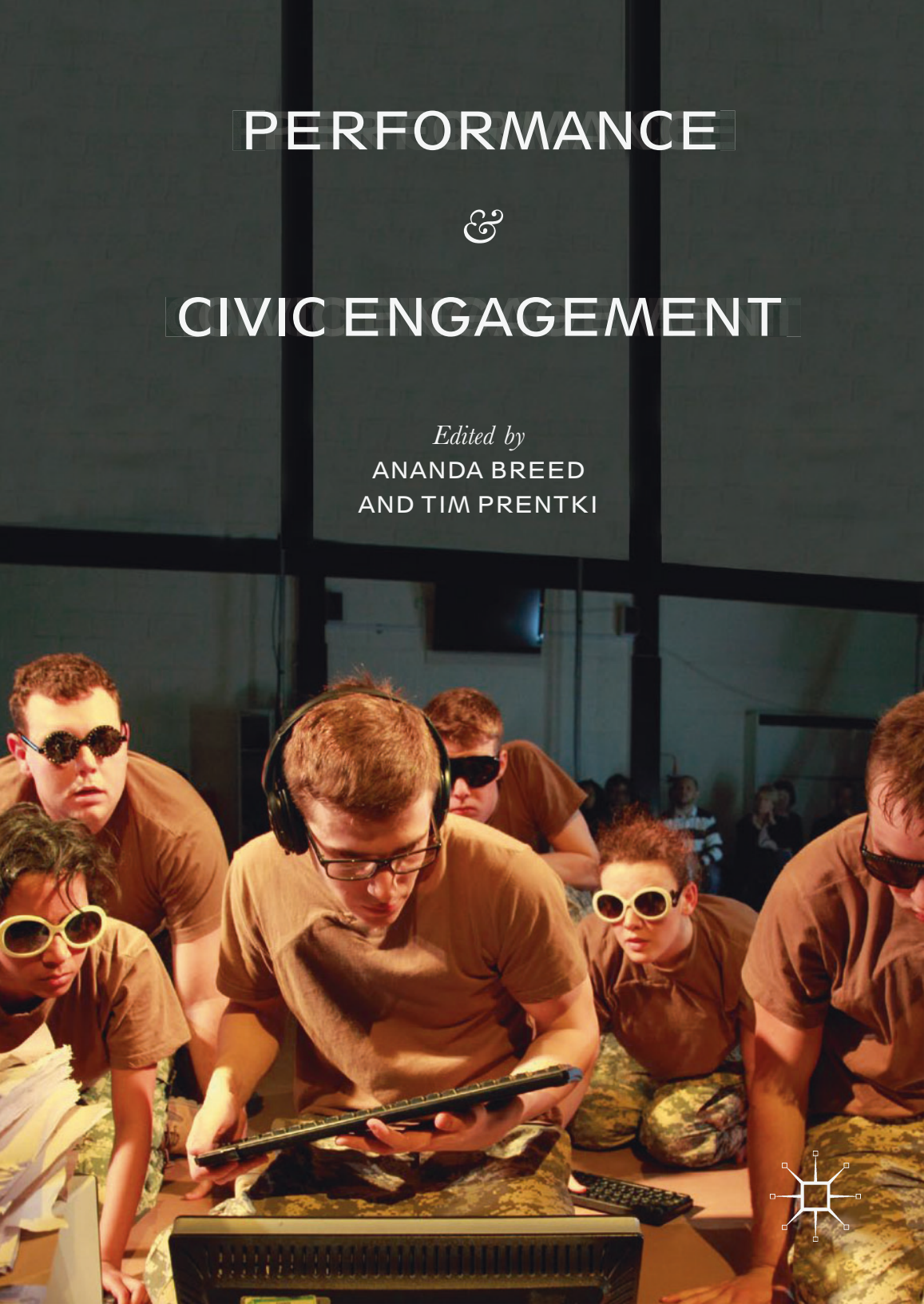

Performance and Civic Engagement

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Artistic Diplomacy: On Civic Engagement and Transnational Theatre

Jonas Tinius

Introduction

Contemporary European theatre builds on many traditions, yet two seem particularly at odds: wandering theatre troupes and publicly funded municipal theatre institutions. While the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the French *théâtre de la foire* or the German *Wandertruppen* frequently appear as marginalised, itinerant phenomena in theatre histories, the public city, state or national theatres of these three countries embody aristocratic patronage, bourgeois audiences and artistic continuity. This contrast has not always and everywhere been as crass, however. While nineteenth-century Germany did indeed see the gradual erosion of wandering troupes, a few well-known European theatre artists of the twentieth century have kept up a tradition that brings together civic engagement, public patronage, and transnational aesthetics with the institutionalised traditions of European public theatres. Among others, Dario Fo, the theatre anthropologist Eugenio Barba, and the founder

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of the festival d'Avignon in France, Jean Vilar, need mention here. This contribution adds another chapter to this historiography by focusing on the often overlooked but complex artistic tradition of Roberto Ciulli's Theater an der Ruhr in the German postindustrial Ruhr valley city Mülheim.

For more than 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork and during subsequent and ongoing artistic-ethnographic collaborations, I accompanied the work, travels, and behind-the-scenes negotiations of this theatre, which draws on itinerant philosophies of migration as well as on the important institutional role of public municipal German theatres. Based on archival and ethnographic fieldwork, this chapter introduces the committed cosmopolitan theatre maker behind this project, a self-styled nationless 'bastard-child' of different critical, nomadic, European traditions.

This chapter recounts the difficulties and complexities of such transnational civic engagement by way of an ethnographic account of the Theater an der Ruhr's 2013 travel to Algeria. This trip was part of the ensemble's exchanges with artists and theatres from Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, and Syria that began after the Arab Spring (see Hemke 2013). It was put together under the name *Theaterlandscapes New Arabia* as the latest in their Theaterlandscapes series and gained a different political traction following the so-called 'refugee crisis' and the renewed emphasis on integration, diversity, and applied theatre from 2014 onwards (see Tinius, forthcoming). This chapter contextualises this transnational project and the 2013 travel to Algeria in the economic and political logic of the German repertoire system (*Repertoirebetrieb)*, which provides a framing for the institutional basis of travel and the repetition of plays. This framing is contrasted with a personal narrative and recounting of my own participant observation during the travel to Algeria, its preparation, and aftermath, to give a sense of the realpolitik of the Theaterlandscapes project, including its many tensions and contradictions. Although I have interspersed an 'excursus' that takes the reader back to the 1980s and the theatre's first significant exchange with artists from former Yugoslavia, this contribution does not provide an historiographical account of the entire thirty-five-year-long history of the Theaterlandscapes. I have provided such accounts based on extensive archival research and interviews elsewhere (Tinius 2015a, b) and they give a better sense of the great number of pioneering exchanges, including collaborations with Iran and Iraq between 1997 and 2007,

during which the Theater an der Ruhr became the first German theatre to visit Iran after the 1979 revolution. These accounts also include discussions of the theatre's engagement with Turkey and its complex relation to Germany through migration, as well as the problematic question of Kurdish identity, embodied in a *Theaterlandscape Kurdistan* (2007–2014). Also part of the Theaterlandscapes project, among other important exchanges, were exchanges with Poland (1989–1991) and Russia (1992–1994) after the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since these trips are discussed in greater detail in these complementary publications, I will here focus on how travel in a literal sense of movement evokes more fundamental questions about deterritorialisation, dialogic spaces, public interaction, diplomacy, political critique and censorship. Civic engagement thus appears in this chapter in the interstices of conversations I witnessed. It is questioned as a goal, evoked by others, unpacked in preparation for travels, and reflected upon through a discussion of imagery. As colleagues and I explored elsewhere with regard to the idea of 'micro-utopias' (see Blanes et al. 2016), the artistic diplomacy I am discussing and describing in this chapter is not always a clear-cut form of political protest or activism, but articulates itself in a *reflection on the capacity* to transform publics, actors or communities through theatre. I believe that one of the tasks, or perhaps rather opportunities, of an ethnographic approach to theatre and political performance is that it can bring us closer to these processes of doubtful reflection on theatre that an analysis of audience-reception or the elements of a stage-performance does not. It is for this reason that descriptions of performances and public engagement appear interstitially, while accounts of conversations, interactions, and reflections on and with the actors and directors actually constituting theatre as a community and institutional tradition are foregrounded.

Since its founding as a private-public partnership with the municipality of Mülheim an der Ruhr in 1980, the Italian émigré Ciulli, his dramaturge, the sociologist Helmut Schäfer, and their closely knit ensemble have turned the institution into a locus for cross-border theatre collaborations, the so-called International Theaterlandscapes. In order to do so, they have made it the theatre's prime cultural and political task to highlight two interlocking aspects of artistic production: the collective creative process and the political role of transnational collaboration with artists from precarious regions of the world. Both of these aspects—collective creative processes and a transnational theatre

programme—are constitutive of the institution in practical and theoretical ways. Rehearsals, for example, are not merely the fundamental modus and locus to establish the social and artistic cohesion of their ensemble; they are also an ethical space in which the actors cultivate a form of critical, reflexive conduct and attitude (see Tinius 2017). This space is constitutive of what I have elsewhere described as an institutional tradition, that is, an institution that *creates* and *reperforms* itself through a continuous engagement with its own philosophies (Tinius 2015d). Since the Theater an der Ruhr relies financially on the reperformance of plays from their repertoire—sometimes over years and decades, both at home and abroad—rehearsals and a functioning, extant repertoire also support the practical modus operandi of an institution with a permanent artistic staff and a fixed institutional home-base. Rehearsals, lastly, are composed of diverse artistic processes that range from collective reading and discussions of interpretations and approaches to any given literary material, to practical improvisations and reflections on rehearsals. They are therefore a social space in which practical and theoretical aspects of the significance of a repertoire and travel-logic for this theatre interlock. This is important to underline in order to understand the everydayness of reflexivity in the Theater an der Ruhr, as well as German public theatre more generally.

The conjunction of the practical and theoretical also characterises the second core constituent of artistic work at the theatre: their transnational theatre programme. The theatre's co-founding director Ciulli considers this programme as a means to speak across national borders and cultural policies. As he repeatedly noted in interviews and conversations with me, 'we need to recognise the many 'other views' in what we consider national traditions: no one theatre tradition, for instance, is singularly national—artistic traditions are always mediated and multiple' (personal comment, June 2016). The idea of a theatre that speaks to those 'other views', that speaks to 'the stranger' (*den Fremden*), as Ciulli has emphasised in his many public interventions, is not just an aesthetic suggestion for intercultural theatre: rather, Ciulli and his dramaturge are drawing implicitly and explicitly on theories of transnationalism and migration drawn from critical migration studies and postcolonial theorising (see Chakrabarty 2007; Bojadžijev and Römhild 2014). For the Theater an der Ruhr, as its dramaturge underlines in both public interventions and closed rehearsal settings, Europe is regularly evoked as a historically constructed narrative with traditions that are in flux and under construction.

This philosophy is further underpinned by a scepticism of modern metanarratives and the European Enlightenment drawn from Critical Theory: Adorno and Hegel are frequently referenced intellectuals in private and public discussions at the theatre. In a milieu as self-reflexive as the theatre, where rehearsals often begin with intense reviews of critical, philosophical literature on aspects of a new play, one is faced as researcher with the difficulty of describing emic theorising that is as complex as the theoretical reflexivity one is conducting oneself. What requires even greater nuance when conducting fieldwork with self-reflexive and theoretically versed informant-interlocutors is the curious interweaving of poetic self-ascriptions ('bastardo') with serious criticality that may turn a joking remark into a political statement of purpose. Such statements may also be a form of ironic subversion of stereotypes and therefore enact a form of poetic defiance of expectation, as the editors of this volume note in their introduction.

When the Theater an der Ruhr directors write on their website that there are two 'structuring elements' of their institution and tradition, one being rehearsals and the other 'travel', this does not just refer to an interest in intercultural exchange. For the Theater an der Ruhr founders and ensemble to be in touch with and exchange ideas about politics, society, and art with theatre makers from precarious regions of the world is a way to establish a kind of transnational solidarity through art. They understand, as Ciulli and Schäfer (n.d.) write, 'the idea of travel as the universal language of theatre'. This universal language here is meant to underscore a way of communication across geopolitical borders that is based on 'common ideas about the role of art and theatre in society, and not on mutually agreed treatises between countries', as an actor put it to me during rehearsals for a joint production with the Turkish company *Kumbaraci50* from Istanbul in 2014. While coproductions with 'foreign' artists in Germany, and abroad with artists from all over the world concern a kind of transnational grassroots diplomacy through theatre, the *practice* of travel also serves other purposes beyond figurative metaphors. As Ciulli and Schäfer (n.d.) put it: 'Travelling—the movement, the non-stationary—requires flexibility and the capacity to improvise, and it contributes significantly to the financing of the Theater'. This intersection of aesthetic and political reasons for travel on the one hand and practical financial consequences on the other underline the significance of the theatre's repertoire of plays. With an institutional and economic structure that allows for as few as two premieres a year (while touring with plays

from the repertoire) and a political interest in cultivating an acting style, critical attitude, and philosophy of transnational communication through art, the idea of travel has influenced the daily organisation and general outlook of the Theater an der Ruhr. From practical organisational tasks such as international communication across different languages, logistical handling of stage sets and props, networks to international funding agencies to the capacity to translate, both as actors and as directors, some of the ideas developed with European playwrights into transnationally intelligible performances, the theatre's emphasis on travel also affects artistic work and craftsmanship in the institution. As one of the actors put it to me while referring to the significance of acting in a theatre with a more or less permanent ensemble and a touring repertoire:

> If you play something for twenty-five years … you begin to meet yourself over and over again. You see an entire generation of actors live through a role. You don't get this collective and individual growth and cultivation [*Bildung*] anywhere else. (pers. comment)

I was invited to imagine how performing a play and a character for several decades and across more than thirty different countries continues and complements the intense emphasis on cultivating a reflexive relation towards the political implications of the work of the Theater an der Ruhr. The notion of repertoire can therefore also be seen as speaking to the non-activist cultivation and transmission of ethico-aesthetic memory, values and tradition. Acting in a travelling repertoire theatre and in an ensemble that does not reshuffle after each new show, creates a continuity of labour and political engagement that profoundly affects both the aesthetic of plays as well as the commitment of actors to their diplomatic qualities when performed in other countries. The extent to which actors and actresses in the Theater an der Ruhr ensemble are themselves re-thinking their own acting practices following repertoire travel may be a further dimension of what the editors of this book describe in their introduction as the move from bodily practices to the disembodied, from the physical to the virtual. The travelling of the Theater an der Ruhr does not just address the specific artistic and intellecutal communities with whom they collaborate, but also in turn the notion of theatre propagated and imagined by this German ensemble.

Joint coproductions and rehearsals—as practices, loci and modi of political self- and mutual reflexivity in theatre—present only two of

the ways in which communities are forged through collective artistic agency. The community engagement and civic participation of the Theater an der Ruhr however extends well beyond the rehearsal space, where many ideas and trajectories are prepared and discussed. Indeed, they reach out to communities of artists and intellectuals, defined, in reference to Breed and Prentki's discussion of the term, as the formation of informal relationships distinct from the ways in which the state categorises its citizens (see Introduction, this volume). The International Theaterlandscapes project of the Theater an der Ruhr is a thirty-five-year long-running series of international collaborations through which the ensemble has visited, invited and co-produced plays, conferences, seminar series, musical performances, published books and essays, and, most importantly, brought together artists and intellectuals from often politically-precarious regions of the world that had thitherto or at the time of collaboration not been on the map of contemporary theatre and its political attention. The notion of a 'Theaterlandscape' here is used by the Theater to conjure up a kind of geographical imagination through the arts, inviting the audience and artists involved to think of landscapes as constituted, among other things, of artists. Not entirely unlike Arjun Appadurai's notion of 'scapes' (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ideoscapes), which he uses 'to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes' (1996, 33), the Theaterlandscapes conjured up by the Theater an der Ruhr are a way to imagine alternative, non-governmental, transnational ties between artists and intellectuals. Like Appadurai's notion of scapes, the Theaterlandscapes project of the Theater an der Ruhr has been and still is a way to contest national boundaries or artistic collaborations brought about solely for the purpose of mediating foreign cultural policy. As Appadurai puts it, 'these landscapes thus are the building blocks of what (extending Benedict Anderson) I would like to call *imagined worlds*, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe' (Ibid.). Yet, a significant aspect of the Theaterlandscapes project is that they present an ongoing attempt to organise artists transnationally and to reflect on the very act of transnational artistic coproduction and exchange, they do not pose a fixed solution or format for cooperation. As such, their work carries with it a sense of alternative, possibly subversive, ways of self-identifying beyond the possibilities offered by nations or international artistic funds or exchanges set up by governments, to borrow a phrase from

the editors (Introduction, this volume). The dialectic of consciousness-raising and social action that makes up community action for Breed and Prentki thus offers a comparative vocabulary and framework for what I have introduced as the ethical and transnational core of the tradition and international work of the Theater an der Ruhr. Furthermore, the projects of this theatre offer an artistic complement to the anthropological contestation of

> the ongoing assumption that in the modern world diplomacy is separated from other domains of human life, and that the only actors authorized and able to conduct diplomacy are the nation-state's representatives. (Marsden et al. 2016, 2)

Although the Theaterlandscapes of the Theater an der Ruhr builds on the ethical self-cultivation of individual artists (and not primarily on global flows, as Appadurai intimates), the practice of imagination raises another key issue of this volume, namely that of agency. Artistic forms of diplomacy and civic imagination like the Theaterlandscapes project of the Theater an der Ruhr are closely related to the notion of agency, because transnational projects require 'the capacity of participants in performance projects to be or to become social actors individually or, more likely, as a consequence of forming themselves into a collective' (Introduction, this volume). Flynn and I have elsewhere discussed this capacity in terms of ethical agency, understood as the capacity to create practices and spaces for what we termed 'relational reflexivity' (2015, 5) and by which we referred to the transformative potential of collective interrogation of a situation and its reflection in a manner that involves others and that does not always need to be externalised physically or violently to be political. The ability to initiate a project such as the Theaterlandscapes at the Theater an der Ruhr is therefore a form of ethical *and* institutional agency, but one which also shines light on the significance of theatre both as a form of political practice and as an institutional tradition.

German Repertoire Theatre

The Theater an der Ruhr is a repertoire theatre. Primarily, this describes theatres that repeat a stock of plays rather than relying on new productions. This structural feature of performing arts institutions was closely tied to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century national organisations in

France, such as the *Comédie-Française* (est. 1680) or the *Opéra Garnier* (est. 1875), where it predominantly referred to a limited set of plays by recently deceased canonical authors. Over the course of the twentieth century, with the increasing significance of public rather than feudal theatres in Germany (Daniel 1999; Kallmorgen 1955; Vietta 1955), repertoire theatre became an aesthetic and economic institutional model. Characteristic of this model are permanent acting ensembles performing a stock repertoire of plays and a reliance on subscribers as opposed to box office sales. Repertoire theatre in this sense persists today (O'Hagan 1998) and describes a model that binds audiences to the *institution* rather than to *individual performances* by having them subscribe to seasonal programmes (Klein 2008; Neligan 2006).

In countries like the UK or the United States, where theatres derive more income from box office sales, subscribers are vital economically. In Germany and France, subsidies are greater and theatres are less dependent on subscribers, often creating tensions between subscribing audiences' tastes, liking or disliking of particular directors, and the influence of the interest, patron, or lobby groups (often called *Freunde* or friends of a theatre) that coalesce around these communities. Seasonal ticket holders and subscribers (*Abonnentenpublikum*) account for around 38 per cent of the total audience in German public theatre, but box office incomes bring in only 6.5 per cent of average income or less (Deutscher Bühnenverein 1999, cited in Neligan 2006, 1118). This has increased over the last decades: but in 2013/2014, theatres' own receipts still only amounted to 18 per cent, subscribers and box office combined (Deutscher Bühnenverein 2015). Overall, the revenue from subscribers and day tickets alone does not determine an institution's economic survival: in 1998/1999, 152 German public theatres received a total of €2 billion in public and private grants that cover up to 85 per cent of total income of individual theatres (Deutscher Bühnenverein 1999; Neligan 2006). Subsidies still cover more than 80 per cent of the income of public theatres and orchestras in Germany today (Deutscher Bühnenverein 2015).

This subscription model, paired with a repertoire stock of plays and extensive public funding, creates as well as underscores characteristic features, attitudes, and values across the German public theatre landscape: chiefly among them the idea of theatres not as commercial venues for entertainment, but as sites for learning and self-cultivation (*Bildung*) whose tasks are measured by ideas about the common good

and universal aesthetics, rather than by democracy, participation, inclusion or impact. It is notable too that the conjunction of the subscription and repertoire model has both economic and political underpinnings, since it is supported across the political spectrum. The current Christian Democratic Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media, Monika Grütters, for instance, ties together assumptions about the inalienable cultural value of theatre with economic arguments for their public funding. Like others in the same influential political position before her, she did so by underlining German theatre as both a sounding board for society and an autonomous institution valuable for the maintenance of bourgeois civic values: 'I support a modern cultural conception (*Kulturauffassung*)', by which she understands supporting theatres, despite their minimal economic profit, since they are 'an agora, that is, a discursive and a cultural space' (Grütters 2014b). 'In the USA,' she added, 'only 13 per cent of cultural institutions are publicly funded, the rest comes from private sponsoring. In Germany, this relation is the exact opposite. This secures us here a great aesthetic diversity, because the state creates the space and the freedom which artists require for their creativity' (Grütters 2014a). Elsewhere, she emphasised this differently:

> Where, if not in cultural activities, do people strive to find answers to the questions about meaningful values and forces that bind our society together? To make this possible is the task of a cultural politics, which feels obliged to maintain the freedom of the culture and the arts. For this freedom, we have to fight on many fronts today. (Grütters 2014b)

This relation between guiding public cultural and moral values (*Leitkultur*) and the 'educative mission' (*Bildungsauftrag*) associated with public theatres explains further interrelations between cultural politics and the *Bildung*-tradition of public theatres. In addition to 'régie management' (Montias 1983), that is, direct appointment of artistic directors by federal states or municipalities, 'public funding can affect the behaviour of theatre companies in many ways, including its pricing policy, the quality and lavishness of its production and its choice of repertoire' (O'Hagan 1998; Throsby 1994). One study even goes as far as concluding that 'subsidies *discourage* high levels of activity' and '*encourage* presentation of relatively higher levels of minority interest plays' (Austen-Smith 1980, 15). Indeed, his study claims, 'without subsidy, essentially no minority interest productions would be staged'

(Ibid.). Unsurprisingly, therefore, a comparative study of repertoire conventionality (number and variation of playwrights staged) suggests that 'the higher the state subsidisation of a theatre, the more non-conventional will be its repertoire' (O'Hagan and Neligan 2005, 48). As this discussion has shown, a repertoire theatre system merges political ('régie management'), economic (subsidies and box office sales), and aesthetic (repertoire unconventionality) aspects and values of theatre.

In the German public theatre context, this has led to a curious situation where government subsidies do indeed allow the flourishing of a critical and autonomous theatre scene and help to maximise artistic freedoms, e.g. with regard to censorship, while also serving to continue aspects of a tradition of *Bildung* and the cultural bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*) that inherits problematic Enlightenment assumptions about individualism, social and institutional hierarchies (see Hänzi 2013), and socio-cultural diversity. The 2014 recognition of the German public theatre (and orchestra) system as part an immaterial UNESCO world cultural heritage appears further to underline a trend towards reification rather than dynamic transformation of this system. And yet, especially by contrast to the post-Fordist working modalities and project-based temporalities of the German freelance performing arts scene (see Tinius 2015e), the 'slowness' and long-term trajectory of a theatre tradition and institutional framework based on an ensemble and repertoire system remains a noteworthy and exceptional case of cultural production that merits further investigation.

Repertoire as Ethics: The Theater an der Ruhr

This repertoire logic applies in different yet intensified ways to the Theater an der Ruhr. On one occasion, founding director Ciulli was asked how his theatre had managed to persist for so many years, to which he responded:

> We don't produce one premiere after the other and throw them away afterwards. We believe that there is a value in having an actor work over a long period of time on his role, when an ensemble stays together for a long period. We don't believe in steady change, in the constantly new. We perform our plays over many years and the people watch how we develop. If there is such a thing as a collective intelligence, then it can flourish in such a theatre. That's what I believe, that's why I do theatre. (Ciulli 2013)

The theater's slow production turnover is a consequence of the troupe's emphasis on long-term collective labour. The notion and practice of being a repertoire theatre provides insight into important aspects of the Theater an der Ruhr as a tradition. The word 'repertoire', not incidentally, refers both to a 'stock of plays that a company or a performer knows or is prepared to perform' as well as to 'a stock of skills or types of behaviour that a person habitually uses' (*Oxford Dictionary of English* 2015). This second sense of the concept 'repertoire' as a stock of *skills* is an important analytic for understanding the theater's cultivation of expertise through long-term rehearsals and travel. Diana Taylor aptly uses the term 'repertoire' to refer to 'a nonarchival system of transfer' (2003, xvii). Indeed, performing a play or a character for decades—as many actors at the theater have done—continues and complements their emphasis on cultivating *ethical acting conduct*. The notion of repertoire therefore also speaks to the transmission of values and ideals about good theatre itself through the very act of re-performing and, as a consequence, the continuous engagement with what the ensemble considers good theatre.

Being a repertoire theatre also has economic and structural implications. In fact, the Theater an der Ruhr is dependent on its repertoire. Since it produces only one or two new plays a season, it has to fill the programme with 'older' plays from its repertoire. At the time of writing, there were thirty-seven plays in the active repertoire, of which some premiered more than twenty-five years ago. Touring appearances in other cities account for nearly 40 per cent of the institution's revenues, complementing 60 per cent municipal subsidies and a negligible amount of box office and subscriber sales. This financial model creates a situation in which the local audiences in Mülheim are not existential financially (see Hemke 2008). For a theatre to be reliant on a decade-long re-performing of a stock of plays and on travel means that it needs a well-tuned logistical system and manageable storage space (storing stage sets and props for thrity-seven plays and remembering each screw and chair all falls into the hands of the five-person-strong technical crew) and actors capable of performing a wide range of acting styles, personae and characters, and of adapting quickly to new settings and audiences.

The repertoire system at the Theater an der Ruhr has turned the 'idea' of travel into a value and virtue that encompasses all ensemble members but is particularly connected to Ciulli. The theater's so-called 'international philosophy' is constructed around his own biography as

a cultural diplomat, cosmopolitan, migrant, and self-styled 'bastardo'. For thirty years, he almost single-handedly served as cultural broker between Foreign Ministries and local artists in countries with which even the German government had not had any official cultural contact. Only recently, Ciulli outsourced some of his work to the journalist and lawyer Rolf Hemke. He is employed at the Theater an der Ruhr as director for public relations and marketing, but official statements always underline that he is responsible for the international work of the theater 'alongside Roberto Ciulli' (Hemke 2008). Ciulli also commented on this development saying that Hemke was an excellent 'networker' (*Netzwerker*). Yet, for Ciulli, the kinds of networks one develops with other artists need to be scrutinised to avoid superficial engagement:

> [F]estivals produce monsters, half-baked artist entrepreneurs that enter a country for three days and don't get to know it at all – it's international jet-set, not international collaboration. (Interview, November 2013)

Ciulli acknowledged the excellent connections one could establish through festivals, for instance the networks created by Hemke in the Maghreb and the Arabic-speaking world, regions into which the Theater regularly travelled (see Hemke 2010, 2013). However, Ciulli also critically reflected on this *style* of collaboration to bring out what he thought was characteristic about the theater's international philosophy. In contrast to what he regarded as the managerial professionalism of contemporary international festivals, Ciulli referred to their international philosophy as that of the 'bastardo'. Using the word 'bastardo' adds an element of satire to their political endeavours, but it entails more than pure provocation and it certainly does not undermine their 'political sincerity' (Boyer 2013); travel refers to a process of self-transformation, civic engagement and political critique through theatre. As Ciulli put it, many of their key collaborations took place with artists from outside of Germany, 'but even when it doesn't travel, this theatre is the theatre for the stranger (*den Fremden*)' (cited in Bartula and Schroer 2001, 87–90).

> The language of this theatre is aimed at strangers. People who feel estranged, irrespective of their race, nationality or religion. For those Germans that *feel at home* ('die beheimateten Deutschen'), there are plenty of theatres, but the Theater an der Ruhr has always been the theatre for the estranged Germans—those Germans that felt like strangers in

> Germany. Twenty years ago, we were the theatre that addressed this generation of young people in Mülheim, who lived in a family where a grandfather or father was in the SS or the *Wehrmacht*.(…) We also address such kinds of strangers elsewhere: people in Chile or Turkey, where we staged plays about torture in prisons, or those in Iran, who suffered from censorship. We want to create a new conception of the stranger that says: of course, every artist has their own cultural heritage, their identity, but *the criteria by which we create art are not national or geographic, they are aesthetic*. (Ibid, my emphasis)

Ciulli's appeal to cosmopolitanism might appear ironic in the context of a previous discussion of the traditions that position the Theater an der Ruhr in Germany and it was not meant to suggest there was only one theatre that could fulfil this role; yet, it should be noted that his recourse to strangers who were alien in their own country refers to the peculiarly *German* post-war intellectual scepticism of the German nation-state. Concerns for German reunification and (Eastern) European disintegration heightened political reflexivity about nation-building among (West) German artists and intellectuals in the late 1980s. Ciulli's statement also hints at a more nuanced understanding of civic engagement realised in artistic encounters with different conceptions of nationhood and heritage; the Theater an der Ruhr is here not positioned as a liberating, in part 'conscientising' Freirean practice, but as an institution that validates and recognises estrangement as a defining experience of social life. Like rehearsing, the idea of travel and the practice of travelling thus became a structural foundation of the Theater as institution and a key ethico-aesthetic pillar of the theater as tradition. As the founders write in the 'International Principle' manifesto of the theaterlandscapes programme:

> The idea of travelling is the guiding motive of this theatre. Travelling is a school of seeing, necessary for a theatre dedicated to making thought perceptible. (Ciulli and Schäfer, n.d.c)

Much like the cultivation of *conduct* during rehearsals, travelling requires technical and bodily training. It generates a terminology used by the ensemble to explain what they understand as political about the theater. On the informal Theater an der Ruhr blog, called 'Why do we travel?', an actor published a post entitled 'This is why we travel!' (Seidl 2012). Its focus is on the imprisonment of the Kazakh director Bolat Atabayev,

a close friend of the theater, but Rupert opens the entry with a programmatic statement:

> Travel is a form of dialogue for us. We travel to ask and to answer questions. For the Theater an der Ruhr, travelling belongs to the central tasks of a political theatre. (Ibid.)

For the ensemble, travelling is concerned with forging international encounters with underrepresented artists from precarious regions of the world or with migrants in Germany through theatre and is thus a political practice in the sense of being one of forging solidarity and social ties on the basis of encounters over art. Furthermore, this particular concern for a non-patronising, artistically-motivated form of travel affects the aesthetic discourse on theatre in the institution, which crystallises around the idea of 'theatrical imagery' (*Theaterbild*) and 'image-language' (*Bildsprache*). Bildsprache describes the idea that theatre can communicate and connect artists and audiences via archetypal 'images' (*Bilder*) evoked through a combination of aesthetic elements (movement, sound, light), yet not primarily through text. According to Ciulli and the ensemble, this artistic 'language' is universal in so far as it transcends linguistic and national barriers, although they recognise that aesthetic styles, like philosophical theories, are received differently everywhere (see Bohannan 1966). Its claim and vocabulary is therefore meant as a provocation aimed at national traditions of arts, rather than an artistic essentialism; one, which I explore in its complexity and pitfalls in the following sections in greater detail.

Censorship, Critique, and Translation: Preparing Algerian Theaterlandscapes

Late October 2013, a preparatory meeting in the foyer of the Theater an der Ruhr near Mülheim's industrial harbour. Ciulli addresses the ensemble: 'We are at the Algerian festival as official guests of the state and will be received at the German consulate. This is an honour for us, but also a cultural political event.' Ciulli and Schäfer highlight the significance of travelling into this region, noting their ongoing collaboration with the Tunisian artist and lawyer Meriam Bousselmi, to support her in spite of antagonism she experienced against her work as an outspoken female director in Tunis. 'We also must inform ourselves and be aware of the

history of the region and the conflicts', he continues. 'Our presence coincides with Algerian independence day on 1 November', Ciulli adds, and underlines: 'We must therefore be particularly alert to censorship—we're not going to be docile, but also won't risk too much. Such things are always to be negotiated on the ground. That's why Hemke and I [will] travel there a few days in advance.'

Two weeks later, I am waiting for a bus to the airport with the ensemble. I am taking advantage of a slight delay to speak to actress Maria Neumann. Fifty-five-years old at the time, she has been at the theatre since 1986, making her one of the longest-standing ensemble members. For fifteen years, she has been performing *Le petit prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry with Ciulli, and, likewise, has been performing the lead role in Peter Handke's *Kaspar* since its premiere in 1987. This latter play is one of two that tour to Algeria—the other being a recent production in which she took over a role. Maria's relation to the theater is unique and difficult, but revealing of some of the tensions underlying its carefully managed tradition. As a core ensemble member involved in many plays over decades, she began to distance herself from the daily rehearsals of the theater. In her view, the intellectual and political discourse around the significance of public theatres has become too stagnant and introspective. Nonetheless, Maria emphasised that she owes her entire artistic development to the Theater an der Ruhr and finds it important to continue working with the institution. As a compromise between her discontent with public theatres and professional acting in such institutions, she started building up the *Fairy Tales* project, a very popular children's theatre section within the Theater an der Ruhr, which she runs with an assistant. She has also been engaging in her own very physical and intense one-person adaptations inspired by Fluxus and Joseph Beuys, of Joseph Roth's interpretation of the Book of Job, for instance, in her own apartment in nearby Duisburg, problematising implicitly the deported Jewish family that had lived in it until the 1930s. These plays are intense narratives, weaving together a literary adaptation with site-specific histories and an intimately personal contextualisation of the performance in her own practice and understanding of theatre as a form of social process. Her distance from the theater is not a subject of much discussion in the ensemble, yet it is tacitly acknowledged, allowing her to cultivate her own autonomous projects while remaining part of the ensemble and at an arm's length from the Theater an der Ruhr.

Waiting for the bus in the theatre foyer, Maria suggests we go outside for a stroll. She walks through fallen leaves from the old beech trees

lining the alley in front of the theater. We stop at a beech that has been blown over by the strong winds this morning. Looking over my shoulder to see if anyone else is with us, she expresses some of her grievances. Wondering whether 'the effort is worth the hassle', travelling to other countries while remaining within the framework of festivals and foreign policy rhetoric, she underlines the role of local artists: 'You will be watching the play and the audience. I'm very curious to hear what you observe', she continues, asking me to be weary of where civic engagement and artistic exchange takes place. 'Not in official ceremonies, but in private homes, when real people meet, or in the eyes of a young local artist who comes up to us and allows us to learn and listen.'

I took note of her criticism and wanted to ask her more, but our bus driver called us over to get back to the airport. Our conversations were to continue in Algeria.

Privilege, Precariousness and Power: Arriving in Algeria

At some later point during our flight to Algiers, I sat next to Rupert Seidl, another core actor in the ensemble. He described to me the friendship with Meriam, the Tunisian lawyer and director, whom we were going to meet in Algeria. The Theater an der Ruhr had in the years leading up to this travel become her patron, Rupert recounts. He thinks that international travel is precisely about such long-lasting encounters through art:

> I remember vividly how moved I was when we were performing in Iran, over a decade ago, and the audience was so thrilled about our performance that they came on stage and shook my hand afterwards. In such moments, I notice how much responsibility we have as actors – for the emotional effect of our art, but also as privileged hosts or official guests in precarious regions of the world.

The following morning after our late-night arrival, we continued our journey into the east of the country to the capital of the Béjaïa region, the largest Berber-speaking city in Kabylia, and the festival's main site: Béjaïa. Our journey was seriously delayed since we were asked to wait for a police escort. 'Because you are international and official guests, it is required', we were repeatedly told. Two white police cars escorted us for the next five hours, often turning on their blue lights and sirens to get us through dense traffic. While many people in the bus found these

dramatics entertaining and took photos, Ruždi Aliji, the theatre's long-standing lighting director, who came to sit next to me, had something else on his mind. 'It's all spectacle,' he said. 'We're being invited to showcase European theatre, but at the expense of locals who need the support.' He paused for a moment, before whispering, albeit with great intensity and while holding on to my arm as if to underline his words:

> Has anybody thought about who is organising this festival? It's not artists, it's politicians. Who is invited? Europeans! Who is excluded? Local artists. All these questions are answered by the politicians here, and we're being used as pawns in this game.

I asked him if he had always thought this way about the international travel of the theater, reminding him how highly he spoke to me earlier about the first Yugoslav collaborations. 'It's different now,' he responded. 'I remember many phases in my life when nobody questioned power and art was just a commodity for politics.' 'That's why,' he told me, that 'we', gesturing at me and then at him, 'we, artists and intellectuals, need to remain alert, Jonas.' Ruždi continued to qualify his claims. Ciulli, he said, was different and had created an institution that for a long time practised a different kind of theatre politics, one that was inclusive and negotiated the diplomatic power of art creatively. However, Ruždi added that the ever more pervasive 'festival culture', which Ciulli also criticised, minimised actual interactions with local artists and reduced them to an official level: 'It's now all mediated, we're no longer in the same control.' It was to some extent, he continued, an erosion of the tradition of the Theater an der Ruhr, in which he strongly believed. It was partly for that reason, he added, that it was important that I documented the political nature of the theater's travels—so that one could begin to reflect on it again. This reflection and self-criticism had ceased to be as lively as it used to be, he concluded. Our conversation was abruptly stopped when our bus came to another halt at a crowded bridge. The police cars started their sirens to cut through the traffic jam. Ruždi was concerned and moved to the front of the bus to see what was going on.

As if she had waited for him to leave, Maria slipped into his seat. Wearing a black suit, black shirt, black jacket and dark sunglasses, she looked as if she was in a role already. 'I wonder, is this really worth it,' she sighed. 'When travelling as privileged Europeans, we *always* need to ask

ourselves who benefits from this. Do we, does a critical community of artists, or are we just here to function as cultural capital for the local cultural brokers?' She looked at me, then stared straight ahead, as though she was not awaiting a response, before she added: 'How are audiences going to understand that the piece [*Kaspar* by Peter Handke] is a critique of post-war Germany and of forced socialisation into language?' She explained that these forms of cultural translation required careful contextualisation of the exchange, profound discussions on the local theatre scene and its situation. Otherwise, she said, one would run the risk of becoming part of a neo-colonial spectacle in which European theatre is exibited with no real chance for dialogue. At this point, she turned to me, like the other actors and ensemble members before, underlining how important a critical reflection of travel and exchange was for them. For her, my observation of audiences was key: 'You'll be better positioned to judge the audience than we are: for example whether they also let in working-class people or whether it's all pre-ordered high culture.' We continued our exchange at a later point, as we neared our destination (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 The Theater an der Ruhr bookstand in the Théâtre Régional de Béjaïa. Photograph by the author

Language, Reception, and Repertoire: *Kaspar* in Béjaïa

On the evening of the *Kaspar* performance in Algeria a few days later, I arrived early to help an actress and an intern at the bookstand with translations. They were giving away several programmes with background to each play, as well as several books on Ciulli and the Theater an der Ruhr. Many local artists had heard of the theatre and its reputation for having travelled the world. They left me notes with their addresses, or brought gifts for the ensemble, such as a book about the cultural history of the city. I later brought these to the actors, telling them about our brief encounters. Some were touched and regretted not having more time to talk to these artists who wanted to get in touch (Fig. 2).

When the doors opened at 7 p.m., the attention of all audience members diverted to getting in, rushing past the security men to fill the theatre to the last seat. I barely found a place myself, eventually sitting down next to three elderly men in the last row. They had kindly invited me to

Fig. 2 Placard announcing the performance of Kaspar outside of the Théâtre Régional de Béjaïa. Photograph by the author

sit next to them. We introduced each other just as Rolf Hemke began his introduction in French, in which he explained that the play *Kaspar* addresses the historical case of Kaspar Hauser who was found without speech in the German woods and became a subject of medical and social attention, specifically of a brutal process of language socialisation which broke him psychologically. Hemke mentioned that the Nazi period in Germany was an important backdrop for the ensemble and their interpretation of the play, but deliberately left it open to the audience what they might perceive as the right analogy or association. It was the kind of introduction that allowed for the contextualisation Maria had thought necessary, not least because it was held in French. Specifically in Kabylia, the three older men told me, they could relate this to the tumultuous linguistic and cultural oppression under the French 'and now under Arabic Islam', one of them said. In fact, I was frequently drawn into conversations about this in buses, taxis or cafés, specifically in Kabylia, where many people, men, women, and students alike, told me they were proud to resist the 'Islamicisation of the country'. It was not an uncontentious topic, as just what people meant when they referred to Islam was heavily inflected by media reports and people's own experiences, leading frequently to heated arguments that broke out between disagreeing parties in the busride into town. Handke's musings and the ensemble's staging facilitated a reflected translation of this experience onto the stage for the three men in the audience, since the play played with the inability to speak, using language just as much as sounds and gestures that did not require an awareness of the play's dense source language.

After the play, the three men told me that they were fascinated by its powerful evocation of what violence can do to people. They alluded to the scenes in the play during which actors enacted, either without language or just by using gestures, noises and sounds, the devastating effects of violence and mechanisation on human beings. Dystopian encounters between masters and slaves during the performance were evoking the negative effects that social assimilation and homogenisation can have on the free development of subjectivity. One of the three men mentioned Nietzsche, the other said this was about moral language and its power to become a medium of suppression. Their observations resonated with Ciulli's idea of theatre as inciting reflection. Yet, the three men had got so caught up in concerns about the *literal* rather than the visual language of the play that we ended up discussing differences between the German, French and Arabic subtitles instead of their

interpretations of the actual performance. Our fascinating conversation continued for a little while, but I eventually had to join the ensemble for a brief meeting with the German ambassador before we headed back to the hotel.

Later that night, one of the actors and I were standing outside the hotel to catch some fresh air before calling it a day. I asked him whether he thought that a play could be 'over-performed' (*ausgespielt*) after twenty-five years, thinking of Maria's critical comments on *Kaspar*'s long existence in the repertoire. His response contrasted with her comments, since he stressed the ethical importance of continued acting of the same roles. Reminiscing about his own first professional roles, his eventual employment at the Theater, and the fifteen years he has spent in it, he came to the conclusion that a repertoire theatre offered a unique framework for an actor's self-development over time.

> If you play something for twenty-five years, like Maria, you begin to meet yourself over and over again. You see an entire generation of actors live through a role. You don't get this collective and individual growth and cultivation [*Bildung*] anywhere else.

For him, it was obvious that the repertoire system offered great educational and transformative value. Repeatedly, he referred to the actor's body and faculties as a 'field' that needed cultivating through repeated learning and acting. The performance and reperformance of characters in different countries and to different audiences is a practice of self-understanding, he said. 'Travel is a way to expose yourself', he stressed, 'and that is the way in which we learn as actors'.

'More Serious Theatre': Woyzeck in Algiers

The last stop on our tour was Algiers. After interviewing some actors in the café adjacent to the Théâtre National d'Alger (TNA) the morning after our arrival, I spoke to an artistic director from the theatre. He gave me a tour of their exhibition on theatre since Independence. He told me that they used to be what one German actor translated as a *Dreispartentheater*, that is, an institution presenting theatre, ballet and opera, but now it appeared to be mainly theatre and ballet. He said he was glad to have a German ensemble presenting 'more serious theatre again', adding that he did not mean to imply there was none in Algeria, but: 'critical intellectuals have a hard time in the current strict religious

Fig. 3 Bookstand in the foyer of the Théâtre National d'Alger. Photograph by the author

climate of Algiers' (Fig. 3). I asked him what he meant with 'serious theatre', remembering preparatory discussions in Germany about the many critical writers and artists from the Maghrebine region. 'I mean theatre that creates images we can relate to without being explicit; not all can be said or shown here, but that doesn't mean it cannot be serious in its meaning', he added, leaning in closer so as to emphasise his point. 'There are many languages other than the spoken word that creates a feeling of solidarity that you understand our concerns, for language, education, military power and so on, *tu comprends*'?

The play that evening began, as usual, with an address to the audience—this time by Ciulli himself. In fluent French with thick Italian accent, he introduced the play: Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, a fragment written by the young revolutionary German poet about a soldier exploited by the military for social experiments.

> Woyzeck is based on a true historical case and which problematises the issue of violent socialisation, the relationship between an individual, his subjectivity, and a society that erodes the character's development of a proper self.

During the break, visitors told me that they saw in it an analogy to the increasing censorship in the country, and what people are allowed to say or do. But they were aware that this was their interpretation; the play, they told me, just acted as a catalyst for further associations on their part. After the play, several audience members walked up to the stage to pay Ciulli their respects and to shake some actors' hands. An Austrian–English ensemble we had watched the evening before was present, and so, too, were five German academics teaching in the region as part of a German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) programme and their students. They all found the intensity and discipline, the estrangement and reduced language of the play noteworthy. Later in the hotel, I joined some of the actors in the bar. It was often in response to their performances that they reflected on the values of theatre; sometimes acting styles were remarked upon, colleagues praised or challenged, but frequently discussions erupted over the purpose of a play, the audience reaction, or the rehearsals leading up to it. This time, one actress commented that a literary symposium had been held in Algiers at the same time as they were there, on Islam, intimacy and the body—topics that would have been very appropriate for the themes they discussed and poked at with the two plays. The actors, who were later joined by two Tunisian and Syrian actors they had got to know over the course of the trip and from the local theatre, further reflected on the travel to Algeria. It became evident just how important the integration of logistical arrangements with artistic ones is: the navigation of existing cultural events, advertisement for plays, and the creation of additional spaces for discussing plays was regarded as crucial and as interdependent by the ensemble. In order to engage both artists and locals, one actress said, one needed to create possibilities for encountering one another. It does not suffice to arrive, perform, and then leave afterwards. 'Theatre is a gesture, a greeting, but it needs to do work to reach out to another person beyond this initial hello', an actor in the ensemble aptly put it.

Imagery, Hospitality, and Didactic Theatre

Shortly after our return to Mülheim, I met with Ciulli to reflect on the trip to Algeria. 'Our visit was only a first step', he said, continuing the vocabulary used by the actor I cited on our last evening in Algeria. 'Now we are inviting artists from Algeria to us, and then we will see how we continue collaborating.' He mentioned a few more performances, screenings and discussions that they had planned for the coming months, all

of which would pick up themes relevant to the other Maghrebine countries from which they had agreed to host ensembles. The visit in Algeria was just a first encounter in a longer series of exchanges: a first reaching out, a guest-visit that would be reciprocated by hospitality. 'We need to intensify relations if we want to get at a deeper understanding of one another through our artistic practices', he said. Ciulli and I also discussed an article I had written about the international Theatrelandscapes project (Tinius 2015a), at which point we were joined briefly by an actress from the ensemble. She knew about the article too and pointed out how important it was to write critically about their artistic projects: 'We need an archive of our unrealised plans and failures, too, in order to move beyond, to push ourselves', she said. Referring to a draft of the article on their international travel, they both noted my inclusion of discussions of what they called 'Theaterbilder' (*theatrical imagery*) and the theatre's 'Bildsprache' (*image-language*). In the article, I elaborate how the purpose of constructing a 'theatre of images' is to *correct* a didactic aesthetic whose meaning is already explained, an issue that caused great discussion after this and other trips abroad, since it concerned the limitations of performing a play conceived in one country and language in another.

Their reluctance to rely on a fixed narrative and the significance of ambivalence in creating a play was a recurrent concern also during the many interviews I conducted with Ciulli and the ensemble during our trip to Algeria. I mentioned the commentary of the older men on the subtitles in Algeria, prompting Ciulli to reflect:

> I used to have a much more radical attitude towards language and images, which was to have no subtitles at all, ever. We never subtitled *Kaspar*. If somebody watches a play and sees images [*Bilder*] that are only marginally affected by language-images [*Sprachbilder*], then he will engage more intensely with the play. *Seeing* a play through its images allows you to see the play doubly, from two angles: language and images. This is not just an aesthetic attitude, but also contains the essence of how I direct: I direct fundamentally through images.

I asked him what he understood by an 'image' in theatre.

> The concept of the image holds the answer to the question whether theatre has an abstract language that transcends concrete language. Theatre contains *unthinkable* images. Every director has to ask himself how he deals with this secret theatrical language that can transcend particular languages. For every play, I meet with my costume designer, dramaturge, and

> stage designer and we arrange images for each character and scene. These are never finite, concrete pictures, but elements of archetypal traditions. We create such arrangements because to speak of an image in theatre is always to speak of multiple potential images. The images that theatre offers have to be so versatile as to encompass all the possible images that can arise in the imagination of an audience. If theatre manages to do that, it can speak to audiences in any language.

The language of theatre, as conceived by Ciulli, thus seeks both to transcend images that unify different audiences and to contain a multiplicity of meanings. Travelling allows him and the ensemble to witness different interpretations and to be challenged to communicate to people unfamiliar with their traditions of seeing. The challenge for theatre thus rests in allowing for and negotiating these forms of communication. The aim was 'to resist dogma and fixation', Ciulli added in one conversation. Therefore, for the director and his ensemble, theatre must not become 'didactic' and 'prescribe' images or interpretations, because in such a mode of action no mutual recognition of other views is possible. If ever someone asked Ciulli or ensemble members what they meant with a particular scene, both in Algeria and elsewhere, their response would always be to return the question: 'What did *you* see?'

To reconcile the presentation of a particular idea about a play, developed during the concept conversations, with the possible different meanings by other audiences is one of the core challenges for theatre that travels abroad as frequently as the Theater an der Ruhr. Ciulli described this confrontation with different perspectives, both abroad and in Germany, as one of the principal tasks for a political theatre:

> When you translate a piece and impose your explanation of images on to the audience's own imagination, you create a didactic attitude [*schulische Haltung*]. You force people to listen to you. This is the way to create terror – and not aesthetic experience. To seek out the infinite images that can be imagined by an audience is what has motivated the international work of the Theater an der Ruhr from its first days.

Concluding Remarks

The ensemble's scepticism about 'festival theatre' rests on their distinction between a theatre that cultivates inward reflection through art and an outward-orientated theatre that seeks mere communication of a

'message'. Travelling, a 'structuring element' of the institution I introduced in this chapter, thus relates to the tradition of the Theater an der Ruhr by practising a form of ethical conversation across borders, to borrow a phrase from Evans and Mair (2015). Those plays that the ensemble considers to have achieved this nuanced instigation of reflection through its images particularly well are then incorporated into the repertoire. Plays in this repertoire could potentially be replayed over decades, challenging actors to relate to these characters and images over long periods of time. Acting a particular character is therefore not a one-off task. Many core actors and actresses from the ensemble frequently told me that certain roles they had reperformed over decades complement their non-professional life significantly. This sort of reflection on one's roles, and the outlined challenges of international travel, are thus further ways in which the institution facilitates the cultivation of artistic conduct beyond the stage.

Since the elaboration both of aesthetic images and of ethical conduct frequently takes place in the context of politically charged exchanges with artists, travel also relates to multiple political dimensions of theatre. Travel requires the ensemble to think humbly about the meaning of their acting in relation to other acting traditions, about the potential impact of their art on other communities, and it has a clear diplomatic afterlife: artists may be invited to Germany for political refuge in an artistically supportive context, as in Tunisian director Meriam Bousselmi's case. For the theatre, travelling thus aims to achieve three related functions that are fundamental to its tradition and function as the second 'structuring element' of the institution: an aesthetic one (imagery), an ethical one (working collectively and individually at a development of one's acting sensibilities), and a political one (building up a network of and reaching out to artists that are not in the canon of artistic work). All of these make up the particular form of civic engagement practised by the Theater an der Ruhr.

In this chapter I hope to have provided sketches of an ethnographic glimpse into the difficulties and discussions of a pioneering albeit historically avant-garde travelling theatre around performing German plays in Algeria. Even in a festival situation with international European guests in traditional theatre settings, forms of intercultural cooperation emerge over discussions of political aesthetics, rather than as forms of patronising socio-political intervention. Preferring long-term interactions over short festival participation, the Theater an der Ruhr has over the years

developed an implicit critique of forms of 'intercultural work' (see Barba and Fowler 1982; Fischer-Lichte et al. 2014; Marx 2003; Watson 2002). One of the key differences however between the work of Eugenio Barba at the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) and that of Robert Ciulli, for instance, is that the latter does not work towards *identifying* performance universals, and certainly not by means of breaking down, altering or modifying existing performative traditions. Barba distinguished his own theatre practice as a form of anthropology from Schechner's by describing it as 'the archaic way of physical, anatomical study' (Barba 1987, 191). For Ciulli on the other hand, a concern for directing a theatre of 'images' that seeks to create means of communication beyond a particular language refers to an aesthetic form of artistic diplomacy. Language, then, becomes just one among several instruments for creating a sense of shared concern, as I witnessed in conversation with the three old men after the *Kaspar* performance in eastern Algeria.

The theatre and its participants have also taken explicit political action, for example against the imprisonment of Kazakh theatre director Bolat Atabayev.[1] They also support and promote the provocative plays of Tunisian director and lawyer Meriam Bousselmi (Hemke 2013), and the project on refugees led by the young Turkish director Adem Köstereli (Tinius 2015c). However, one of the key components of the international work of the Theater an der Ruhr is that it does not strive to be interventionist in the sense of advocacy for a political or pedagogical ideology or as a didactic tool.[2] Different from a theatre theory and practice that sees intervention as its central toolkit and application as a concept, Ciulli's ensemble develops a notion of engagement that is hermeneutic, interpretive and doubtful about the potentials and pitfalls of international work. As debates about the nuances of the political in theatre continue to push theatre directors into new directions (see Deck and Sieburg 2011, Tinius 2015b), Ciulli's ensemble articulates an ongoing concern with a different sense of 'political' theatre: a stage language that seeks to connect an ethical concern for exploring the depth and complexity of human relations with political reasoning and aesthetic play. Reflection on the process, the failures, and the politics of creating meaningful encounters between artists and audiences is a key aspect of the theatrical diplomacy of the Theater an der Ruhr. This chapter introduced a theatre that has been concerned with the possibilities and limits of artistic diplomacy for over 35 years. It remains a singular appearance during a certain period of German theatre history which has since been

suceeded by a more widespread practice of international collaborations among public German theatres. But what I hope to have explored are some of the difficulties of reconciling the immense logistical and political efforts required to maintain such travel with imaginaries of social and civic engagement through theatre. Even for an institution that has modelled its infrastructure and everyday labour on anticipations of travel and international coproductions, whose ensemble structure is a diverse result of these exchanges, and whose repertoire speaks of the influences from the dozens of countries repeatedly visited, the initiation and maintenance of meaningful transnational exchanges is a slow and steady process of reflection and learning. The critical introspections I cited throughout this chapter testify to the intense concern of this ensemble and yet also of the delicate difficulty of artistic diplomacy and civic engagement through theatre.

Notes

1. For coverage on the protest, see: http://campaignkazakhstan.org/index.php/2012/06/29/bolat-atabayev-released/ or Ciulli's co-authorship of an open letter: http://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7052&catid=126 and http://www.freundederkuenste.de/aktuelles/medien-ausschreibungen/ankuendigung/goethe-medaillen-preistraeger-bolat-atabayev-ist-frei-offener-brief-von-volker-schloendorff-und-roberto-ciulli-hatte-erfolg.html (all links last accessed 11 October 2017).
2. The relationship between actors and practitioners within large-scale civic engagement projects has long been subject to critique, both in ethnographic, but also theoretical terms, as a central tool in the reconfiguration of such relations (see Crehan 2011; Flynn and Tinius 2015).

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