



## Profile

### Thomas Ostermeier

Born in West Germany in 1968, director Thomas Ostermeier is art director of the Schaubuehne. Moving to Berlin after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Ostermeier began to show his talent as a director while still in drama school. After graduation he was given responsibility for the small theater space "Baracke" of the Deutschen Theater, where he presented works by modern playwrights like Brecht along with the works of contemporary writers. Winning acclaim as a leader of the young generation, he was given the position of art director at the Schaubuehne in 2000 at the young age of 31. Among his noted productions as director are Ibsen's *Nora* (*A Doll's House*), Mayenbourg's *Fire Face* and Phaidras Liebe and Sarah Kane's *Crave*.

# Presenter Interview

プレゼンターインタビュー  
In pursuit of Theater for the Playwright  
Talking with Artistic Director Ostermeier of the Schaubuehne

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劇作家のための演劇を目指す  
新生シャウビューネのオスターマイヤーに聞く

From 2005 into 2006, a variety of events are being held around Japan as part of the year of "Deutschland in Japan." In the field of performing arts, a lot of attention focused on a series of performances by three leading German theaters from March into June, including the Volksbuehne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz production of *Terminal America*, the Schaubuehne theater's productions of *Nora* and *Fire Face* (*Feuergesicht*) and the Berliner Ensemble production of *Der Aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*.

Particular attention has focused on the activities of the new Schaubuehne and its Artistic Director since 2000, Thomas Ostermeier (36), who have started a contemporary theater festival and actively brought performances to Japan and many other parts of the world. While in Japan, Ostermeier spoke about the aims of the new Schaubuehne at a press conference.

(From the June 14 press conference)

### About the play *Nora*, an important part of the Schaubuehne repertoire:

The actual title of the original Ibsen play is *A Doll's House*, but in Germany it is commonly known as *Nora*, and it has been performed so often in Germany that it is considered a part of German theater. When I first read this play, I thought that although it was surely quite shocking in its day, it lacked impact in today's world where divorce has become so common. Particularly the ending. At the time of the premiere of *A Doll's House* in Copenhagen in 1890, the controversy was so great that the very name Nora became taboo and people were forbidden to pronounce it. When I spoke to a 30-something theater director in Oslo not so long ago, I learned that Ibsen had prepared another ending for the play when it was to be performed in Germany. It was based on the suggestion of one of the actresses of the time, who suggested an ending in which Nora chooses to remain in the home rather than leaving her husband. After hearing that I stopped thinking of Nora's leaving the home as the play's climax. What I began to think about what would be effective to give the play the same kind of impact it had in its day. Performing the play as it was originally written might have still had actual effect in Europe in the 1970s and 80s, but not today. With this in mind, we restaged *Nora* with the setting in present-day Berlin.

When the original play was performed in the 19th century, society was of course strongly based on paternal dominance, and in the 20th century that didn't really change much in Europe. But now, I think it is possible to give the play a more radical ending. In other words, I think a different kind of "death sentence" is possible. Related to this, there is an incident that impressed me quite strongly. One young woman who had just seen our new *Nora* said, "I didn't know people were still writing such new, good works."

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### Data

#### Schaubuehne am Lehniner Platz

Established in Berlin in 1962, Schaubuehne became one of Germany's representative theater companies with a reputation for finely staged productions of works by playwrights like Chekhov executed primarily in ensemble form under the direction of Peter Stein and others from the 1970s. Later, the company was reorganized in 2000 and a dance department was established. With Ostermeier as art director and stage director for the theater department and Sasha Waltz as art director and choreographer of the dance department, the Schaubuehne uses primarily selected young artists. As inheritor of this theater with its long and illustrious tradition, Ostermeier writes about the "Mission of Theater" in the theater programs, saying: "How should we live our lives? Theater is the act of answering this fundamental question." He goes on to make a case for "Theater for the Playwright."

The company's current repertoire consists not only of works by leading German writers but also a lineup of stimulating works by foreign contemporary playwrights. This past March, in its annual international festival based primarily around drama readings, works by Keralino Sandovich and Suzuki Matsuo were among the drama readings. Most theaters in German are supported by public funding and the annual funding received by the Schaubuehne is 1,280,000 euro.

<http://www.schaubuehne.de/>

Regarding the question of how women today express themselves, we thought to incorporate into our production a sense of the way women seek to express themselves based on influences they get from looking at magazines and watching commercials and videos and also animated films. The climax of my production of *Nora* may be so radical that many audiences will have trouble with it. But, that is exactly the effect I am hoping for. I want it to start the audience discussing the question of why such a climax is necessary.

#### About *Fire Face* :

Of the productions Schaubuehne is presenting now, of the things I am doing, two thirds are productions of works by contemporary playwrights or inspired by contemporary plays. One of these is *Fire Face*. People who saw the performance may have thought it too dreadful, too void of hope. The point that makes it so dreadful is that fact that the young protagonist, Kurt, sins for no reason. I believe that the achievement of playwrights is to put things in words that have never been put in words before and make it possible for them to be brought to the stage. German theater has a long history in this sense. During the era of the French Revolution, Germany had writers like Goethe, Kleist and Buchner, and although there was no actual revolution in the political world, there was a revolution occurring in the literary world. In other words, I think you can say that in Germany the revolution was taking place on the stage instead of in the political system. The main character in *Fire Face* is representative of a rebellious generation that doesn't know what they are rebelling against, or for what reason. And this rebellious generation can't put into words what their frustrations are. In the 1960s and 70s when German playwrights like Kroetz and Fassbinder were active, for example, there were new possibilities that people were striving toward. I believe that the today the directions are different from what they were back then. In *Fire Face*, the protagonist Kurt and his sister are in their puberty and Kurt has an incestuous love of his sister. Kurt is also making a bomb. The social setting is a typical middle-class Germany and you have parents that don't know how to communicate with their children, though the family is one that you could call liberal in some sense. Although the family is not doing anything wrong, for some reason the children are losing control of themselves. Finally Kurt kills his parents and spends several days with the bodies. That is the plot.

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Schaubuehne am Lehniner Platz  
Nora / A Doll's House  
photo: Arno Declair



Schaubuehne am Lehniner Platz  
Feuergesicht / Fireface  
Photo: Arno Declair

### About the Schaubuehne theater:

I would like to explain something about the position the Schaubuehne has in Berlin today and what its situation is. I think some of the people gathered here will already know that Schaubuehne has a long history of 40 years. During those four decades, the period when it was most active as a theater was between 1970 and '85, when Peter Stein was its art director. At that time, it functioned mainly in the ensemble format and the productions were created by a process of consensus, with results that were very fresh and interesting. However, from the later half of the 80s into the 90s, that freshness was lost and it became like a museum to things past with a conservative approach of protecting the tradition that had been built up there over the years.

At the end of the 90s the person in charge of at the time called me in. Before that, I had served as an artistic director of a company called Baracke in Berlin for about three years. It was a production type company made up of a small group actors, several of whom were from the Deutschen Theater (German Theater), and we would put together contemporary theater productions in a very short working period. At the time, in about 1996, the Volksbuehne was ascendant and had won some degree of acclaim, and in some sense they had become enveloped in their own world. To counter that trend, we were running Baracke as an alternative.

The direction the Volksbuehne was taking in its productions was a sort of deconstructive one aimed at breaking down the conventions of theater as such. On the other hand, we in Baracke, as representatives of the younger generation, were wondering if we couldn't use a different methodology. We looked for a direction that was Baracke wilder and more extreme. Our answer was to try to bring social realities into the theater. The primary basis for this, the umbilical cord, so to speak, was the playwright. I thought, isn't it possible to bring the world of the playwright as he writes it directly into the theater?

In the case of Mayenbourg who wrote *Fire Face*, I felt that his work had not really been written to be performed in the theater. Rather, it seemed to me to be a text that he had written in a process of self-reflection. [In the production this time] we concentrated on the storyline that shows the development of the characters in the story, and in that sense it might be considered somewhat conservative in method. And, since in that sense our performance this time doesn't conform to the image of the young power of a young theater company on full display, I hope people won't come to it with the wrong expectations in that aspect (laughs). Rather than a typical portrayal of youth, I think the thing to watch this time is the development of the story.

### About the nurturing of playwrights and the festival:

We are working now to discover works of good contemporary playwrights and support them. Central among these for us are works that are written with a critical eye towards society. At the same time, we are taking the works of playwrights of the past and adding new interpretations and staging them in the contemporary context in ways that bring new reality to them. Some examples are Buchner's *Woyzeck* and works of the woman playwright Marieluise Fleisser.

As a platform for discovering and nurturing young contemporary writers, Schaubuehne is now organizing a yearly international festival to introduce the works of young playwrights. With each holding we focus on works of a different language and introduce works mainly in a drama reading format. Most of the works are staged by excellent directors and we choose costumes and props for the

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productions. But, in fact, the readings sometimes go better than the actual performances.

In March 2005, we had drama readings for to Japanese playwright's works, Suzuki Matsuo's *Machine Diary* and Keralino Sandrovich's *Frozen Beach*. With Kera's work the production used devices like music to maintain the pace of the original, and the reaction was very good among the primarily young audience. Like *Fire Face*, *Frozen Beach* is also a kind of family drama and it reflects very vividly the topology of TV culture and entertainment culture. I appreciated this drama, this creative world, very much.

Ours is a 5-day festival in which we present five to eight works. It is very international in terms of both the works presented and the audience, and it functions as a sort of messe (exposition). We use it as a platform to think about the works we will bring to production for the coming season.

What we hope to do through these activities is to get more people in the young generation to look to theater, and to make it a part of their actual lives. Perhaps it is going too far to say that the young generation of playwrights are lacking in imagination, but it is clear that through the influence of movies and TV they are weak in their ability to tell their own stories. It is our hope that our theater will serve as a last fortress in the effort to nurture and support playwrights. And we hope that our festival will continue to be a forum that ensures the type of communication that should normally be going on.

Of the two works that we brought to Japan this time, *Nora* is a part of the modern era theater repertoire and *Fire Face* is by a newly discovered playwright who we supporting. In other words, these two works reflect very well the two directions that Schaubuehne is pursuing today. I am very excited to see how these works will be received here in Japan and what kind of communication they will inspire.

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### About directing:

I believe that my role is not one of a comprehensive artist so much as an artist dedicated to plays and their interpretation. For me, the most important part of my job is to find the best way to bring out the core of the playwright's work, the playwright's play. The playwright may be Mayenbourg or it may be Sarah Kane. In the case of plays from the modern repertoire like Ibsen's *Nora*, for example, I do a lot of modification of the original when I bring it to stage. When I direct a work such as this, I ask myself what kind of message the playwright would want to deliver if they were righting today. Perhaps you could say that I seek the spirit of the playwright.

With *Nora*, I don't change the storyline much. Perhaps Ibsen would be angry if he saw my production, but I respect and have been faithful to the plot. But, I am focused mainly on what the story shows and the situations that are contingent with the events of the storyline. Why did this situation develop, why does Nora leave the home, or not leave it; I superimpose these things on today's society and direct the play while thinking of ways to make the questions come alive so that the audience will also ask why?

### About the Schaubuehne audience:

Our audience is made up of a number of different groups. In the case of *Nora*, the audience is largely people who come wanting to see a performance of *A Doll's House*, and you might say that it is an older audience. In the case of works by contemporary playwrights the audience is younger, of the same age group as the playwright. For an example, we mounted a production of Mark Ravenhill's play *Shopping and Fucking*. We have given about 120 performances of it and the audience is young, in the 18~28 age group. The people who used to come to the Schaubuehne in the past got the feeling that its tradition came to a standstill in the mid-80s. But now that generation is starting to come back to the theater gradually. I think that this is a result of the fact that our activities have gained momentum and found a positive trajectory.

In Germany there is a traditional theater system in which people would always plan to see a certain number of plays during a year and make their reservations before the start of the season. This theater culture remained as part of the German belief in cultivating appreciation for the arts and culture and made the theater—going for the liberal populace something almost equivalent to church-going until the 1960s. But now, that kind of cultivation of cultural appreciation is all but dead. Behind this change is the development of various types of entertainment and culture besides theater. Good examples are film and the club culture of the younger generations. It is very difficult to get these people to come to the theater.

### About the works in the Schaubuehne repertoire:

In our repertoire are plays by Brecht and Chekhov. Although I didn't direct it, we have a production of *St. John of the Cross* and one of *Man is Man* that I directed. In 2000, one of the plays we opened our new theater with was a rewritten version of Brecht's *The Decision*. In the autumn of 2004 we presented a greatly revised version of Chekhov's *The Seagull* directed by the young playwright and director Falk Richter. In the future we are considering productions of *The Cherry Garden* and *Three Sisters*. And, we plan to do these productions using new interpretations by

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contemporary German playwrights.

We have also presented numerous English-language plays at Schaubuehne by playwrights like Edna Walsh, Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp, and Jim Cartwright. We haven't produced a work by Martin McDonagh yet, but he is a playwright with whom we have a personal relationship and whose work I like very much. Looking now at all the English plays we have done, I think it may even be too much! (laughs)

### About the violent scenes in *Fire Face* and other works

In *Fire Face* I think there is a strong impression of violence for the audience. But, there is nothing really new about these scenes of violence. The works of Yukio Mishima are full of violence and classics like the Greek tragedies often depict violence I believe. In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* there is a scene where Lavinia's tongue is torn out and hands cut off and the name of the villain is written in the sand. I have never seen such a shockingly violent scene in a contemporary playwright's work (laughs).

I believe that from its beginnings, theater is a medium that deals with the theme of death. And by confronting death, you might say that a spirit is appeased. I believe it serves that sort of function. This aspect can perhaps be seen in the fact that most of the Greek tragedies are said to have been created after the Persian wars. After the Persian wars many barbaric people came and performed murders on stages or other acts of violence to appease the spirits of the dead. The non-political aspects that could not be dealt with in the everyday world were acted out on stages. I believe that is one of the functions that theater performed.