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FROM THE EDITOR

The cover image for this issue is the second in a series of three to record that all three issues of Volume 59 will have been prepared for publication in Berlin. It shows the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, home of the Berliner Ensemble, where an adaptation by Frank Castorf of Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* opened on 4 December 2017—Castorf's first Berlin production since stepping down as Intendant of the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, the theatre that graced the cover of issue 59.1.

A few weeks before this production premiered (and ran, at least on its opening night, for about seven and a half hours), the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz held a rather belated opening weekend featuring three Beckett plays—*Not I*, *Footfalls,* and *Eh Joe*—in productions directed by Walter Asmus and featuring Anne Tismer and Morten Grunwald, as well as works by Tino Sehgal, including the conversation piece, *This Is Exchange* (2003) and a reworking of part of his Tate Modern commission, *These Associations* (2012).

A new piece by Sehgal, *Ohne Titel* (2017), with music by Ari Benjamin Meyers, was the first event of the evening in the main auditorium and comprised Meyers's electric guitar music, which had already been heard through the foyers and salons, and a brief display of some of the theatre's technical capacities: lights on an empty stage, the stage lifts rising and falling and, to end, the big central chandelier lowered over the heads of the audience in the stalls. A woman behind me muttered, "Wunderbar," but her tone did not suggest sincerity. As the audience left the auditorium to return to the foyers and salons for an interval of just over an hour, staff started setting out individual seating in the stalls (during the Sehgal display the audience had been sitting on the floor), during which one could view videos of work by Beckett, Philippe Parreno, and Pierre Huyghe, watch a presentation of Sehgal's *Ann Lee & Marcel* (2016), or engage in conversation about "the market" with one or another of the interpreters of Sehgal's *This Is Exchange*. Then the Beckett. As in Asmus's Beckett productions featuring Lisa Dwan (*Not I*, *Footfalls*, *Rockaby*) which toured extensively (BAM, Royal Court, etc.) a few years ago, the plays were given with all lights extinguished—unless, that is, you were sitting in the balcony of the rather cavernous Volksbühne, where in spite of an announcement of impending darkness, emergency exit lights remained on, and bright lights from under seats cast the shadows of ushers onto the walls of the auditorium either side of the proscenium. From this viewpoint the precision and intensity of the performances seemed a little lost, to say the least: an intimate theatre dropped into the wrong place, just as the Sehgal pieces, conceived primarily for galleries, felt ill at ease in the social spaces of a theatre building.

Clearly Chris Dercon and the evening's dramaturg, Marietta Piekenbrock, are interested in some kind of refunctioning of the theatre as a building and as an institution. Not an entirely successful experiment at this first attempt, especially

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if some of the more hostile press responses to the evening are to be credited: "an insult to the audience and the performers" (*Frankfurter Allgemein Zeitung*); "what was a hit at the London museum seemed stale and tiresome in the theatre" (*Süddeutschen Zeitung*); "boring, out of its time, exhausting in its evenhandedness, and surprisingly humorless" (*Die Welt*). Boredom, insult, exhaustion: these might once have been the badges of honor worn by proud avant-gardists, but in this case seem to have more to do with the perhaps inadvertent inauguration of a museum of theatre and performance. This is one of the problems—or perhaps opportunities—that the recent change of leadership and direction at the Volksbühne poses for people working on theatre's histories. What might be done with such a practice, its social relations, its means of production, today? This question is one of several raised repeatedly in the special section of this issue devoted to the Volksbühne.

In this section, Brandon Woolf offers an elegy for the work of the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg Platz during the twenty-five years of Frank Castorf's artistic leadership. Holger Schott Syme reflects on what the change of direction means for the actor as medium for human communication in the German theatre tradition. Sara Waterfeld, who was involved in the "alleged occupation" of the theatre in September 2017, presents a brief glimpse of an alternative vision for a "transmedial theatre practice." Finally, in a conversation with Michael Shane Boyle, René Pollesch, who worked as a playwright and director at the Volksbühne beginning in 2001, offers his thoughts on what made the theatre distinctive.

The main part of the issue, preceding the Volksbühne section, comprises four essays. First, Mark Phelan considers the antagonisms of melodrama as constitutive elements of nation formation in nineteenth-century Belfast. Glenn McGillivray next intervenes in conversations about the historicization of emotion (see the articles by Natalya Baldyga in 58.2 and Jacob Gallagher-Ross in 56.3 for earlier contributions on this topic) by thinking about emotions—in this case, in eighteenth-century acting—as being made, socially and in situ, rather than merely held and felt. Brynn Shiovitz's work on yellowface in George M. Cohan's *Little Johnny Jones* adds another layer to our understanding of the relationships among the twentieth-century musical, the commercial theatre, and race. Sean Edgecomb then constructs a queer history of Ludwig II's identification with the swan and the lavish theatrical production of his own private utopia. Each of these essays works on the assumption that it is possible to make social and political meaning from those bits and pieces of the past (large or small, solid or fragile) that we can lay our hands on. How one does this, and with what kind of attention to other people's relationships with those chosen pasts, is what is at stake in Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz these days, as well as in the pages of this journal.

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