Steve Earnest

The East/West Dialectic in German Actor Training

In this article Steve Earnest discusses contemporary approaches to performance training in Germany, comparing the content and methods of selected programmes from the former Federal Republic of Germany to those of the former German Democratic Republic. The Hochschule für Musik und Theater Rostock and the University of the Arts in Berlin are here utilized as primary sources, while reference is also made to the Bayerische Theaterakademie 'August Everding' Prinzregententheater in Munich, the Hochschule für Musik und Theater 'Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy' in Leipzig, and Justus Leibig Universität in Giessen. The aim is to provide insight into theatre-training processes in Germany and to explore how these relate to the national characteristics that have emerged since reunification.
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THE YEAR 2009 marked two full decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the extraordinary changes that accompanied the reunification of the 'two Germanys' that had been separated for forty years. Since the early 1990s all areas of German society have been affected and, while there have been some areas of cultural homogenization, there is still a legacy of division between those of the former east and those of the west. Two areas in which reunification has had a great impact are those of culture and the humanities (especially with regard to state funding of those institutions) and education. Vast changes have occurred in the German theatre system, necessitating a reconsideration of staffing, allocation of financial resources, approaches, and directions for the future of the system.

At the intersection of the two areas of culture and education is the area of training for the theatre. In this essay I will analyze contemporary approaches to performance training in Germany, using the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Rostock and the Academy of Arts in Berlin as primary sources. Additional documentation will be included that focuses on several other training institutions in Germany, among them the Justus Leibig Universität Giessen, the Bayerische Theaterakademie 'August Everding' Prinzregententheater in Munich, and the Hochschule für Musik und Theater 'Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy' in Leipzig, all of which I have visited in the past seven years.

This study will yield overall impressions of the training for the stage that is taking place at those institutions, provide insight into the overall nature of the process for actor training, analyze the differences between approaches of schools in the former German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany, and suggest the national characteristics of performance training in Germany.

As of 1 July 2008 there were in Germany some 150 publicly funded theatre and opera companies (including symphony orchestras) and another 280 private companies.[1] While the private, smaller theatres now provide the bulk of theatre offerings in Germany, the most typical structure of the larger state theatres in Germany is the 'three-category house', a theatre building which hosts theatre, musical theatre and/or opera, and ballet or modern dance.

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Many houses also support full symphony orchestras.

Approximately 5,300 different theatrical productions are staged in the country each year in a variety of formats, the most common being the repertory system. Stand-alone, long-run productions, common in both London and New York, are also increasingly evident in certain parts of Germany. Approximately 60 festivals of theatre and or/musical theatre supplement the already sufficient offerings. There are over 110,000 performances yearly in Germany attended by 35 million people, with the average state theatre company employing upwards of 200 actors on a yearly basis and jobbing in another 200 for smaller roles and individual productions.[2]

In 2007 membership in the Deutsches Buhnenangehorigen, which includes artistic leaders of all state, city, municipal, and private theatres and orchestras in Germany, totalled 430, which is significantly larger than any other European country.[3]

The most substantial changes to the German theatre system have been the large cutbacks in both artistic and administrative personnel and the growing number of privatized theatres – those whose state funding has been largely replaced with private or corporate sponsorship. While both trends have resulted in drastic programming changes, the bottom line is that the system is very large, extremely complicated, yet, comparatively speaking, relatively stable.

The Status of Theatrical Training

Given its density and world profile, the German theatre system is a source of great national pride and identity for the German nation. Because of the relatively high wages and stability of the acting profession, becoming a working member of that system is a goal that is highly sought after, yet extremely difficult to attain. Since reunification, the process of annually contracting performers by both state and newly privatized theatres has been in constant change. Actors of the former GDR were virtually guaranteed jobs for life once they established themselves with a resident company.[4] FRG actors also enjoyed lengthy employment with renewable two- and three-year contracts with theatre companies as the standard.

In the twenty-first century, length of contract and longevity with particular companies has been dramatically diminished. One- and two-year contracts have become more common, with many actors now working at several houses simultaneously. However, while length of employment with a single company is a diminishing trend for most German actors, the availability of quality employment has remained about the same for the last sixteen years.

Training for the stage in Germany has been provided from two basic sources – from a number of highly regarded, state-funded schools of theatre, and a growing number of private schools. Since the early 1990s, the four former schools of the GDR have been united with the twelve schools of the former FRD and five additional schools from Austria and Switzerland to comprise a consortium of twenty-one schools which train actors for the German-speaking region. The award of a place to study at one of these institutions is highly coveted and only gained after an extraordinary selection process, the specifics of which will be detailed later. Generally speaking, only about one in every thirty-five potential students is accepted.[5]

A few dozen private schools of theatre also exist in Germany, and many applicants who do not receive places in the state schools attend these much more expensive schools (tuition at the state schools is free), with a growing degree of success. Though teaching positions at the state schools are held in much higher esteem, teachers at the private schools, most of whom are former successful actors at major theatre companies, are also reputable, and many of the schools have developed strong relationships with both state and private theatres. Since the late 1990s, graduates of the better private schools enjoy placement rates that rival the state schools.[6]

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Graduates from the state schools are placed at rates nearing one hundred per cent. Esther Zschieschow, Professor of Acting at the HMT Rostock, noted that over the past ten years, to her knowledge, all graduates of the Rostock programme were employed full-time in the profession. Similar rates of placement are evident at many of the schools, particularly the four schools of the former GDR, which, collectively, have garnered the reputation of being the nation's stronger programmes.

The Tradition in the East

Having spoken with Joerg Huckler, Intendant of Volkstheater Rostock, Wolfgang Engel, Intendant of Schauspiel Leipzig, and Matthias Stier, freelance director at the Staatstheater Madgeburg, in addition to numerous students and faculty from both the former East and West sides of Germany, it is apparent that graduates of schools from the former GDR still evidence the clearest skill set and most solid range of abilities among the actors that are being prepared for the German stage. The irony of this lies in the abundance of myths surrounding the East German schools, and the legacy of the styles and methods taught there.

While it is typical to identify recipes, training methods, or physical/emotional adjustments to define the overall character of the training that takes place, the delivery of technique is considered to be only part of the training, and equal importance is placed on the future actor's awareness of his place in society, why theatre exists and what purpose it serves, and in the political position and beliefs of artists.

The basis for the training of actors in the GDR was created in the years from 1945 to 1949 in Weimar, where Otto Lang, Ottofritz Gaillard, and Maxim Vallentin founded the Deutsche Theaterinstitut to explore the theories of Stanislavsky. There were two phases to the training that was offered there: from 1945 to 1947 the pedagogical collective attempted to prove the principal correctness of an education according to Stanislavsky as demonstrated through the staging of *Das wundertatige Puppentheater*, and from 1947 to 1949, when the collective began to include the academic study of Marxism and Leninism in order to facilitate an 'all-German' theatre – one that evidenced a 'multi-faceted ensemble spirit' that would 'bring about national renewal through the theatre'.[7]

It was felt that it was necessary to overcome the collapse of Nazi Germany, to reawaken ethical values, and to give life a new orientation. Young actors trained at the institute would be made aware of the need to 'respect themselves, for society, their ties to progressive powers [in other words the Soviet Union] and of the need to develop a progressive outlook on the world that could be applied to artistic life and to the relations and connections to people'.[8] The primary aim of the institute was thus the 'political clarity necessary to sustain a democratic people removed from the shackles of fascism'.[9]

Political clarity had been requisite for the Soviet schools of acting (primarily the National School of Drama or GITIS) on which the Deutsche Theaterinstitut was modelled, and for the transference of the Stanislavsky method which was taught at those schools. In the 1930s and 1940s realistic acting had become the standard of German theatrical producers and it was felt that acting students should be immersed in the rigour of Stanislavksy's system.

The Deutsche Theaterinstitut continued its work until 1952, when the programme was moved to Leipzig and incorporated as the Theaterschule 'Hans Otto' Leipzig, one of the four centres for theatre training in the newly organized GDR. Teachers from the Deutsche Theaterinstitut were assimilated into the East German system, while others attended seminars and sessions in Weimar to study the Stanislavsky system. In 1947 Ottofritz Gallaird published *Das Deutsche Stanislavski Buch*, the officially approved East German translation of Stanislavsky's writings on acting.

The basis of the East German or 'Ossie' approach to theatre training has its roots in the Stanislavsky training developed at the

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Deutsche Theaterinstitut. However, due to the relaxing standards regarding the use of formalism in the GDR during the 1960s, teachers and specialists also began to embrace the style and teachings of Brecht, creating a mixture of ideology that, while seemingly incompatible, also informs the approach to acting taught by the schools from the former GDR.

'Co-Consideration' at Rostock

While approaches and ideas have certainly evolved and varied over the past fifty years, it is clear that the methodological basis for actor training has remained virtually the same in all three of the schools that specialized in training for the stage.[10] Basic information and certain ideas about that approach, though by no means exhaustive, are revealed through some of the work and comments from Professor Zschieschow at the HMT Rostock.

Students at the HMT Rostock undertake a four-year programme of study that comprises three years on campus followed by one year working with a professional company. The curriculum includes voice, movement, singing, literature, and theory; but the bulk of the work is in the area of acting. Professor Zschieschow detailed a few general areas of utmost importance to the training programme in Rostock. First is the basic idea that, above all, theatre is rooted in society and cannot exist separately from it. Given that premise, the most important element in theatre is the ensemble, and the most important technique that an actor can learn is how to react to a partner.

According to Zschieschow: 'They must learn that on stage we want to tell a story, and that a story is told by reacting and playing with your partner on stage.'[11] She also notes that: 'You can't produce something that is really real out of yourself alone in a scene; you can only react to what your partner gives you.'

Second, it is important to the teachers that the students be aware of the theatre as a conscious process: it is not inherent in 'me' and I can produce these things, but it is a function of the group process, which they must be able to repeat. They must make the work conscious yet playful and improvisational, and stay focused on their partner and the ensemble, and not on themselves.

Finally, actors from the HMT Rostock must have passion for the story that they want to tell, passion in what they are doing and fighting for, and for their personal ideology and point of view. As has been previously noted, the GDR did not traditionally separate the theatre from the rest of society, and the teaching staff at the Rostock school (most of whom taught in the GDR) maintain that an ideological and psychological point of view is critical to the place held by the theatre and the actor in society.

It was clear that the student actors were intimately linked with the Rostock community. At least once daily they were involved in some type of community service activity, ranging from performances for disadvantaged children to readings of Christmas stories to elementary and pre-school children. Zschieschow noted that the students were continually involved in similar activities throughout their studies.

The training that takes place during the Brecht seminar at the Rostock School and the mixture – or 'co-consideration' – of the two approaches is a tradition dating back to the time when the Rostock school was founded as a satellite campus of the Staatliche Schauspielschule Berlin (now the Hochschule für Schauspielkunst 'Ernst Busch') whose acting methodology was centred upon the synthesis of the Brecht and Stanislavsky approaches. Asked about the tradition of this approach, Zschieschow explained:

> When you get down to it it's not that easy to explain. The Stanislavsky approach teaches students to understand the character, to dive in with all the emotions and goals of the character. With Brecht the students explore the importance of the social aspect, the environment that we are living in – both as character and as actor; that we give our heart and soul to the character but only to a certain limit because we are not the character; we are actors who use certain tools such as the body,

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Above: exterior of the Volkstheater Rostock, Rostock, Germany.
Below: performance space at the Volkstheater Rostock.



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voice, and movement to play the character with our full conviction. At all times the commitment to being a worker of the theatre and a functioning member of society is equal to that of being a character.[12]

Understanding *Gestus*

Zschieschow described some of the work done in the Brecht/Stanislavsky seminar, primarily with regard to *gestus* – the creation of a social gesture or external showing of a role. She noted that, generally speaking, the work is quite simple, but developed over a number of weeks and months as opposed to shorter workshops that merely introduce the main points before moving on to something else. The concept of *gestus* is deeply rooted in ideas concerning the synthesis of the individual with his or her environment – that the environment physically affects the manner in which a person behaves, speaks, moves, breathes – everything they do. She described two ways of working in this area.

The first exercise she described was with a broom. An actor is given a broom with which to sweep the floor and not given any indication as to why they are sweeping. Then they are told to sweep because, for example, they want to make the room look good for a boyfriend, or because their parents are making them sweep the room against their wishes. Each time the element of 'why' would create a social attitude of *gestus* related to the situation.

Another exercise she described was a more advanced exercise combining *gestus* with the V-effect, or alienation. Students would sit in chairs around a platform as themselves, as 'students', and would then engage in student dialogue that was typical and immediate. Scenes from a preselected play would have been prepared – anything from Aeschylus to Schiller or even something more recent. The students would take turns stepping up onstage to perform scenes from plays and encouraged to make the physical and mental transition from the world of the 'student' to that of the character only when they arrived on the stage.

Finally, regarding the synthesis of Brecht and Stanislavsky, Zschieschow noted:

> A lot of people misunderstand and think that Brecht is just external and a big lie, but this is not so. Traditionally Brecht's work was played realistically in the theatre, but with a sense of minimalism or reduction. Brecht told actors to reduce everything to a simpler form, telling them not to take three steps if they didn't need to, to take only one, but know exactly why they were taking that one step as opposed to three.

Zschieschow and her colleague Matthias Stier reflected on additional elements from the days of the GDR that have carried over into the present. They noted that students were taught that theatre should only be made from a strong political and social conviction, and that they should know why they were doing this. They should be aware of the changes in society and of the fact that theatre does not exist outside of society. Stier noted, 'In East Germany we constantly thought in terms of the dialectic: everything changes and moves; the way we are right now is not the way we will be ten years from now.' Both agreed that they wanted their actors to be able to perform in any form or style of theatre and that they needed to learn how to survive in the 'big bad world of directors'.[13]

The Eclectic Approach in the West

While the three schools from the former GDR which train actors for the stage maintain a strong sense of consistency and have carried their approaches from the former East Germany into the twenty-first century, the schools of the former FRG are seemingly only united by their differences and eclecticism. While three programmes were visited and utilized as reference points in this essay, it is generally felt that the schools from the former West Germany are only similar in their dissimilarity. Uwe Hollmach, director of Sprecherziehung (voice training) at Bayerische Theaterakademie Munich, commented on the approach to stage speech as microcosmic of this phenomenon:

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HMT Rostock graduate Claudia Graue as the title character in *Alice in Wonderland* at Volkstheater Rostock.

After the Second World War, the previous emphasis on correct stage speech, or *Hochdeutsch*, was no longer a concern for those of us in the former FRG. There was much more of an emphasis on freedom of artistic expression throughout West Germany. However, in the GDR there was a consistent methodology among the schools, even a standardization of the terminology used. That was not the case in the Western part of Germany.[14]

This is not to imply that the programmes are any less successful or impressive. In fact, the schools from the former West generally had more impressive facilities, talented students who displayed a sense of freshness and openness, and equally impressive teachers with strong professional backgrounds. Several of the former FRG schools have taken on the characteristics of American departments of theatre and have begun to produce full seasons of work with diverse, wide-ranging approaches and offerings. Other institutions, such as the Bayerische Theaterakademie 'August Everding' Prinzregententheater in Munich, provide training throughout the academic year with a full repertory of plays and musicals during the summer months.

The approaches of two theatre training programmes and one university that is exploring practical training for the stage will now be considered. The theatre programme at the Academy for the Arts in Berlin was founded in the late 1960s at the then Hochschule der Künste in West Berlin. Karl-Ludwig Otto, a professor at the Academy since 1996, provided insight into the overall goals, current practice, and future direction of the Academy, which is housed in a superb facility just north of the major rail depot in western Berlin, Zoologischer Garten.

According to Otto, the programme at the Academy is unique among West German schools as it follows the radical spirit engendered by ensemble members of the first Schaubühne am Hallesche Ufer under the leadership of Peter Stein, one of the great theatre makers of the last century. Stein's theatre was based equally in the realm of 'idea' theatre and in the concept of site-specific theatre – staging works in abandoned factories, warehouses, and other spaces was necessary in Stein's view. Influential in the formation of the Academy's mission, Stein felt that it should train actors who were more than 'material for directors' and who were part of a strong democratic process of self-determination, but were capable of expressing themselves as individuals and whose command of individual technique would allow them to be co-authors of their characters.

Many of the actors from the original Schaubühne became teachers or part-time

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instructors at the Academy and, given the eclecticism of Stein and his followers, the ensuing approach was extremely diversified. According to Otto: 'That was one of the things I found dangerous about the programme, which has carried on to this day – the teacher makes the method. It is not like those schools of the former East where the method of training is very clear and specific.'[15] He also noted that: 'After the wall came down it was like a war between our programme and the Ernst Busch programme; we viewed our graduates as a school that produced actors whereas the Ernst Busch programme produced "material for directors".'

Otto, who spent a number of years at GDR schools, primarily the HfSK 'Ernst Busch', noted that initially the programme at the Academy seemed a bit like anarchy – everyone could do what they wanted. During the 1980s and 1990s he felt that the then HdK had established something of a 'corporate identity' in the world of theatre training with no real sense of direction other than the 'rubber stamp' that they provided. Otto noted that the programme had changed drastically over the past five years, and that relationships with both the Deutsches Theater and the Maxim Gorky Theater in Berlin, two leading state houses, had been successfully negotiated.

During the autumn semester of 2007, each class worked with different guest artists in addition to attending daily classes in voice and movement. The third-year class spent the entire autumn semester working with Rene Pollesch, a noted German director and theorist of acting. With him they developed a lengthy performance project that was characterized by his trademark movement and vocal style, a radical departure from traditional storytelling which does away with story and plot and opts for what Pollesch describes as 'real communication with the audience'. Pollesch's style is reminiscent of early Robert Wilson, Ionesco, and Beckett (especially Beckett's movement works) and is unique in that he co-creates all works in found spaces with found objects.

The Bayerische Theaterakademie 'August Everding' Prinzregententheater in Munich has also traditionally offered one of the most highly regarded programmes in the former FRG. Since 2003, the programme at the Bayerischen Theaterakademie has modelled its training methods on a co-consideration of both GDR and FRG traditions. To that end, several faculty members in the areas of acting, movement, and singing had taught and/or trained in the former GDR. As in the schools of the former GDR, the second- and third-year students engaged in an approach to training that was highly *Projektbezogene*, or project-based. According to Hollmach,

> I must say, those of us in the former West have been greatly influenced by the GDR tradition, which was known for its high level of *Handwerk*, or craft. The mixture of the two traditions has had a profound effect on our programme and we have found the results to be extremely positive.[16]

Practice in the Universities

Finally, there is a hybrid type of training programme that emerged in Germany in the 1990s that includes both theoretical and practical training in theatre – offered at the Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft or ATW (literally Institute of Applied Theatre Studies) based at Justus Leibig Universität Giessen. Traditionally, very little in the way of practical theatre experience has been on offer in German universities, which usually offer academic degrees in Theaterwissenschaft, or Theatre Science; but the programme at Giessen is divided, with about half of the work dealing with theoretical issues and the other half with practice.

A core group of professors in the programme are supplemented by international guest artists, who have included Robert Wilson, Heiner Müller, Heiner Goebbels, and more recently Richard Foreman and Sophie Haviland (2005), director Lee Breuer and Kathakali performer Surangama Dasgupta (2006), and Japanese Butoh artist Minako Seki (2008).

The focus is less on individual performance and more on the creation of new

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work, new performance techniques, and the integration of media in performance. Students take courses in acting, voice, and movement, but not to the level that would be found at a theatre *Hochschule*. The programme includes a variety of courses in directing, dramaturgy, film production, editing, and stage design. As of 2009, the programme was practically the only one of its type in Germany, but according to Lecturer Petra Bolte-Picker, there has been growing interest in a number of other universities regarding the possibility of establishing similar programmes.[17]

The Giessen programme also made the change in 2008 to move away from the 'diploma' model (common in Europe) towards offering the three-year Bachelor of Arts in Applied Theatre Studies, and a Master of Arts programme in Choreography and Performance.

Given the cross-pollination that has taken place to some degree among the German schools, it is inevitable that there will eventually be a greater sense of similarity among German programmes. As more teachers and students with diverse backgrounds filter into the mix, undoubtedly the national identity of theatre training in Germany will continue to experience change. However, it is certain, given the density of state and private theatres in Germany, that there will always be a strong need for actors capable of stepping immediately into positions within companies, and that the needs of the theatre companies themselves will in many ways determine the qualities to be found in their future graduates.

Notes and References

1. Information provided by Rolf Bolwin, Managing Director of the Deutscher Bühnenverein.
2. According to the website of the Deutscher Bühnenverein, the largest organization of theatrical employees.
3. Information provided by Rolf Bolwin, Managing Director of the Deutscher Bühnenverein.
4. H. G. Huettich, *Theatre of the Planned Society: Contemporary Theatre in the German Democratic Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).
5. This is a composite figure, averaged from acceptance statistics of all three former GDR schools.
6. Interview with Professor Karl-Ludwig Otto, Universität der Künste, Berlin.
7. Papers from the Hochschule für Musik und Theater 'Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy' Leipzig (unpublished).
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. The fourth school – the Hochschule für Film and Fernsehen 'Konrad Wolf' – specializes in acting for film and has traditionally been considered apart from the other three institutions.
11. Interview with Professor Esther Zschieschow, Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Rostock, Germany.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Interview with Uwe Hollmach, 30 April 2009.
15. Interview with Professor Karl-Ludwig Otto, Dean of the College of Performing Arts, Universität der Künste, Berlin.
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17. Interview with Petra-Bolte Picker, 29 April 2009.

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