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Rimini Protokoll and Bürgerbühne Theatre: Institutions, Challenges and Continuities

A Surprise at the Theatertreffen

In 2004, a rather surprising event in German theatre circles occurred: the production *Deadline* by Rimini Protokoll was invited to the Theatertreffen in Berlin. This annual festival is considered a definitive gathering of the most outstanding productions in established German-speaking theatre. A jury of selectors travels up and down the country in order to identify the most remarkable productions of the season, which are then performed in Berlin. At the Theatertreffen, prior to 2004, one expected to see classical dramas or modern theatre pieces that were professionally staged in an impressive and innovative manner by well-seasoned directors. *Deadline* marked the appearance of a new kind of contribution to the program. The production was not a staging of a dramatic work but the outcome of a collective project. *Deadline* addressed the everyday experience of death in a social context by giving a voice to people who were professionally involved in the processes connected with death and dying: for example, a professional *Trauerredner* (funeral speaker), a nurse and a monumental stonemason. The work was not a work of theatre featuring dialogue, a plot, and characters, but a discursive exploration of a theme from different perspectives. Most surprising was the fact that the audience members did not encounter actors but performers who visibly and audibly lacked any professional actor training. 'Real' and apparently authentic people stood on stage, telling the audience about their everyday experiences at their jobs outside of the theatre.

For many Anglophone readers, Rimini Protokoll is likely to be the exemplar of German, or indeed European, 'reality theatre', in part because of that company's high-profile productions outside of Germany. However, their work forms part of a continuum of productions throughout Europe that feature 'real' people. The audience sees people on stage who have obviously not gone through physical and vocal training for the theatre, who do not have mastery over performance skills, and who are not capable of embodying a virtuosic role. Often the cast members for such productions are defined by the social group to which they belong: children, seniors, homeless people, prison inmates, the mentally or physically disabled, or members of certain professions. These cast members tell the audience about themselves and their personal experiences or professional situation, thereby appearing to be experts of their everyday lives.

The nature and goals of these productions have been diverse, running the gamut from performances guided by social or educational agendas to productions motivated exclusively by formal or specific artistic concerns. The quantity and variety of these productions suggests an interest in questioning the demarcations that have often separated social and aesthetic practice,

professionalism and dilettantism, and art and life. On the one hand, the critical acclaim received by a significant number of productions working with non-professional performers might indicate that commonly accepted criteria for evaluating the quality of theatre are under pressure, this development in the relationship between ethics and aesthetics presenting a challenge to professional theatre, its traditional schools, and, not least, theatre studies. On the other, by including *Deadline* in its 2004 showcase, the Theatertreffen signalled an openness to different theatre formats, suggesting a flexibility in such criteria.

Indeed, although the inclusion of *Deadline* in the Theatertreffen was surprising in terms of its use of non-professional performers and its lack of dramatic plot and characterisation, this inclusion marked a stage in a development that had actually begun much earlier (Wartemann 2002) and that continues to assert its influence in various ways both within and beyond Germany through the increasingly numerous works by professional directors and performance artists that foreground non-professional performers. Further, if one looks beyond the use of non-professional performers, *Deadline*'s inclusion becomes rather less surprising. *Deadline* was originally performed in a former cinema, the Neues Cinema in Hamburg, rather than a purpose-built theatre venue, and was co-produced by the Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin, one of the most renowned production houses for independent theatre in Germany. However, unlike most of Rimini Protokoll's other work and most forms of 'reality theatre' in Germany at the time—but entirely as might be expected for a work included in the Theatertreffen—*Deadline* was also co-produced by prestigious municipal theatre companies, in this case the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg, the Staatsschauspiel Hanover and the Burgtheater Vienna. This article aims to contextualise the work of Rimini Protokoll in terms of the German theatrical institutional framework, and its relationship to text-based theatre and the German and wider European concept of Bürgerbühne theatre.

A Context of Crisis and Collaboration Between Two Institutional Systems

The German theatre landscape is dominated by two systems, which are both largely financed by government subsidies: the *Stadttheater* and *Staatstheater* (municipal theatre and state theatre) and the *Freies Theater* (free or independent theatre) (Roselt 2013: 215). The system of municipal and state theatres, which extends all throughout Germany, emerged in the second half of the 18th century as a response to the collision of, on the one hand, a middle-class drive for political and cultural emancipation, and on the other hand, the theatrical culture of the court. Municipal and state theatres are ensemble theatres that have traditionally worked with an established group of artistic and non-artistic employees at a specific site and that present up to four different genres (drama, opera, dance, and children's and youth theatre) in an annual season program. A key goal of the repertoire is to cultivate and promote classical works of opera and dramatic literature. This cultural and educational mandate still continues to serve as the justification for the public funding of theatres. Municipal and state theatres generate approximately 19 percent of their operating budget through ticket sales. The rest is covered by funding from municipal and state sources (Bolwin 2010: 141). This rare funding situation enables theatres to offer long-term contracts for their artists. Municipal and state theatres can be understood as institutions that produce professional theatre and that offer relatively stable and static working and living conditions.

In the 1960s the *Freies Theater* or so-called independent theatre movement developed as a counter to this system of municipal and state theatres (Kurzenberger 2009: 131). The *Freies Theater* is characterised and organised by individual groups of people, rather than established theatre companies. In opposition to the hierarchical division of labour in municipal theatres, independent theatre often experiments with alternative, collective forms of production. Despite its name, the *Freies Theater* is also state-funded, and carries its own cultural and educational

mandate: in contrast to (and perhaps complementing) that of the municipal and state theatres, the cultural and educational mandate of the Freies Theater is not to preserve the tradition of dramatic literature but to make experimental and avant-garde contributions to the aesthetic of traditional theatre. Early on, those engaged in independent theatre explored performance art, tested the use of new media on stage, and worked with audience participation. Presentation platforms for independent theatre include festivals, international networks, and, increasingly, also actual theatres used as venues by a range of different groups. In comparison to municipal and state theatres, the production situation for independent theatre projects is economically problematic. The groups are largely dependent on generating their own income as 'only' 41 percent of their budgets is covered by public funding (Bundesverband Freier Theater 2015: 14). This economic pressure makes itself felt in the working and living situations of those engaged in independent theatre projects. Long-term contracts and especially salaried positions are the exception to the rule. Most people who are involved in independent theatre work on individual projects as freelancers. Their income is 40 percent below the German average (Keuchel 2010: 45). This precarious situation makes Freies Theater practitioners appear to be the forerunners for a world of deregulated work and life (Loacker 2010: 344). At the same time, a critical discussion has recently emerged as to what extent the artists working in independent theatre tend to accept the post-Fordian working conditions without criticism (Stegemann 2013: 86).

As mentioned above, *Deadline* was a critically acclaimed co-production between three established municipal theatres and a renowned Freies Theater production house. What in 2004 was an unusual production arrangement can now be seen as a forerunner for recent developments in the institutional framework of German theatre. The considerable reduction of spending by public administrations as a result of the Global Financial Crisis brought to a head an ongoing debate in Germany about state subsidies for theatres, a debate that continues today. The cuts to theatre budgets (or even the looming possibility of theatre closures) has been accompanied by the question of why theatre should be funded by taxes in the first place. Both systems are under growing pressure to justify their subsidies through justifying their practices. One result of this discussion is that the two theatre systems (municipal and state theatres on the one hand and the Freies Theater on the other) have made advances towards one another that have led to various forms of cooperation and *mésalliance*. Thus, municipal theatres not only now aspire to foster globally relevant works of dramatic literature, but in the midst of globalisation they are also exploring the local relevance of their work. Freies Theater performance groups have been commissioned by municipal theatres to generate research projects with local inhabitants. Established theatres thus use the artistic know-how of the experimental scene, and experimental groups have come to value the good working conditions and production budgets of municipal theatres. These mutual advances have been encouraged and facilitated by the so-called 'Doppelpass fund', established in 2011 by the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation) with funding guaranteed until 2019. The Doppelpass fund is specifically designed to support the cooperation of independent theatre groups and established theatre institutions:

the goal of the Doppelpass fund is to offer independent groups an opportunity to benefit from the structures and capacity of established theatres, while at the same time, offer artists at the theatres a chance to observe these groups at work and apply their methods in an artistically productive manner (Kulturstiftung des Bundes, n.d.).

What was innovative in 2004 with Rimini Protokoll's *Deadline* has become a matter of survival in the current economic climate.

Bürgerbühnen

This funding situation and the breaking down of barriers between municipal and state theatres and the Freies Theater have allowed a diverse range of new production possibilities to open up in Germany for productions that wish to use non-professional performers, in particular the so-called 'Bürgerbühne' (which literally means 'Citizens' Stage', and has also been translated as 'Citizens' Theatre', 'People's Theatre', and 'Civil Theatre') productions that originated in Germany but which have become a prominent European phenomenon in recent years. However, although these projects have contributed to the blurring of boundaries between municipal and state theatres and the Freies Theater, they have not always been the results of cooperation across the institutional framework of the sort envisaged by the Doppelpass project.

In 2009 Martin Schulz, Director of the Staatsschauspiel Dresden, established a new program in his theatre, in which participatory research projects on local issues were to be developed in cooperation with Dresden residents (Kurzenberger/Tscholl 2014: 11). The project was called the Bürgerbühne. In contrast to the Doppelpass project the Dresdner Bürgerbühne does not aim to pursue cooperations with independent theatre but to integrate the working methods and artistic forms of independent theatre into a state theatre. The Dresdner Bürgerbühne has its own budget and a designated rehearsal space within the Staatstheater. It develops five productions a year, which are integrated into the seasonal program of the state theatre.

Readers familiar with Rimini Protokoll will recognise familiar aspects of the so-called 'Theatre of Experts' in Bürgerbühne productions. The term 'Theatre of Experts' was coined and introduced into theatre discourse early in the new millennium by the initiators of Rimini Protokoll (Malzacher 2008: 23). Since then it has been utilised in a range of contexts and often functions as an umbrella description for numerous professional theatre projects that involve non-professional performers. For example, in children's and youth theatre, the children are often described as performing in the role of experts (Wartemann 2015: 21). Using the term 'Theatre of Experts' means defining non-professional performers not by what they cannot do (that is, act), but by what they are capable of, what they contribute and achieve. Their expertise is based both on their professional skills and on their life experience, which they usually talk about or demonstrate in performances. The biography of the performer plays a significant role in the Theatre of Experts, as it does in Bürgerbühne productions. One can therefore situate both the Theatre of Experts and Bürgerbühne productions within a wider tradition of documentary theatre insofar as the bodies, voices, and knowledge of these experts constitute the documentary material that is then aesthetically negotiated on stage (Dreysse 2004: 68).

Nonetheless, although the term 'Theatre of Experts' was available, the Dresden project and its subsequent offshoots throughout Europe have chosen to use the umbrella term 'Bürgerbühne', or its equivalent in translation, suggesting a difference of philosophical approach from the 'Theatre of Experts', if not of actual practice.¹ The term 'Bürgerbühne' is rhetorically linked to the tradition of the theatre as an institution of moral education – an institution that since the advent of the bourgeois [bürgerlich] drama in the 18th century has been associated with the cultural emancipation of the middle class and that has served an educational purpose through its dedication to staging enlightening dramatic works of literature. One might draw links between bourgeois dramas such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1767 comedy *Minna von Barnhelm, oder das Soldatenglück* (*Minna von Barnhelm, or the Soldiers' Happiness*) and Friedrich Schiller's 1784 tragedy *Kabale und Liebe* (*Intrigue and Love*) that broke with tradition by portraying contemporary middle-class Germans on stage and Bürgerbühne productions that break with tradition by actually bringing contemporary Germans on stage. In this historical context, citizens are no longer

conceived of unproblematically as the subjects of a royal authority that can do with them as it pleases. By granting them the right to be represented on stage, such bourgeois dramas conceive of contemporary citizens as having equal status and rights to representation as the heroes of the historical and mythic past, and by analogy, rights to take part in political and cultural life. In terms of the Bürgerbühne movement, this taking part means not only acting as audience members or being represented by professional actors, but also entering the stage as participants in theatrical productions in order to address, in this context, those things that move contemporary citizens.

Similar projects have been initiated at other European independent and state theatres. These various forms of Bürgerbühne theatre have formed an internationally operating network that so far has presented productions at two Bürgerbühne festivals, the first held in 2014 at the Staatsschauspiel Dresden and the second in 2015 at the Nationaltheater Mannheim, thus providing high-profile institutional homes for Europe-wide Bürgerbühne productions within the German municipal and state theatre framework. The 2014 festival program illustrates the range of themes addressed by the productions. In *Moeders (Mothers)* by the Ro Theater Rotterdam, director Alize Zandwijk brought together ten women of different ethnic backgrounds who cooked on stage, sang, and told the audience about themselves, their parents, and their children. In *Eine (mikro)ökonomische Weltgeschichte, getanzt* (A (Micro)Economic History of the World, in Dance), originally staged at the Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe, Pascal Rambert and Éric Méchoulan placed a real philosopher on the stage, who explained to the audience the philosophical fundamentals of economic history and the current financial crisis, while 30 Karlsruhe inhabitants provided illustrations for his thoughts in a choreography of movements recalling a real-life Powerpoint presentation. In a production from Basel, director Sebastian Nübling staged *Die Klasse (The Class)*, a work based on a novel by François Bégaudeau, in which an actress played a teacher whose on-stage students were actual school children from Basel. The precarious situation of homosexuals in Moldova was addressed in *Dear Moldova, can we kiss just a little bit?*, a documentary project by Nicoleta Esinencu and Jessica Glause originally staged at the Teatru Spălătorie in Chișinău, the Moldovan capital, in which a young man talked on stage about his mother's coming out. A moving and speaking chorus of twenty-seven Warsaw citizens appeared in front of the audience in the production *Requiemasyna (Requiemachine)* by Marta Górnicka and chanted texts dealing with the relationship between power and language. In the project *Die letzten Zeugen (The Last Witnesses)* by Doron Rabinovici and Matthias Hartmann from the Burgtheater in Vienna, professional actors read texts recounting the memories of survivors of the pogrom of November, 1938 in Vienna, while the authors who witnessed the events sat on stage in front of a video camera and were shown as large-scale projections. Working with handicapped performers, the theatre project *Dschingis Khan* by the Berlin performance group Monster Truck / Theater Thikwa placed three young performers with trisomy 21 (Down Syndrome) on stage, who wore silly Mongolian costumes and attempted to strike fear into the audience by throwing styrofoam heads at them. A Danish Bürgerbühne production from Aalborg presented *Romeo og Julie lever! (Romeo and Juliet Live!)*, in which an older couple told the story of how they met using Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as analogy. In a similar manner, men in the midst of a mid-life crisis examined Goethe's *Faust* in *Ich armer Tor (Poor Fool am I)* by the Dresdner Bürgerbühne. In *Woe* by Edit Kador from Amsterdam, three adolescents involved the audience in a mental experiment, which gradually forced viewers to confront the issue of child abuse. Finally, with *We are Still Watching* from Amsterdam, Ivana Müller gave a group of audience members the assignment of jointly reading a dramatic text that dealt with a group of audience members reading a dramatic text. These projects represent a most diverse range of approaches, themes, individuals, stories, and modes of on-stage performance, which at first glance have little in common beyond working under the overarching Bürgerbühne label. However, on further reflection, a number of similarities can be seen to define these Bürgerbühne productions that, despite different aims,

issues, and methods of working, are shared with those productions by Rimini Protokoll more widely known to Anglophone audiences.

The Group as Central Protagonist in Bürgerbühne Productions

Classical theatre places the individual hero at the centre of the action, often presenting him or her in the title of the work. Performance art has also traditionally focused on a single individual as the performer and object of attention. In contrast, the individual Bürgerbühne performer is portrayed as part of a group and as belonging to that group, although able to separate himself or herself from the group at will. Bürgerbühne theatre negotiates social issues as group processes and not through the personal dramatic conflicts of individual characters. *Moeders*, for instance, included 10 women with different ethnic backgrounds who seemed to occupy different cultural and religious spheres of life. However, the production not only celebrated this diversity but operated from their obvious shared experience. All of the women on the stage were daughters and most of them (sooner or later) had also become mothers, and this is precisely what they talked about in front of the audience. Individual stories thus unfolded, which also spanned the entire life cycle. *Moeders* dealt with the experiences of puberty, of power and powerlessness in childhood, the loss of other people, the practice of various rituals of mourning, interactions with one's parents, and the experience of becoming a wife and mother oneself, and explored how violence is dealt with in the family. The performers thus wove an intercultural narrative that did not ignore differences between various cultures and individuals but still gave viewers the feeling that these people had something in common. What was shared was the unsuspected power of these women, their joy in storytelling and their force of presence, expressed particularly in the songs and dances that they performed. If one can trace a continuity in Bürgerbühne productions to 18th-century bourgeois drama, one might also see here a reactivation of an even older artistic form, the heroic epic and song. But *Moeders* was not about a male hero, whose deeds are sung. The women talked about themselves. They did not wait to become an object of someone else's story but confidently reclaimed the authorship of their own narratives. This brings a new tone of emancipation to the stage. Drama and theatre from the Enlightenment to the present are replete with mother figures penned by male authors. The dramas of Gerhart Hauptmann and Henrik Ibsen, for example, portray suffering mothers forced into unhappy social or familiar situations in order to inspire pity or outrage on the part of the audience. In contrast, the production from Rotterdam showed self-confident women. Such biographical stories forgo any claim of intimacy and私ateness and are designed for and addressed confidently to a public group.

In the above examples of Bürgerbühne theatre from 2014, each project used an individual theatrical form in order to present the group as a social formation and as the actual protagonist. In *Die Klasse* this role was assumed by a class of school children, a hoard pitted against the single teacher and one that developed an aggressive dynamic over the course of the performance. In *Woe* three teenagers appeared in front of the audience as a unit that conspired to perform a kind of social experiment with viewers. The performers of *Eine (mikro)ökonomische Weltgeschichte, getanzt* came together as a choreographed community, while in *Requiemmaszyna* the chorus, originating in classical theatre, found its contemporary equivalent as a dramatic form for representing a group. In this work a 25-person chorus carried out a strict, drill-like choreography with the greatest possible precision. Individual subgroups, performers, or voices isolated themselves now and again from the formation. The action of the chorus was compelling in its organisation, control, and precision. In this case the performers gained their agency through their skillful mastery of a given form. In *We are Still Watching* the audience experienced itself as a group with the potential to become the protagonist, since the viewers were given an assignment at the beginning of the performance—to read the manuscript of a dramatic text and play its different

characters. The audience was left alone with this task, with no other performers making an appearance.

Strategies for Building Confident and Distanced Performers

In theatre work, performing in a group can give the individual performer a sense of security. At the same time, a group acting as one on stage suggests a spokesmanship that can lend the performance a political dimension. In *Dear Moldova, can we kiss just a little bit?*, Moldovans who identify as homosexuals appeared on stage alongside their relatives, with the former talking about the social repression and stigmatisation that they are subject to in their native country. That the performers even defined themselves as a group of gays and lesbians and presented themselves as such to the audience was thus a political act. However, the performers on stage did not behave like people suffering under social discrimination but as individuals with something to say that pertained to them personally. One performer told the audience about his life as a gay man, while in the background a projection could be seen of the website through which he staged his coming out. The way *Dear Moldova* was staged created a correspondence with the mix of intimate process and public act that characterises coming out. Whereas the setting of the typical Naturalist drama was the private home of the protagonists (for example, Nora's 'dollhouse'), the Bürgerbühne stage is a site of public address and discussion. Even though the kitchen serves as the performance setting for *Moeders*, it is not shown as a private refuge as in a 'kitchen sink' drama but as a gathering place, where the performers and the audience confront one another and ultimately eat together. Although individual biographical conflicts and problems are addressed, no interpretation of psychological inner worlds takes place. In many projects the performers exhibit an emotionally neutral attitude, which is characterised by a calm, even manner of speaking and a controlled use of the body, which gives the impression of seriousness and distance.

For non-professional performers the stage can also be alien territory, a place where they are exposed to the voyeuristic gaze of the audience. How can performers appear as confident citizens under these conditions? First, the performers gain a sense of security through their execution of actions on stage that they know how to do because they are familiar to them from their daily lives. For example, in *Moeders* and in *Dear Moldova, can we kiss just a little bit?* cooking together became a key action on stage. Through the entire duration of the performances the performers prepared a meal by cutting vegetables together, handing each other pots, cooking, and tasting and serving the dishes. The performers thus had a common aim which they carried out with ease. As complex and multifaceted as some concepts of the staging were, for the performers the piece was reduced to clear and simple actions. As a result, the public watched performers who were able to do something more or less skillfully. One might thus contextualise Bürgerbühne productions' strategies for building performer confidence in terms of a Theatre of Experts even when performers are not overtly talking about or demonstrating professional skills.

Second, in Bürgerbühne productions, the performers' presentation of themselves to a paying audience, an unfamiliar situation for many of the performers, is not concealed but put on display. Scenes of dialogue in which individual performers speak with one another as if no audience were present are the exception rather than the rule. The main type of speech is direct address to the audience, which is mirrored in the body language of the performers who usually stand directly facing and looking at the audience. This positioning tends to lead to static poses and simple movements that can provide a sense of security.

A third source of confidence is provided by the use of storytelling as the central mode of performance. The Bürgerbühne thereby reactivates an old cultural technique of oral transmission,

one that is part of everyday experience. The performers on stage have something to say; they have something to tell the audience, and they know how to do that. By using this form of memory work, the Bürgerbühne practises a stage-based version of oral history. This practice was vividly illustrated by the production *Die letzten Zeugen* (*The Last Witnesses*) by Vienna's Burgtheater. The title refers to the six main protagonists, Viennese Jews who survived the Holocaust. These 'last witnesses' were present on stage but simultaneously strangely set apart from the action. They each sat behind a semi-transparent screen, onto which was projected a live close-up of their face and their name. Four professional actors from the Burgtheater took turns stepping up to the lectern to recite the texts, while using the speech habits and body language of a reader. The viewers thus saw the witnesses, who were removed from the immediate action, and simultaneously watched the close-ups of their faces as they listened to their own texts being spoken by strangers' voices. In this production the act of observing oneself from a position of distance was a key motif. In the recited texts one heard penetrating narratives about personal experiences of the repression, disenfranchisement, persecution, and harassment of the Jews in Austria beginning in 1938, as well as about experiences of deportation and life in hiding. While the audience listened to these stories of suffering, their perspective was entangled in a web of distanciations: the perfect articulations of the actors, the autobiographical written memories, and the physical presence of the witnesses and their close-ups. The Viennese production did not present the last victims or the last survivors, but the last *witnesses*. In this case the witness was a cultural figure of distance, engaged in observing and tracking events. Here the act of witnessing involved a precise and objectively clear description of events, not an emotional involvement in the action at hand. It was a bearing witness that relied on remembering something after the fact and not on reliving it in the present. The production showed an act of memory while refraining from playing out the remembered action on stage.

The autobiographical relationship between the performers and their narratives is the fourth element that gives the performers in Bürgerbühne productions a confident appearance. The performers tell the audience about themselves, their experiences or professions, thereby appearing to be experts of their everyday lives. Appearing as oneself before an audience gives the performers a chance to attain agency through the assumption of a particular stance towards themselves and their story and by showing this stance to the audience. The anthropologist Helmuth Plessner has described this 'distancing of a person from himself' as a fundamental condition of human existence in general and theatrical acting in particular (2003: 407). In Bürgerbühne productions, and other similar works, such as those by Rimini Protokoll, that use 'real' people, this *conditio humana* is translated into a sensory experience when members of the audience watch the performers as they assume this distanced position in relation to their own stories.

This relationship between distancing between self and role and its relationship to a sensory audience experience for audiences leads us to the fifth element: Bürgerbühne productions experiment with approaches to dramatic roles in ways that disrupt the unity of actor, character and role and that foreground the opportunities performers have to 'play' with their roles. This becomes particularly evident when dramatic literature is incorporated into a theatre project: *Romeo og Juliet lever*, for example, played with Shakespeare's characters from the title onwards, declaring their survival, while *Ich armer Tor* allowed its men in the midst of a mid-life crisis to play with Goethe's *Faust*. *We are Still Watching* pushed this idea still further, placing both the opportunity to play with roles and the responsibility for creating and developing them onto the audience.

Rimini Protokoll and Text-Based Theatre

This engagement between 'real' people and text-based theatre that is a feature of some Bürgerbühne theatre is shared by some of Rimini Protokoll's work. While for many Anglophone readers, Rimini Protokoll's Theatre of Experts exemplifies devised work based on thematic and biographical research, in fact since *Deadline* in 2004 the group has at times worked with classical dramatic literature in their productions. In the *Wallenstein* project (2005), for example the group studied Friedrich Schiller's *Wallenstein* trilogy (1799) and subsequently developed a production reflecting on the experience of war, power, and intrigue (Roselt 2008: 46). For *Uraufführung: Besuch der alten Dame* (World Premiere: *The Visit*, 2007) the group researched the people involved in the premiere of the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt's drama *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (*The Visit*) in 1956 in Zurich and worked with those who had participated in the production, both on stage and behind the scenes (Müller 2008: 212). In addition, in *Breaking News. Ein Tagesschauspiel* (*Breaking News. A Daily News Show*) that premiered in 2008, an interest in the contemporary news business in the media led to an examination of Aeschylus' tragedy, *The Persians*. These plays were not in themselves staged but were used as research material and analysed in order to extract their contemporary relevance. Rimini Protokoll clearly demonstrates an ability to use this post-dramatic aesthetic to weave a virtuosic web of references between the individual biographies of the performers, the overarching topic, and the referential function of the dramatic text—thereby enabling new perspectives on old works.

This mode of production is exemplified by *Breaking News. Ein Tagesschauspiel*.² At the beginning of the performance a woman introduces herself to the audience: 'I am Martina Englert, and I am an interpreter for English and Russian, and I live and work in Berlin'. In the process, the woman, approximately 30 years old, steps out in front of a stage set which photographically replicates the façade of an urban apartment house. She claims that the building's address is 6 Pallas Street in Berlin-Schöneberg and that this is where she lives. She points to one of the apartments depicted and says: 'The one up there is my apartment'. She also says that she mostly listens to the radio, and only goes over now and then to her neighbour's flat to watch certain news programs. Over the course of this opening scene five additional performers enter the stage, introduce themselves, point to an apartment where they supposedly live, and tell the audience about their daily news consumption.

These narratives establish the biographical dimension of the production. All of the performers are experts in the news business. They work as interpreters and translators or are employed as news editors, video editors, and correspondents for television. The production is performed in German, although each performer speaks with a noticeable accent that suggests their country of origin. In addition to offering their basic biographical information, the performers make individual impressions on the audience through the intonation of their dialect-inflected speech, the unique rhythm of their spoken language, and their specific body language when presenting themselves to the audience. The professional expertise of the performers is used, presented to the audience, and performed on stage over the course of the evening. The production is structured so that it begins at 7.30pm. At 8:00pm, at the sound of a gong like that which announces the beginning of the German nightly news program *Tagesschau*, the interpreters on stage begin to watch news programs from throughout the world—thereby partially assuming the role of the audience—while simultaneously translating selected passages into German. They describe what they see on their respective screens, translating and also commenting on the spoken text. Thematically the work is centred around the production, distribution, and viewing of TV news. The news is revealed as the result of a working process that involves a division of labour, and as subject to an economy of supply and demand.

Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians* adds a literary component to the production. Over the course of the two-hour performance its plot is recounted and selected passages are read aloud. For this purpose, former TV-correspondent Hans Hübner sits on an elevated pedestal in front of a microphone while holding an edition of *The Persians* in his hand. At various points he leaves his perch to join the action on stage, explaining the events leading up to the tragedy, summarising the scenes of the play, reading individual passages, or calling on his fellow performers to recite specific segments. Although with *The Persians* a true classic of theatrical literature is incorporated into the production, the story of the tragedy is not acted out but told to the audience. Here the journalist's expertise is brought to bear in how he illuminates the complex political and human circumstances of Aeschylus' tragedy in an informed, comprehensible, and, most of all, brief manner—as if he were providing an in-depth analysis of a current news event. Through Hübner the audience learns that the Persians lost the battle at Salamis to the Greeks, into which Xerxes had led them in order to wreak revenge on his father. Hübner describes the situation at the beginning of scene 1, where the elders at the Persian court are eagerly awaiting a message about the course of the battle. This anxious wait for a report, the news delivered by a messenger, and the (largely negative) reactions it triggers are clearly identifiable as the key dramatic components of the classical tragedy. Similar to today's news business, in the tragedy the presentation of the distant events is achieved through visualisation strategies, by means of which the messenger describes what he has seen, and Atossa, the mother of the defeated Xerxes, tells of the cataclysmic visions that plague her. According to Hübner, Atossa also speaks in images. Describing the scene in which she learns of her son's defeat, Hübner then reads the words of the messenger, while televisions show the US invasion of Somalia in 1992. When Hübner—who was reporting on site for German television at the time—himself appears on the screen, he stops reading the passage about the messenger and comments on his own video report, which shows him talking to a US soldier. The relationship between a contemporary television correspondent and the ancient figure of the messenger is thus underscored. From a perspective of distance, the expert reflects on his personal role as a reporter for a media spectacle, and in so doing makes clearer to what extent the military action itself had a theatrical dimension. Indeed, even at the launching of their 'secret' mission the US invaders were awaited by camera teams on the Somalian coast.

In *Breaking News* the performers talk about the business of making news, which suggests references to the tragedy *The Persians*, which in turn deals with conflicts recalling the professional experience of the performers. The actions of the performers on stage do not constitute a dramatic situation, whereas almost without exception the news programs that they watch dramatise the conflicts portrayed. When quoting the text of the tragedy, the performers do not portray any individual figures that could potentially interact with one another, but instead they address the public with monologue-like text. They do not take themselves to task, raise complaints, or demand explanations. The staging of the production does not weave a narrative on three levels but provides a dramatic order for the biographical, thematic, and literary material presented, thus making distance and relationships visible. Constellations that could possibly generate conflict are suggested but simultaneously deferred. Catharsis is kept to quotation from the tragedy; any potentially tragic dimension of the performers on stage must be created or imposed by the viewers.

Conclusion

Rimini Protokoll, the Theatre of Experts and Bürgerbühne productions thus function in a German theatrical framework that is currently in a state of flux, as funding pressures have contributed to a blurring of boundaries between municipal and state theatres on the one hand and the Freies Theater on the other. Nonetheless, as Rimini Protokoll's *Deadline* demonstrates, this blurring of the boundaries began before the Global Financial Crisis made a rethinking of the framework of

German theatre institutions a matter of pressing public concern. This change in the institutional landscape has not inevitably led to mutually fruitful collaboration between municipal and state theatre and the Freies Theater in the ways envisioned by the Doppelpass fund. Instead, as in the case of many Bürgerbühne productions, municipal and state theatres have at times adopted the working practices of the Freies Theater without collaborating with Freies Theater companies. For the municipal and state theatres, the inclusion of works that draw on Bürgerbühne or Theatre of Experts philosophies and practices thus involves not only a shift in aesthetics but also a structural shift in the mode of production. Such works are project-oriented and research-based. This means that the material to be performed is generated during the rehearsal process. In this project-based theatre there is not necessarily a defined ensemble, whose members play different roles over the years. Instead, the group is reconstituted for each project.

By alluding to traditions of bourgeois drama in the Bürgerbühne, those municipal and state theatres that develop their own Bürgerbühne productions are able to connote both innovation and continuity. Innovation and continuity are also evident in those Rimini Protokoll and Bürgerbühne productions that engage with existing dramatic texts. However, here too this engagement with classic works involves not only a shift in aesthetics but also a structural shift in the mode of production. Operating at the intersection of biography, theme, and literary text, such works have become an alternate form of theatre to the staging of dramatic literature and performance art. The impetus for working together does not necessarily come from a complete, written drama. As a rule, emphasis is instead placed on the development of a specific theme, the joint researching of material, and the exploration of the performers' biographies instead of the biographies of a play's characters. To a certain extent, the text is not the point of departure for such project work, but it is produced over the course of rehearsals and performances; it is not the precondition but the product of group theatre work. This approach thus demands different competencies within professional theatre. One must explore urban spaces, seek out a dialogue with inhabitants, develop a subject matter, find and work through documents. These practices require less literary and more ethnographic competencies on the part of professional directors.

While this blurring of institutional boundaries potentially provides wider opportunities for productions to incorporate 'real' people on stage in productions that challenge audience expectations of what municipal and state theatres provide, it does not inevitably lead to greater opportunities for Freies Theater companies. It also poses challenges to municipal and state theatre institutions, often requiring the development or introduction of whole new skill sets and working practices that contrast with the relatively stable work environments that these companies have long been able to offer.

Notes

1. For example, the first festival, in Dresden in 2014, was named '1. Bürgerbühnenfestival' (1. Bürgerbühne Festival) (Staatsschauspiel Dresden, 2014), while English-language publicity for the second festival, in Mannheim in 2015, referred to the festival as 'Second People's Theater Festival' (National Theater Mannheim, 2015).
2. My analysis of *Breaking News. Ein Tagesschauspiel* is based on a video recording made by Rimini Protokoll of a performance at the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU2), Berlin, on 20 March 2008. All quotations are from this recording; translations are my own.

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