

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE, ARCHIV DARSTELLEND KUNST
THEATER OF THE WENDE COLLECTION

“We’re stepping out of our roles” was the motto of East German theater ensembles in 1989—time to deal with the upheavals and work on a documentation of theater after the fall of the wall and the following Reunification. This thematic collection includes changes in fully subsidized theaters as well as in cultural politics that occurred from the autumn of 1989 until the end of the 1990s, thereby documenting and making a unique chapter of theater history accessible for research. The major part of the collection begins with the 1988/89 season, although occasionally it begins earlier for contextual reasons since the changes in theaters were a result of processes that had begun before the Fall of the Wall or Reunification. The documentation of each theater concludes with the theater’s restructuring, in some cases with its closure. The collection’s regional focus is on Berlin (East and West) and Brandenburg, with 12 theaters as well as three theater start-ups in the new states.

Description

The upheaval of the new states’ entire cultural infrastructure was not only accompanied by numerous changes to their theatrical landscapes but also initiated a structural debate among the old states with the aim of comprehensive organizational and financial reform. Changes to East German theaters should be understood within the context of the regionalization of cultural politics: theaters had to redefine and establish themselves. A reunited Berlin called for a new order in the myriad of theaters in the East and the West. Thus, the collection focuses on new concepts developed by theaters with regard to content as well as ownership, fusions, or concentration on individual categories.

Structure

The collection documents changes in two fundamental areas: individual theaters as well as regional and national cultural politics. The following theaters are documented:

- Theaters in the state of Berlin: Berliner Ensemble, Deutsches Theater, Maxim-Gorki-Theater, Staatliche Schauspielbühnen Berlin, Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz

- Theaters in the state of Brandenburg: Brandenburger Theater, Hans-Otto-Theater Potsdam, Kleist-Theater Frankfurt/Oder, Neue Bühne Senftenberg, Staatstheater Cottbus, Uckermärkische Bühnen Schwedt

- Theater start-ups in other states: Freie Kammerspiele Magdeburg, Kammertheater Neubrandenburg, Theaterhaus Jena

Particular attention can be paid to the archive of the Theater der Freien Volksbühne (1947-1992). The closing of this theater after Reunification is a thematic component of the collection; the theater archive comprises a separate component that contains all of the corresponding materials.

Cross-references to numerous personal archives and collections – “**Sammlung Inszenierungsdokumentationen**”, “**Dokumentationsfonds zum deutschsprachigen Theater**”, “**Schriftensammlung Darstellende Kunst**” – offer the opportunity for further research on this theme.

Sources and materials

The collection contains staging materials, directors’ records, the materials of cultural politics, as well as material published in the media, which has been culled from theaters, cultural administrations, and professional associations. Material selection is based on the uniqueness of such diverse changes as took place in theaters under a myriad of circumstances and the working conditions determined by cultural politics. This explains why parts of the collection can be somewhat disparate and vary in comprehensiveness.

Focus

Theater concepts in Berlin

1. Change came slowly to the Berliner Ensemble. Formerly known as the Brecht Theater, it had a special reputation to protect, which the artistic director Manfred Wekwerth interpreted in a different way than the Brecht heirs. The Berlin Senate forestalled a possible impasse by installing five directors as a joint directorate, in the course of which the theater was turned into a Limited Liability Company in 1993, with the directors as associates. The change in legal form was accompanied by redundancies in the ensemble. All in all, this “solution” hindered rather than helped productiveness and a decisive positioning of the theater. Only with Heiner Müller as its director in 1995 was the Berliner Ensemble able to develop a profile. Müller’s death was followed by numerous interim solutions until Claus Peymann became director in 1999.
2. The Deutsches Theater was greatly affected in its content by restructuring in staff. Thomas Langhoff’s most important directors Heiner Müller and Frank Castorf left for the Berliner Ensemble and the Volksbühne on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, respectively. They took with them the political-aesthetical explosiveness that finally returned to the Deutsches Theater in 1996 in the form of Thomas Ostermeier, if only in a small accompanying stage—the Barracks. Langhoff’s classical productions were able to draw the audience of the Schiller-Theater, which had since closed.
3. The fall of the Wall was reflected in the Maxim-Gorki-Theater in its varying program concepts. In the 1980s, it was committed to critical Russian and Soviet plays, but also to contemporary plays from East German authors. Later it expanded its repertoire to include contemporary theater from outside Europe. In 1994 Bernd Wilms became the first theater director from the West to join an East Berlin theater. His concept of Berlin Volkstheater allowed him to position himself within Berlin’s theater landscape.

4. In 1992 Frank Castorf took over the direction of the Volksbühne on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz with the claim to make theater “a source of friction” and a “form of conflict.” In their examinations of history and present-day culture, the productions questioned and undermined “middle-class” values. This concept is supplemented by video performances, concerts, the adolescent theater club P14, and the homeless persons theater Ratten 07 and thus gained the interest of a predominantly young, critical audience.

Theater as a cultural and social center

1. The Uckermärkischen Bühnen Schwedt, which emerged from a small city theater and the Kulturhaus, began with the notion of the theater as a cultural center. It has since expanded this concept of performing arts beyond its connotations to include other cultural offerings and has begun cooperating with theaters in Szczecin. This approach allows the theater to attract a broad audience despite high unemployment in a city whose industry is experiencing negative growth.

2. The Neue Bühne Senftenberg developed a new concept in order to survive alongside the closely positioned and far more powerful Staatstheater Cottbus, with its program encompassing three disciplines. Senftenberg created a theater for children and adolescents from a former three-discipline theater. The Neue Bühne Senftenberg’s street theater and amphitheater on Senftenberger Lake during the summer season has helped to establish it as a local center of communication.

Theater start-ups

1. Established by members of the former Puppentheater Neubrandenburg, the Kammertheater Neubrandenburg offered plays and puppet theater for children, adolescents, and adults, as well as street theater and various cultural activities. National and international coproductions and guest performances were also initiated. Amateurs had the possibility to work in the “Kammerteurtheater.” The structure of the small, 24-member ensemble was characterized by democratic co-determination.

2. Theaterhaus Jena was founded in 1991 by theater graduates on an ABM basis [*Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen* – a federally funded job creation scheme] as a municipal theater and in 1993 was transformed into a non-profit limited company with ensemble members as associates. The theater was frequented by a predominantly young audience in the college town and saw itself as a space for art and communication. Thematic seasons (some with their own plays) were accompanied by exhibitions, concerts, discussion forums, performances, and festivals. The structure of democratic co-determination that was installed at the theater’s founding became hierarchical at the end of the 1995/6 season. Differing

approaches led the company general meeting to break with the artistic director. After a change in management, the theater installed a new artistic ensemble in the year 2000.

3. The former Theater für Junge Zuschauer in Magdeburg was removed from the Verband der Bühnen der Stadt in 1990 and established as an independent theater with its own ensemble under the name Freie Kammerspiele Magdeburg. The founding members followed the concept of a Volkstheater for all generations—in comparison to and in competition with the Landestheater Magdeburg. The theater achieved notoriety for its *Spektakel*, a combination of theater festival and socially critical theater as successfully practiced by Benno Besson at the Berliner Volksbühne in the 1970s. The audience's strong identification with the theater was largely due to Magdeburg residents' involvement in the productions. Further offerings included open theater for kids, pantomime performances, concerts, film screenings, and exhibitions, all of which established the theater as a cultural center.

Alliances, fusions, closings

1. Radical budget cuts led to the founding of the Brandenburgische Theater and Konzertbund, which relocated the classical three-discipline city theater to three cities (and resulted in the closings of disciplines in each building). These cities committed themselves to alternating engagements: Brandenburg with the Brandenburger Symphoniker (music theater, concerts), Potsdam with the Hans-Otto-Theater (theater), and Frankfurt/Oder with the state orchestra (concerts). The Kleist-Theater Frankfurt/Oder was closed in the year 2000. This year also saw the erection of the Kleist-Forum, a cultural and convention center without its own ensemble that offered a venue for visiting, local, and coproductions as well as being available for lease.

2. According to the unification treaty (article 35, paragraph 2), the preservation of cultural substance in the new states must be considered when restructuring the theater landscape. This did not exclude new forms of ownership for theaters. The transformation of Metropol Theater in East Berlin (musical and operetta) into a private theater failed and resulted in its closing in 1996.

Before this, two stages in the western part of Berlin were closed due to pressing financial problems: in 1992 the Freie Volksbühne Berlin and in 1993 the Staatliche Schauspielbühnen Berlin (with the Schiller-Theater, the Schloßparktheater, and the Schiller Theater Werkstatt). The Senate did not consider conceptual recommendations from both theaters for their reorientation in content and structure.

Signed in 2003, the Hauptstadtkulturvertrag [Capitol Contract on Culture] did not allow for the state's participation in the preservation and renewal of Berlin's theaters.

3. In 2001 the Theater und Orchester GmbH Neubrandenburg / Neustrelitz was

founded from a fusion of the Landestheater Mecklenburg GmbH, the Kammertheater Neubrandenburg e.V., and the Neubrandenburger Philharmonie e.V. offering plays, musical theater, and concerts. The Kammertheater Neubrandenburg, whose conception and structural organization greatly differed from the Landestheater Mecklenburg, did not find entry in the Theater- und Orchester GmbH. A large number of employees at the Kammertheater left their posts at the start of the fusion.

The fall of the Wall as reflected in exemplary productions and programs

1. Volker Braun's bitter and explosive comedy *Die Übergangsgesellschaft* [*The Interim Society*] directed by Thomas Langhoff had its premiere at the Maxim-Gorki-Theater in March 1988 and, in a time marked by glasnost and perestroika, was received by a politically active audience. The performances and talks with the audience eventually turned the theater into a political forum. With the performance of *Die Übergangsgesellschaft*, the GDR theater was invited to the Mülheimer Theatertage for the first time (May 1988). A year later the production was shown at the Westberliner Theatertreffen, which marked the first participation of East German theaters as well. The production remained in the program for five years and was staged in Dresden (October 1988), Leipzig (November 1988), Weimar (January 1989), Cottbus (April 1989), and at four other theaters in the GDR.

2. By studying the production lists of individual theaters it becomes clear that plays dealing with the dramatic situation *before* the fall of the Wall—such as Jürgen Groß's *Revisor oder Katze aus dem Sack*, Christoph Hein's *Die Ritter der Tafelrunde*, Georg Seidel's *Königskinder*, and Heiner Müller's *Der Lohndrucker* or *Wolokolamsker Chaussee*—have seldom been staged since. These have been replaced by works reflecting the political watershed such as Rolf Hochhuth's *Wessis in Weimar*, Botho Strauß's *Schlußchor*, Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir*, and Klaus Pohl's *Karate-Billy kehrt zurück*, or Dominik Finkelde's *Abendgruß*.

The information given here highlights the myriad of perspectives with which to view "Theater at the Turning Point" using this collection and its highly diverse materials. The collection is open for all interested people and has already been utilized for numerous academic papers and publications.

(Translation Rebecca Blum)

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