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Justus Leibig Universität Giessen: a New Direction in German Theatre Training

Since the post-war reorganization of education that began in 1949, the purpose and nature of German theatre training has perpetuated a division between performance and technical training, provided by vocational schools (or *Hochschulen*), while university programmes offer degrees in Theatre Science (*Theaterwissenschaft*), theory, or other academic areas. The course of studies at Justus Leibig Universität Giessen is one of the first to break away from this established model, offering a hybrid programme combining the study of theory and practice. Having featured a number of international guest artists as teachers, including Robert Wilson, Heiner Müller, John Jessurun, and Heiner Goebbels, the programme continues to be a centre of innovation in the changing landscape of German theatre education. Steve Earnest is an Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts at California State University, San Bernardino. His published work includes *The State Acting Academy of East Berlin* (Mellen Press, 1999), and articles in *Performer Training* (Harwood Publishers, 2001), *Theatre Journal*, *Western European Stages*, and *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. He is also active in southern California professional theatre.

SINCE the post-war reorganization of German education that began in 1949, there has been a clear distinction in the purpose and nature of educational offerings in the area of theatre. German universities offer academic degrees in *Theaterwissenschaft*, or Theatre Science, gearing their graduates for positions as dramaturgs and for university professorships and related positions, while training for performers, directors, choreographers, scenic artists, and other artistic personnel has been provided by theatre *Hochschulen*, vocational institutes for the practical study of theatre. Degree programmes at both the university and *Hochschule* level require an initial four years of study, with graduates receiving either a Master's degree from the university or an artists' *Diplom* from the *Hochschule*. Masters and Doctoral degrees are offered at universities, and many *Hochschulen* offer Masters (or *Magister*) degrees as well. While some additional reorganization and consolidation occurred after German reunification, the basic system has remained the same.

There have been few exceptions to this practice. Generally speaking, graduates of a German *Universität* could not expect to receive the type of training needed to embark on a

career in professional theatre; and by the same token graduates of a theatre *Hochschule* cannot ordinarily undertake Master's and/or doctoral studies at a German university without some additional coursework omitted by the more practical *Hochschule* training. Unlike students at American and British universities, most of whom take a programme of study that balances practical and theoretical subjects, German students wishing to study theatre have had to choose between the two basic options of theory or practice.

One of those options – entry into the fifteen state theatre *Hochschulen* in Germany – is unattainable for most. Chances of acceptance into the best theatre *Hochschulen*, such as the *Hochschule für Schauspielkunst 'Ernst Busch' Berlin* and the *Hochschule für Musik und Theater 'Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy' Leipzig*, are not high, since each of the schools receives more than one thousand applicants per year, with only twenty-five to thirty available places.¹ Acceptance on a university programme is not easy, either: it is difficult to qualify for entrance, and then one must secure and retain a 'place' within the chosen department. Nevertheless, it is far easier to gain admission into a university programme



The Performing Arts Building, Universität Giessen.

in Theatre Science than into a theatre Hochschule.

Situated between these traditional approaches is the Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft or ATW (literally, Institute of Applied Theatre Studies) at Justus Leibig Universität Giessen. The University, founded in 1605, is located some forty miles north of Frankfurt, and has offered programmes in literature and languages since 1971, and added a programme in Theatre Science in 1982. Though the academic programme initially followed a fairly traditional model, with no production or performance courses, during the past twenty years a 'hybrid' approach to Theatre Studies has developed. According to Gerald Siegmund, Lecturer at the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies, the current programme is similar to that of an American theatre department, in response to what was considered to be a real need in the German system and (in part) to a widespread 'westernization' across the region, including a large influx of Americans at the local military base. According to Siegmund:

The curriculum for Applied Theatre Studies (Drama, Theatre, Media) at Giessen University is a combination of both artistic and academic orientation; practice and theory are integrated into a coherent training programme, thereby taking the drama departments of Anglo-American countries as a model. The programme includes theoretical seminars and lectures in addition to practical courses and performance projects under the leader-

ship of instructors whose primary background is in theatrical practice as opposed to purely academic matters.²

The programme at the university is the only one of its kind in Germany. To that end, many purists (from both the University and Hochschule 'camps') have reportedly expressed distrust for any programme such as this that tries to deviate from established standards and to cross traditional boundaries.³ However, there is some sense that the approach is catching on – by 1998 there were a total of 119 students in the programme, and practically all of its graduates were working in some area of professional theatre.⁴ Additionally, several students that I interviewed at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater 'Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy' Leipzig in 2001 said that had they not been accepted into one of the two or three best theatre Hochschulen, their next choice would have been the programme at Giessen.⁵

Before the new direction of the programme at Giessen, it was not a realistic option for potential actors to undertake practical study of theatre at a university. Instead, potential actors would apply for admission into one of the state-supported acting schools. Those institutions – such as the HfSK 'Ernst Busch' and the HMT 'Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy' (previously mentioned), as well as the Hochschule für Kunst (western Berlin), the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Rostock, the

Staatliche Hochschulen of Stuttgart, Hannover, and Essen, and finally the newly created Bayerische Theaterakademie 'August Everding' in Munich – are highly selective, and can virtually guarantee their graduates positions within state-supported theatre companies; though in the changing landscape of the unified Germany it has become increasingly difficult for actors to obtain and keep positions with state theatre companies.⁶

The curriculum at each of these institutions has been somewhat standardized by the Wissenschaftsrat (Council of Sciences) with over seventy-five per cent of the curriculum devoted to practical studies in the students' major area. For example, students in the area of acting would take a three-year sequence of courses in acting, movement, dance, voice, musical theatre, and gymnastics, as well as a limited number of theatre history and theory classes.

There is a great deal of individual training at these schools, whose student–faculty ratio continued to average about 8:1 as of 2001.⁷ Since almost all of the conservatories are connected with at least one state-supported theatre company, students spend their fourth year in residence with a professional theatre, playing a variety of roles under the direct supervision of a theatre associate appointed by the Intendant, or artistic director.⁸ Upon graduation, students receive their artists' diploma and are seen in an arranged 'showcase' by a number of casting directors and artistic personnel who visit each of the schools during the late spring of each year. Many students are hired directly from these yearly audition/interview sessions, while others depend on placements *via* the Zentrale Bühnen, Fernseh und Filmvermittlung der Bundesanstalt für Arbeit (ZBF, or Central Theatre Agency) or the Genossenschaft Deutscher Bühnenangehörigen (GDBA), in many ways the equivalent of Actors' Equity in the UK and the USA.

Having begun to include courses in performance as early as 1982, the Giessen programme's commitment to practical work in theatre was strengthened in 1984, when the creation of two permanent distinguished guest professorships allowed them to hire major figures to remain in residence for a

period of one year. Since that time guest professors have included Heiner Müller, Robert Wilson, George Tabori, Michael Kirby, Richard Schechner, Patrice Pavis, and John Jesurun.

Müller taught at the school during the winter semester of 1984–85, giving a workshop on his play *Hamletmaschine* and a subsequent on-campus production with students in February 1985. The workshop thus served as a site for the development of his now famous *Hamlet/Maschine*, which premiered at the Deutsches Theater in March 1990 (just after the fall of the Berlin Wall) and remained in the repertoire until 1994.

To prepare for the *Hamletmaschine* project, students were given the task of studying the play in relation to other Müller texts, such as *Tractor* and *Cement*, and incorporating them into *Hamletmaschine*, the expressed goal being to 'make the texts comment on each other'.⁹ Müller also conducted workshops in playwriting, and directing, and several seminars about the theatre of the German Democratic Republic.

Robert Wilson was in residence at the ATW during winter semester 1989–90, teaching a course in the aesthetics of performance and developing a production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (entitled simply *Lear*), which was presented at Schauspiel Frankfurt in early 1990. Initially performed on the Giessen campus with a mixture of ATW students and professional actors, *Lear* was later transported south to Frankfurt where it was booked as a guest production. ATW programme director Helga Finter, who has researched and written several articles on Wilson's work, was largely responsible for the collaboration.

Wilson's effect on the programme was apparent; most of the faculty members there in 2001 were in post during Wilson's visit, and a number of subsequent student productions have been staged using a 'Wilsonian' approach. One of the most successful of these was a minimalist adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, directed by student Peter Oberdorf in March 2001, which included many stunning visual images and tableaux as narrative.

Guest professors Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner both visited from Tisch–



The Left Hand of Glenn Gould, co-produced by students from Giessen and La Fabrica (Taormina, Italy), under the guidance of Heiner Goebbels.

NYU. Kirby was in Giessen during Summer 1988 teaching a seminar on 'Self and Auto-performance', as well as giving a workshop on deconstructivist theatre, while Schechner visited during the summer of 1991, giving seminars on 'Theatre Anthropology' and on 'New York Theatre in the 'Sixties and 'Seventies'. Herbert Blau taught 'Performance Theory' during the summer of 1992, and another New York director, John Jessurun, has been artist in residence three times. According to Professor Sigmund, Jessurun was actually recommended to the department by Giessen students who had seen his work in New York and liked his use of popular genres such as TV soaps.

In the summer of 1985 Jessurun staged *Horse without Rider*, an examination of the conquest of the American West. Developed and presented on the Giessen campus, *Horse without Rider* explored myths of patricide, mistaken identity, and the destruction and reconstruction of the family unit. The performance installation included extensive use

of multimedia and was noted for its incorporation of sculptural and cinematic ideas. During the winter semester of 1987–88 Jessurun staged with the students his play *Sunspot*, which premiered the following year at The Kitchen in New York, and he returned during the winter of 1998–99 for another staging of *Sunspot*.

Beginning on 1 April 1999, the composer and music theatre director Heiner Goebbels was granted a full professorship as a Distinguished Theatre Artist at the University. A major figure in both the international music and theatre scenes, Goebbels's artistic practice as a director is distinguished by interdisciplinary crossings between theatre, music, literature, and performance art. Having studied sociology and music in Frankfurt am Main, Goebbels served as musical director of the Frankfurt State Theatre from 1978 to 1980. Since that time, he has worked as a composer, director, and musician, leading the German experimental rock group Cassiber in 1982.



Heiner Goebbels in France, 1998.

Like Wilson, Jessurun, and others before him, Goebbels's theatre works are best described as multi-layered performance installations, resembling live musical paintings more than traditional theatre pieces. Marked by the use of multiple languages (principally German, French, and English), his works deal with themes of fear, jealousy, race, and colonialism, and are characterized by intense ambiguities created by constant shifts between foreground and background. At the ATW Goebbels has developed several projects investigating the bridge between theoretical and artistic theatre practice.

Goebbels was in France during my own visit but, according to faculty members that I spoke with, his main interests are in 'artistic practice and its theoretical reflection – also the practical and theoretical study of text, language, and sound on the theatre.'¹⁰ His projects at the ATW have included *The Making of . . .* (1999), with text by Gertrude Stein, and *Präsenz und Virtualität – the Left Hand of Glenn Gould*, in which students from Giessen worked with La Fabrica company in Italy. The *Glenn Gould Project* was performed in Giessen, London, and Taormina in 2001. Additionally, 2001 saw the genesis of a project entitled *Hashirigaki*, which was presented at various European venues throughout the

academic year 2001–2002, reaching UCLA's Freud Hall in Los Angeles in October 2002.

Other members of the faculty also have eclectic backgrounds, ranging from performance to purely academic. Dr Miriam Dreyess, whose areas of speciality include contemporary performance, acting, theatre analysis, and gender studies, has worked as an actress at Schauspiel Frankfurt, one of Germany's largest state theatres, and she was assistant director/dramaturg with Einar Schlee for various productions in Frankfurt and Berlin.

Dr Gerald Sigmund teaches in the area of literary theory as well as dance and movement. He has worked as an assistant director for productions at the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt am Main and as a dance and theatre critic throughout Germany. Petra Bolte, also a graduate of the programme, studied classical ballet in Hamburg before attending the university, where she concentrated on the area of acting. Since leaving Giessen, she has worked as an actor in theatre and dance-theatre productions with directors including Oliver Hardt at Schauspiel Frankfurt, Jan Lauwers with the Needcompany of Brussels, Belgium, Grace Ellen Barkey, also in Brussels, and for several film and television companies in Germany.

Dr Helga Finter is an active scholar in Germany and has published a great deal of material about performance art (particularly Robert Wilson) and contemporary theatre. Her areas of speciality are theatre anthropology and vocal performance. In keeping with the nature of the programme, each member of the faculty strives to balance scholarly and practical pursuits in theatre.

Applied Theatre Studies at Giessen comprise two almost equal elements: practical studies and component studies. The students (and faculty) investigate the foundations, basic functions, and historical theatre forms, at the same time experimenting with practical issues – historical and contemporary languages of the stage; staging techniques, traditional and non-traditional; theatre criticism; dramaturgy; directing; theatre management; body and voice training; and stage design and technology, including mixed genres such as dance and music theatre.



Fish: semester project at Justus Leibig Universität

Component subjects which are requirements of the degree include German philology, Romance philology, Anglo-American philology, Slavic philology, classical philology, art history, musicology, and philosophy. The classes in the component subjects cover a broad spectrum of fields related to theatre, but also aim at conveying special knowledge to the students. The faculty is very sensitive to the opinion fostered by several German universities that theatre is simply the 'poor relation' of dramatic literature, believing instead that performance is the centre of all academic and practical studies in theatre.

After having been accepted into the university, students must apply for a place in the ATW. According to the Department, each year approximately ninety students apply for a place and around twenty-five to thirty are accepted. In order to be considered, potential theatre majors must submit a portfolio of

their previous work (acting résumé, slides from plays directed, letters of recommendation, etc.), must pass an entrance examination, and must be interviewed by the theatre faculty. The degree programme (Master's or doctoral work only) can be completed in around four years.

The programme at Giessen seeks to provide a substantial level of practical training in addition to fostering the creation of new work. Unlike those of other academic theatre departments in Germany, its students can study theatre exclusively as their major subject; it cannot be studied in combination with another major subject. Studying theatre at Giessen is both demanding (60–80 hours per week during the term) and challenging, since the comprehensive programme is intended to convey insights into many different subjects, integrating these into an interdisciplinary co-operation.

At the end of each semester, students are required to present a major project in integrated studies. These original projects are geared to 'force the students into becoming independent creators of theatre'.¹¹ Projects are presented live or on videotape (an archival tape also being made), edited for clarity of picture and sound (if presented on tape), and are followed by a lengthy oral examination of the presenter concerning the thematic and aesthetic elements of the production.

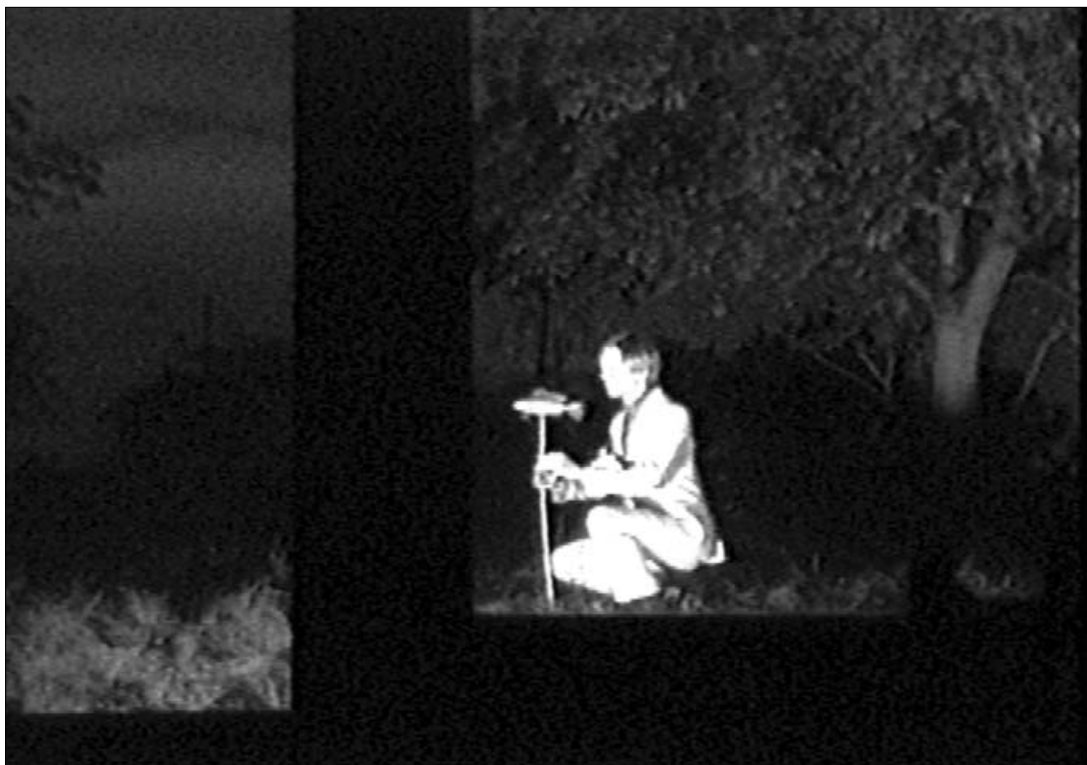
Student projects vary as widely as the backgrounds and experiences of the individual students. *A Woman with a Lamp* was a slowly moving scenario of a young girl in a small dwelling staring at a lamp, who begins taking off her clothes and covering the lamp with them. By the time she is completely naked, the light has been completely extinguished, thus diminishing the voyeuristic element of her 'strip-tease'.

Another work, entitled *Fish*, featured a very carefully framed still image of a female student, holding a fish tank in front of her

with a small fish inside. The fish was magnified out of proportion, allowing it to block her partially unclothed upper torso. Near the end of the piece she reached into the bowl and grabbed the fish, stuffing it quickly into her mouth. Like *A Woman with a Lamp*, *Fish* was concerned with voyeurism and views of the female body.

Once in a While a Lord's Supper Night featured Anne Südmeyer at the end of a long conference table, dressed in something like a nun's habit (though not an actual one), reading selected verses from the Bible and taking Holy Communion – actually drinking wine and eating bread – after each verse. The basic 'punch-line' of the work was the level of drunkenness she reached after 15–20 verses, steadily increased until she was unable to make sense of the lines. The work was a bizarre example of fanaticism – trying to cram all of religion into one session, ending up 'drunk with it.'

Looking for a Small Story was a project by two students (Melanie Mohren and Bernhardt



Looking for a Small Story: performance installation by Justus Leibig Universität students Melanie Mohren and Bernhardt Herboldt.

Herbordt) that was awarded the *Nordrhein-westfälischer Hörspielpreis* (a prize for plays given in the Frankfurt area) in 2001. As the title suggests, it was a work on how to tell a story through the use of stunning images – such as a diver walking through a car-wash system and a young man walking through the woods followed by a fish – again in a style reminiscent of Robert Wilson.

Overall, I was able to see over ten projects, each of which served a number of functions: allowing the students to create original works of theatre, to experiment with lighting for stage and camera, to create a ‘frame’ and learn to control what the audience sees within that frame, to realize the project through its completion, and finally to experience an in-depth critical evaluation of the work by the departmental professors.

After eight semesters of full-time study, students must present a final project of a substantial nature (such as directing or designing a full-length work), and also pass both an oral and written final examination. Upon successful completion of these two final projects the academic title *Diplom-Theaterwissenschaftler* (‘Diploma Theatre Scholar’) – a different degree to the MA that is offered at other German universities – will be awarded. The introduction of the diploma as a degree in Theatre Studies stresses the practical dimension of the programme in relation to the more theoretically and historically orientated MA courses. The possibility of undertaking postgraduate research leading to a doctoral degree may be offered to graduates whose level of work is deemed ‘excellent’.

Graduates of the programme work in a variety of theatrical careers, with the majority either creating new work or continuing to further advanced study. Examples include *She She Pop*, a group comprising six female graduates who have performed at several major theatre festivals including the Hope and Glory Festival in Zurich, while other graduates have performed and created works for theatre festivals in Hannover, the prestigious Theater der Welt festival in the Ruhr area, and for the Podewil Theater in Berlin. Most are engaged in site-specific work and are actively engaged in exploring ‘the theat-

ricality of everyday life’ by mixing fact and fiction to explore their experiences within a theatrical framework.

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Notes and References

1. Lennartz, Knut. ‘Kein Theater ohne Schauspieler’, *Die Deutsche Bühne*, No. 5 (May 2001), p. 11. These approximate numbers were also provided by Professor Klaus Volker from the Hochschule für Schauspielkunst ‘Ernst Busch’ Berlin in 1999, and Professor Hans-Christian Neumann from the Hochschule für Musik und Theater ‘Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’ Leipzig in 2001.
2. Interview with Gerald Siegmund, Lecturer in Applied Theatre Studies, University of Giessen, December 2001.
3. *Ibid.*
4. According to programme director Dr Helga Finter.
5. Interview with Angela Meyer, student at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater ‘Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’ Leipzig, December 2001.
6. Since German reunification, funding for state theatres has dropped substantially. Beginning in the autumn of 2001, many state theatres, such as the Theater des Westens in Berlin, have been privatized. This trend has resulted in fewer contracts for actors and artistic personnel.
7. This figure is somewhat misleading since a large number of acting and voice classes are taught *via* private or semi-private lessons. However class sizes are kept intentionally small: thus, classes at the HfSK ‘Ernst Busch’ featured an average ratio of 4:1, according to administrator Caspar von Rex.
8. For example, the HMT ‘Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’ places fourth-year students at one of four locations: Schauspiel Leipzig, Staatstheater Chemnitz, the Weimar National Theatre, or the Dresden Schauspielhaus. Each theatre company maintains a liaison between the school and themselves.
9. Information provided by Gerald Siegmund. Müller also used this technique for various other productions such as *Der Lohndrucker* in 1998 and *Hamlet* in 1990, both at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Interview with Petra Bolte, Lecturer in Applied Theatre Studies at the University of Giessen.
10. Interview with Gerald Siegmund, as above.
11. Bender, Ruth, ‘Willkommen in Club’, *Die Deutsche Bühne*, No. 6 (June 2000), p. 25.