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VOLKSBÜHNE SPECIAL SECTION

René Pollesch and Michael Shane Boyle

"A TOTAL KINDERGARTEN": A CONVERSATION ABOUT CHRIS DERCON'S VOLKSBÜHNE

The decision to appoint Chris Dercon, director of the Tate Modern, as Frank Castorf's successor at the Volksbühne prompted an exodus of the theatre's core artistic ensemble. Chief among those who refused to stay on with Dercon at the helm was the prodigious writer and director René Pollesch.

Pollesch joined the Volksbühne in 2001, beginning as the artistic leader of the theatre's second stage located in a historic Prenzlauer Berg beer garden, the Prater. It is fair to say that Pollesch's heady and frenetic productions, which received multiple prizes and invitations to Berlin's prestigious Theatertreffen, made his name synonymous with the Volksbühne under Castorf. As source material for plays, Pollesch mixes critical theory with heavy dollops of pop culture. The result can at times feel less like theatre than wandering homilies against emotional labor or Silicon Valley—albeit delivered through extraordinary theatrical means by choric ensembles dressed in Day-Glo tracksuits driving backhoes or doing acrobatics set to Miley Cyrus songs and accompanied by a film crew.

Someone familiar with Pollesch's work would find it hard to pick out an exemplary production. This has less to do with the sheer number of plays he has written (there were many dozens penned for the Volksbühne alone) than the fact that each contributes to an evolving project developed over two decades with a revolving group of collaborators, which has included performers like Martin Wuttke and the designer Bert Neumann. Pollesch's undertaking has always seemed to me an attempt to push theatre beyond what it should be able to do, then use what's left of it to refract the theatricalization of work and life under *very* late capitalism.

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I had the following conversation in German with René Pollesch on Facebook and over email in December 2017 and January 2018. In my translation below, he explains why the Volksbühne is no longer an appropriate place to continue this project.

SHANE BOYLE: *You worked at the Volksbühne for the majority of Frank Castorf's tenure as* Intendant [artistic director]. *Can you briefly describe the central project or mission of the theatre under his leadership? What were the theatre's major aims or operating principles?*

RENÉ POLLESCH: The Volksbühne under Castorf never followed a master plan—not even individual seasons were planned along these lines. Today when a new Intendant takes over a theatre they typically start off by grandly proclaiming a new "dramaturgy," repainting everything, and ripping out anything their predecessors left behind. Just look, for instance, at what Oliver Reese is doing at the Berliner Ensemble[1]—in this regard, Dercon is actually an exception. A new Intendant today would start by hiring a PR firm or graphic design office to create branding like the Volksbühne's "OST" sign or its *Räuberrad*,[2] and all this would take effect at the start of the season. But the things that so defined the old Volksbühne took years to come together. The theatre never had a general leading the charge. For instance, I was never told to create plays to fit some season's theme. For seventeen years at the Volksbühne, I was left alone.

In February 2015 Tim Renner[3] asked me whether I would be interested in staying on at the Volksbühne to take over a so-called performance division under a "General Intendant" whose name he wouldn't yet tell me. I said "No" simply because of the very idea of a "General Intendant." I knew that someone in a role like that would always want to have a hand in things and, as a result, I wouldn't be left alone. Intendants these days start off by going on the offensive because they want to make a splash while making it clear to everyone they've done all their homework. This may look like they are working eagerly and diligently for the theatre, but really it's all for themselves.

Castorf might not have done his job as Intendant, but at the same time he also did not do anything to make it look as if he was doing his job as Intendant. Really he just made his own productions. Whenever an administration wants to show that it's at work, things always turn out badly for the art. At a working theatre like the Volksbühne it's actually essential that the administration—of which all the artists were a part—does not think of itself as essential. If that happens, the balance between art and administration quickly starts to tip in the direction of administration. I once worked at the New York Theatre Workshop, which has an entire floor just for the administration, and that's where everyone in the theatre worked. The result was that the stage on the floor below seemed like an alibi so that those who made up the administration could say they were a theatre—but really it was just an administration.

Unfortunately, in his last year at the Volksbühne, Frank Castorf behaved like one of these Intendants with a master plan—like Reese—but in reverse. He removed the theatre's entire corporate identity, carting off the *Räuberrad* and

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taking down the "OST" sign. It was like he had planned all of this from the very start of his time as Intendant, which, of course, was not at all the case. And the majority of staff were against removing the *Räuberrad*.

SB: *I know it is still early days, but how do you think the project of the Volksbühne has changed with the arrival of Chris Dercon as Intendant?*

RP: When Matthias Lilienthal became Intendant of the Munich Kammerspiele, many in the press wrote about his recent time as Intendant at the Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin, and they all agreed his final night of theatre there was really great. But that night featured eight different directors and directing collectives, none of whom anyone in the press mentioned. Lilienthal's name overshadowed everyone else's. That's the sort of thing I associate with curators. They remind me of companies like Airbnb with none of its own apartments, Uber with none of its own cars, and Facebook with none of its own content.

After I said "No" to Tim Renner, I started getting several calls daily from an English number. At first I thought to myself, ah, Katie Mitchell is probably the new Intendant. I didn't pick up. Then I received an SMS from the same number, and the caller introduced himself as Chris Dercon. I had never heard of him. In any case, he asked if we could meet. And when I sat across from him a week later, I knew without a doubt that he was not someone who would leave me alone to work. Now, over two years later, he hasn't left Francis Kéré alone. The poor guy had to substitute scaffolding for his design, his vision of a temporary but forward-looking stage at Tempelhof Airport, just for the press. Dercon didn't leave Boris Charmatz alone either, transforming him into an entertainment programmer. And something similar happened to Tino Sehgal, whose performances are now all over the place as photos. Under Chris Dercon, these three have each put on trivial versions of their work. It's been a total kindergarten.

SB: *And why have you chosen not to remain with the Volksbühne?*

RP: When Chris Dercon and I met, he asked me again, in person this time, whether I would work alongside him. But he couldn't name a single one of my plays. Even today, when he speaks my praises to interviewers he references my play "Kill My Darling" [SB: The play is actually *Kill Your Darlings! Streets of Berladelphia*]. I knew that someone who hadn't bothered spending two minutes reading Wikipedia but claims they have loved and followed my work for years would only be interested in working with me because they thought it was necessary to have me on board. The last thing I want is for someone to drop by a rehearsal, and then say what they've seen isn't what they had in mind and that the play is canceled. I had already worked at the Prater for a year before becoming artistic leader there in 2001, and Castorf still had no idea what I looked like. As a result, he did not know who I was. None of that mattered to me, so long as he didn't try interfering. Bert Neumann and Bettina Masuch were the ones who brought me to the Volksbühne, and they knew my work well.[4]

SB: *There have been various attempts to protest what's happened at the Volksbühne, from government petitions to an occupation of the Volksbühne itself. What would you like to see happen to the Volksbühne?*

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RP: The Volksbühne had a very special practice, which, in my opinion, cannot be copied. The practice was in part guided by the size of the stage, which extended all the way up to the rafters. There was no way for anyone in the theatre to avoid it. The Volksbühne's former players did not resort to hermetically sealing the stage off, like [Susanne] Kennedy, [Walter] Asmus, and Sehgal are doing now in their work.[5] To be able to ignore the mood of two hundred and fifty Volksbühne staff—who currently have nothing to do because of the kind of work that is being commissioned—and then to tell interviewers that "The mood in the theatre is super," well, you have to be either tone deaf or bourgeois, or, likely, both.

I actually had expected Dercon to open the theatre to any kind of talent that he didn't have to pay much for. The old Volksbühne had sealed itself off in its own kind of way: it would not let anyone else in. That's why even young art students celebrated Dercon's appointment. But nothing has come of it for them. Dercon hasn't let them get involved, not even without pay. No one gets paid in the visual arts anymore, or in film either. The only ones who pay are subsidized theatres—or Netflix or Amazon Studios.

Someone needs to actually open the Volksbühne up again to young theatre people, though no one is tripping over themselves to do so. And these young people have to be paid. Likewise, there have to be people who take care of them, like Bert Neumann notably did for me and, later, for Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller. Some dramaturgs have tried to protect young artists from the theatre. Dercon can only be beaten with what many of us expected him to do in the first place, but which he ultimately didn't: the theatre has to be opened up to young people, and they have to be paid and supported.

SB: *Now that you have left the Volksbühne, what's next?*

RP: I am joining the Deutsches Theater, beginning in the 2018–19 season. I will direct two productions a year there, similar to what I was doing at the Volksbühne. I enjoy living and working in Berlin. I have never had a bad experience here. I came to Berlin because I was asked to—first to Podewil and then to the Volksbühne—and I've stayed ever since.

ENDNOTES

1. In 2017 Oliver Reese succeeded Claus Peymann as Intendant of the Berliner Ensemble. In the lead-up to his first season, Reese publicly declared a new direction for the theatre, which would be oriented to producing new plays by living authors.

2. Atop the Volksbühne for much of Castorf's tenure were neon letters spelling out "OST"—the German for "east." The sign was a reminder to passersby that the theatre was located in the former communist sector of East Berlin. In the mid-1990s, the Volksbühne installed the metal sculpture that would become its iconic symbol: the *Räuberrad* (Robber's Wheel). Designed by the Volksbühne's Bert Neumann, the *Räuberrad* was a four-meter-high wheel with legs that stood on the lawn in front of the Volksbühne. Before leaving the theatre in 2017, Castorf had both the "OST" sign and the *Räuberrad* removed.

3. Tim Renner was Berlin's Secretary for Cultural Affairs during 2014–16. He is seen as primarily responsible for the decision to appoint Chris Dercon as the new Intendant of the Volksbühne.

4. Bert Neumann was an artist and the lead designer at the Volksbühne until his death in 2015. Bettina Masuch was a dramaturg at the Volksbühne. She attended the Applied Theatre Arts program at the University of Giessen, which is where Pollesch also studied, under, among others, Hans-Thies Lehmann.

5. Susanne Kennedy and Walter Asmus are two directors who have productions running in Dercon's first season.

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