

# EXPANDING THE CANON, CREATING ALTERNATIVE KNOWLEDGE, MARKETING THE FIELD? PERFORMANCE PRACTICES IN THEATRE STUDIES

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Departing from examples of German theatre study programs (University of Giessen, University of Hildesheim, University of Bochum), which include performance practice, my contribution discusses specific roles and functions of practical experience in the academic context. I will present and discuss three discursive fields in relation to performance practice as part of academic education: 1) Performance practice as a way of taking a political stance with the aim of changing academic education and to promote alternative forms of theatre. 2) Performance practice as a marketable good within humanities to promote study programs. 3) Performance practice as a means of acquiring alternative knowledge for theatre education and research.

Keywords: artistic research, German theatre studies, alternative knowledge, theory and practice

Today, the discipline of Theatre Studies in the Nordic countries faces many challenges. Recently, some departments have been closed down<sup>1</sup> others struggle with a decrease in student numbers. Theatre Studies within Northern Europe is considered to be a ‘small discipline’, which does not count as one of the ‘classical disciplines’ like e.g. literary studies. Despite this, Theatre Studies can, today, look back on a rich history and tradition.<sup>2</sup> The image and reputation of Theatre Studies has always been strongly identified with its supposed object of study: the theatre. Therefore, a high or low estimation of theatre always goes hand in hand with an

appreciation or disapproval of Theatre Studies – as we can clearly observe in several Scandinavian countries today. Governmental cuts on culture and theatre also reach the universities and specifically the departments of Theatre Studies. We can state that Theatre Studies is and remains a contested discipline.

From a political perspective there is a need to develop the field and its institutions. For more than 15 years now, two main developments have dominated the international agenda: one is the opening of the scope of research and teaching, a second is the inclusion of practical aspects in research and teaching. Under the rubric of

'Performance Studies' the narrow perspective on theatre as an art form is widened to more diverse objects of study that can be labelled 'performances'. On the one hand, this allows for a focus on a wider spectrum of 'theatrical' or 'performative' practices, e.g. rock concerts, political rallies, and sports events. On the other hand, this permits the inclusion of more diverse methods and theories like performance theory, queer theory, de-constructivism, theories on the public sphere and media. This orientation towards cultural and performance studies in recent years has been very fruitful for the research and teaching within theatre studies. By this, theatre Studies/Performance Studies has renewed its academic position, which has enabled the discipline to connect with and to contribute to the current social-cultural discourses. By the utilisation of the apt scholarly tools, performance scholars are able to bridge gaps and thereby communicate between other disciplines. But when

we look into the development of the discipline itself, there is another side to the coin. This beneficial opening and softening of its profile also entails the danger of exposing Theatre Studies all too easily to structural fusion or even diffusion. Especially the expansive tendencies of media studies have sometimes led to a push back of theatre studies, even a disappearance of the discipline when integrated into larger media departments, e.g. Tampere and Umeå.

The response to such a development can, of course, not be to re-establish a fence around Theatre Studies and to stubbornly insist on theatre history, drama, and performance analysis as unique disciplinary competences supposedly incompatible with any other discipline. However, we need to be aware of the somewhat fragile relations of Theatre Studies (as a 'small discipline') to its stronger disciplinary neighbours. The second trend in the development of Theatre Studies, which can be observed, is the integration



Picture 1: Seminar "Staged Bodies", Villigst 2012. Private photos: Julika Mayer, Meike Wagner.

of aspects of performative practices within academic education and research. Students generally love to practice theatre and performance and teachers also enjoy being in a performance space with their classes. Even though we do not aim to educate future directors and actors/performers, it is worthwhile considering what the potentials and consequences are when we get involved in performance practices in the frame of academic education and research. Therefore, I will focus my contribution on the relationship between theory and practice in Theatre Studies. I will discuss three examples from German Theatre Studies that interlink theoretical and practical training to look further into relevant aspects of the discourse on 'future developments' in Theatre and Theatre Studies.

#### THEATRE STUDIES AND PERFORMANCE PRACTISES IN GERMANY

During the 1920s, the first three Theatre Departments were founded in the universities of Berlin, Cologne, and Munich. These three departments prospered even under the Nazi regime, which considered them to be part of their cultural ideology.<sup>3</sup> After WWII, all the theatre professors that had been active during the Nazi reign were re-installed to their former positions. Consequently, one of the main issues for the German student movement – in 1968 – was to draw a clear line between the Nazi tradition – personified by those old professors – and a renewed university based on democratic and non-hierarchical principles. This also counted for Theatre Studies. So, in the 1970s, a new idea of Theatre Studies took shape in Germany and led to a number of new study programs during the 1980s. All of them desired to position themselves outside an idea of 'traditional' Theatre Studies merely based on theatre history and drama analysis. The Universities of Hildesheim ("Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Practice") and Giessen ("Applied Theatre Studies") established study programs that took into account an interplay of theory and practice. In 2012 the University of Bochum launched a new Master program "Scenic Research" that continues the

tradition from Giessen.<sup>4</sup> All three study programs are located within universities and do not belong to academies or conservatories. They combine the practical with the theoretical as well as an historical education.

Since its foundation in 1982 the study program "Applied Theatre" in Giessen has become very popular. However, it also aroused some controversies. Eg. in 2001, one of Germany's best known theatre critics, Gerhard Stadelmeier from *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, described the study program in Giessen as the: "greatest source of harm to the German theatre." By this time, however, its graduates had already started their careers in and outside the German theatre, such as René Pollesch, and the well-known theatre companies She She Pop, Rimini Protokoll and Showcase Beat le Mot. The academic output of Giessen is also quite remarkable. Six – out of a total of approximately 25 – German Professors of Theatre Studies have graduated from the Theatre Department in Giessen.

I will now look into the basic features of the different study programs before turning more generally to the main motives and key concepts of practice-oriented theatre studies. A mission statement from the webpage of Hildesheim promises to offer more practice than any academic theatre studies program and more theory than any artistic education:

"In the department of theatre we teach and research theory and praxis according to the Hildesheim Modell. In line with artistic research, we analyse in seminars, performance projects and research projects which forms of theatre are thinkable and how these kinds of theatre are produced."

In Giessen, the concept of 'praxeology' is a basis for the study program that was shaped by the founding director Andrzej Wirth. He states that 'praxeology' was a method to pass from the space of theory into the space of praxis in order to verify, falsify, or cancel theory. 'Praxeology' is considered to be a theory of practice.<sup>5</sup> In that liminal space there was neither right nor wrong, rather new meaning was created. On the website



this translates into the credo of an equal balance between theory and practice:

“Neither purely academic nor practical, but always both, scholarly and artistic, teaching and research in Applied Theatre Studies are impregnated by their double access to the theatre: the concept of the ‘applied’ is not considered to be an immediate application of science on the theatre that would result in a scholarly/academic theatre, nor a theatre producing academic approaches. However, theory turns to theatre, and theatre turns to theory, to gain a better and more differentiated knowledge of the other.”

In a brochure from the theatre department in Bochum to promote their new study program, the need to relate to new developments and trends in artistic research is expressed:

“Today, the scenic arts change in their aesthetics, their production modes, and in their relation to the social, the political and the urban. (...) Consequently, not only new research questions, new professions in the field of theatre are arising but also a desire to investigate these changes with methods of artistic research.”

In practical terms, this means that the students that have entered the study program at Giessen, Hildesheim, and Bochum via an entry exam will study theoretical issues. Moreover they will also have practical exercises and engage in artistic projects. From the beginning they will take part in and lead many performance projects supervised by teachers of the department. They will also have to do a compulsory internship during their studies. Furthermore the students will meet artists, performers, directors, or dramaturges as guest teachers, whereupon the students will organise their own student theatre festivals (G: Theatermaschine; H: state of the art) and organise and manage theatre and performance festivals (G: Diskurs; H: Transeuropa) inviting professional productions. They have the option to relate their BA thesis, resp. MA thesis to artistic

research, and a theatre performance can become part of their final exam.

When looking into the descriptions of the study programs and the marketing brochures one notices that the integration of performance practices into the academic discipline of Theatre Studies is motivated by three main objectives. The first is to take a political stance in relation to the more established ways of conducting academic research and also towards the traditional forms of theatre. The second is to educate students in a way to make them fit for the needs of the ‘cultural market’. Performance practice seems to be attractive to students because it makes them feel safe when envisaging the future. Their third aim, which I have identified, is to create alternative knowledges, which feed back into research and teaching and, therefore, develop Theatre Studies as a subject and discipline.



Picture 2: Seminar "Staged Bodies", Villigst 2012.  
Private photos: Julika Mayer, Meike Wagner.



Even though all three objectives are interlinked, I would, nevertheless, like to go into each issue separately as each of them is equally important to an understanding of why and how certain forms of practice have an impact on our teaching and research.

### POLITICAL STANCES

Giving performance practice a central role in Theatre Studies distinguished these new study programs from the traditional departments in Germany. They were motivated by the desire to actively take part in the creation of new theatre and new thinking about theatre that they could not find in Berlin, Cologne, Munich, or elsewhere. Performance practice was considered to provide a basis for political agency, collective creativity, and political awareness in teaching and research. The combination of theory and practice, therefore, presumably enables an expansion of the academic canon, an emphasis on participatory research and teaching and the elaboration of new visions for theatre.

In their 2015 chapter, “Research in a Post-Normal World”, Peter O’Connor and Michael Anderson articulate a very critical view on research in the context of universities describing it as a business in neo-liberal terms:

“[Research as business] is cut-throat, competitive and often self-serving. It is an outcome of a neo-liberal business and market model imposed on universities, one which celebrates the individual at the expense of the collective, with highly attuned accountability measures based often on the likelihood of how the research will benefit both the university and the researcher.”<sup>6</sup>

Even though their text is written from a New Zealand and Australian perspective, academics in other countries might also recognize aspects of this neo-liberal research model in their own working conditions.

To O’Connor and Anderson, ‘applied theatre’ is a method to counter these business principles of research and to break away from the market logic of academic writing. Art-based research can,

according to them, challenge traditional ways of representing but also evaluating research:

“If the world cannot be reduced to numbers or words alone, arts-based research challenges traditional research’s demand for validation and verification. It rejects the notion of singular truths or clear answers, instead searching for contrasting nuances, revealing ambiguities and complex multiple truths.”<sup>7</sup>

It appears quite appealing to turn to theatre practice to expand one’s own scope of representing scholarly research, but I think there is more at stake here. Uwe Wirth, a German philosopher and critic, has rightly claimed that the progress of thinking and scholarly research relies heavily on the interplay of canonizing and de-canonizing methods, theories and paradigms. He sees a productive interplay at work between the professional and a dilettantish mode to create new thinking and new academic output. In that sense, theatre practice in the frame of academic theatre studies, which does not intend to be professional, can be considered to allow itself to operate in a non-normative and dilettantish mode:

“While the professional dispositive aims at legitimating the parcelling (of ‘the wild exterior’) - therefore emphasizing acts of setting up ‘borders’ and control – the dilettantish dispositive aims at an opening of the epistemic space – we deal here with a movement in a not yet defined space, with the ignorance of existing borders or with the shift of borders. In other words: the thought mode of ‘frontier’ is prevailing, the travel into yet unexplored spaces of knowledge, where safe ways of knowing are lacking. We rather move ‘cross-country’ and ‘off highway’.”<sup>8</sup>

Leaving one’s own path of scholarly methods and concepts in order to allow for an open epistemic space clearly entails a risk. To feed in new thinking, however, can lead to productive negotiations between tradition and innovation. According to Wirth the benefit of the



Picture 3: Seminar "Staged Bodies", Villigst 2012.  
Private photos: Julika Mayer, Meike Wagner.

‘dilettantish’ mode in research comes to full bloom when the ‘thought mode of the frontier’ interacts with theoretical and conceptual frames of research. So, in our case, performance practice needs to feed back into scholarly epistemology to be able to develop the field further and its modes of thinking. In Theatre Studies, the ‘Performance as Research’ movement, mainly initiated by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson<sup>9</sup> from Warwick, has already explored this interplay of theory and practice.

Another political aspect is participatory approaches in research and teaching through performance practice. Performance practice can

help to unlock hierarchies and to build student capacities. Participants learn to develop autonomous agency and to control their own actions. They gain a wider consciousness about their own intellectual and practical potentials.

German Academics are rather formal with their students. The use of the formal greeting (Siezen) is the rule and you would normally address a student by her last name. However both teachers and students are on the same level and titles (‘Dr.’, ‘Prof.’) are not in use. At many occasions I myself have experienced (as a student as well as a teacher) that this formal setting completely changes when entering the rehearsal room. There

is no way of sharing a theatre space, engaging in corporeal exercises, sharing intimate visions and feelings about certain aspects of the performance while addressing each other as 'Mr' and 'Mrs'. When the group exits the stage and re-enters the seminar room the formal codex is re-established. In the Scandinavian and Anglo-American context this may sound strange, but even there, academic hierarchies expressed in subtler ways might be set out of order in rehearsal.

Undertaking practice at a university Theatre Department can unlock hierarchies and re-arrange group structures in a productive way. Students, having been rather silent in class, can make themselves heard in a different setting. Teachers, too, have the opportunity to engage with students and projects in a different way. Participatory approaches claim that acting on stage and researching into theatre practices can enable the participants to see themselves as actors rather than spectators. They are provided with agency and control. Techniques and methods of co-learning and capacity building are based here on the active experience of performance.<sup>10</sup>

A third political issue is the claim to create new visions for theatre. The Bochum papers clearly formulate this objective for their study program: "The studies of 'Scenic Research' take part in the transformations of the scenic arts by observing, commenting, producing and thereby prepare [the students] for professional fields of the theatre of tomorrow."

The Giessen concept also articulates a vision of a new theatre with a somewhat rebellious or anti-institutional undertone. This kind of mission statement would also fit to an artistic education at the conservatory or academy of acting/performing/directing. On the webpage, it is stated that students are encouraged to never accept the status quo and the theatre as it is, to approach theatre with risky and necessarily contingent concepts, to engage in the search for open theatre forms, to challenge any thinkable form of theatre. The study program wants to provide students with capacities to get involved in shaping a theatre of the future.

The graduates from Giessen have indeed had

quite an impact on German theatre during the last 10 years. Under the label of 'Postdramatic Theatre',<sup>11</sup> former Giessen students have been most successful with their theatre and performance projects. Their works dominate theatre festivals and even state funded theatres have opened their doors for new approaches in production and creation that have been shaped, or at least been mainstreamed, by the Giessen education and training. Theatre critics have even created the term 'the Giessen School' to describe the specific theatre aesthetics.<sup>12</sup>

### EDUCATING FOR THE MARKET

The political implications discussed above seem to foster academic freedom and creative production of thought. But to introduce performance practices can also become an alibi, a legitimization for Theatre Studies as a discipline when today's neo-liberal policies require the humanities to prove their social relevance in simple terms. At the same time, the students demand from us an orientation concerning their future profession. They keep asking 'why and to what aim should I study theatre?' To give them clear, practical tasks relieves them from the risk of engaging in their studies on the basis of a vague idea about humanist education. I remember when I was a student that every so often, I had to answer my family's questions about my studies. What actually is it you are doing? It's not about acting... How easy it would have been to tell them that I am currently developing a performance. There are even tickets available to come and see it.

Thus, from all sides today, there is an expectation of outcome. Students require a clear vision of their future profession and the university want us to increase student numbers and is very happy when we introduce modules providing concrete professional training on all levels.

Hildesheim demonstrates their willingness to subscribe to this logic when they promote on their website:

"The interdisciplinary structure of the curriculum fosters the necessary





Picture 4: Seminar "Staged Bodies", Villigst 2012. Private photos: Julika Mayer, Meike Wagner.

flexibility for the open field of culture professions. Analysing the data of graduates has demonstrated that our former students have been very successful on the market of cultural work. Their professional activities range from dramaturge, curator, television news editor, web designer, theatre and museum pedagogues, director of young art schools, of socio-cultural institutions, of cultural agencies, from art manager to cultural journalist.”

It is striking that there is no mention of any scholarly professional activity here. The major goals of humanist academic training have seemingly disappeared from the agenda. This self-marketing is very much directed at professionals in the field of culture. To the students, the link of theory and practice appears to be an advantage for their ‘marketability’ after graduation.

We should not oversimplify matters by just saying that performance practices bring us further

down the path of neo-liberalism. But, on the other hand, we should keep in mind that there is a constant negotiation between the ‘political stance’ and the ‘marketability’ that we need to acknowledge when evaluating practices of/in Theatre Studies. Therefore, I would like to offer another perspective on performance practices that relate them back to the notion of Theatre Studies as an academic discipline within the humanities. With the help of performance, we can acquire alternative knowledges that enable us to augment our capacity of intellectual and aesthetic judgement. Theatre is a corporeal art form. But we mainly acquire knowledge about theatre through reading, discussing, and performance analysis. Practical exercises, however, allow the students to go beyond the text-based transmission of knowledge and reconnect the analysis of performance to a corporeal experience.

In 2012, I gave a course on the phenomenology of the body and the relationship between human beings and objects. After two long sessions of

reading body theory – Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Butler et al. – I invited a puppeteer, Julika Mayer, to do a workshop with the students on the basis of our theoretical readings. The students worked with materials and also with puppets to become aware of their corporeal conditions and the ways their bodies relate to their material environment. And in this case it worked out perfectly to create a loop back on theory when the students took their puppet to read Jacques Lacan [picture 4, Workshop with Julika Mayer, Villigst 2012]. Here, theory travelled through their minds and their bodies initiating an artistic and also academic expression in performance: the students had encountered the Lacanian ‘other’ in reading and in corporeal practice when performing with the puppet.

The whole seminar, including the workshop, was a very satisfying experience for the teachers as well as for the students. We had worked through theories on embodiment by ourselves embodying the theory. I believe that the practical work and the corporeal experiences were essential to foster more essential knowledge on the staging of bodies. The workshop allowed for a transmission/emergence of knowledge through no-written and non-verbal channels. In that way, through the practical work with their bodies, the students gained access to higher levels of tacit knowledge.

In the late 1950s, Michael Polanyi coined the concept of ‘tacit knowledge’ as a capacity that is opposed to ‘explicit knowledge’. ‘Tacit knowledge’ is rather a ‘know-how’ than a ‘know-that’. The latter can be transmitted via writing and talking, whereas the first cannot be verbalized, it can be demonstrated and experienced. When we are dealing with art, according to Polanyi, we have to get access through a practical knowledge of art:

“Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims that can serve as a guide to the art only if they can be integrated into the practical knowledge of the art. They cannot replace this knowledge.”<sup>13</sup>

In our case, the practical knowledge of art is a corporeal knowledge of performance. So doing

practical exercises and also performing on stage can give us access to the knowledge of theatre and at the same time, while performing, we demonstrate or represent our knowledge of this art.

This transmission of knowledge through corporeal experience and performance inheres also a historiographical aspect, as Diana Taylor has emphasized. In her seminal book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), she presents the concept of ‘the repertoire’ as an embodied archive that needs to be explored for a full image of past and present performing practices. The archive provides us with texts and objects that fall short, however, to transmit performing action and corporeal aspects:

“Repertoire, etymologically ‘a treasury, an inventory,’ also allows for individual agency, referring also to ‘the finder, discoverer,’ and meaning ‘to find out.’ The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.”<sup>14</sup>

A lived and performed repertoire preserves but also changes the performance while transmitting the corporeal action. Taylor provides us with a practical historiographical approach that borrows from concepts of oral history, but emphasizes the performing body. The concept of the repertoire as a living archive and corporeal transmission of knowledge makes us aware of the fact that the historiography of theatre only poorly explores the performative past when purely restricted to the study of text- and object based sources.

#### MARKETABILITY VS. ‘EXPANDED KNOWLEDGE’

In Germany, the graduates from Hildesheim and Giessen (the same is to be expected from Bochum) have been quite influential for theatres,

but also for theatre and performance education. They have initiated a re-thinking of the traditional division of labour between actors, performers, directors and dramaturges at theatres by a more interdisciplinary approach: actors now become directors, become performers, become dramaturges, become visual artists... These 'half-educated all-round performers with a touch of theory' have entered the institutionalized and subsidized theatres in Germany only to question the traditional production processes. In return, acting academies and conservatories are forced to re-model their idea of the actor towards a creative and conceptually working actor/performer and interdisciplinary and collective creation.

At the same time, it became obvious that Theatre Studies benefits largely from practical

modules in teaching and research. Performance practices can contribute importantly to an expansion of our research and teaching. The development of alternative methods to acquire and apply knowledge greatly enriches our intellectual capacities. This counts equally for theatre theory, performance analysis, and theatre history. However, the question still remains open to what extent Theatre Studies should invest in approaching theory and practice in face of neo-liberal demands for 'marketability' in the guise of 'social relevance'. Therefore, we constantly need to reflect on the objectives, functions, and consequences when we choose to embed performance practice into academic research and teaching.



## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This concerns departments in Tampere, FI (fusion with Media department), Oslo, NOR and Umeå, SVE.
2. The department of Theatre and Dance Studies in Stockholm, e.g., celebrates its 70th anniversary in 2016.
3. In Berlin, the Jewish founding theatre professor Max Herrmann was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942 where he died. His successor, Hans Knudsen, took over as a professor in 1944. He was a strong supporter of Nazi ideology. In Cologne, Carl Niessen also followed Nazi lines and became a leading figure in the so-called 'Thing-Spiel movement' to promote open air theatre for the masses. In Munich, Artur Kutscher became a member of the Nazi party in 1942. Compared to Knudsen and Niessen he was a less active Nazi follower.
4. Today, the tradition of the Giessen study program dominates all three study programs as the professors running the study programs in Hildesheim (Jens Roselt, Annemarie Matzke) as well as in Bochum (Sven Lindholm) have all graduated from Giessen. As a consequence, all three departments are somehow interlinked and have their roots in the methods and concepts that build the basis of the so-called 'Giessen School'.
5. Wirth took this term from the Polish philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbinski's examination of the parameters governing human agency. It combines the process of thinking and its logic (theory) with its purposeful implementation in practice. Andrzej Wirth was Kotarbinski's student. Cf. Andrzej Wirth: "Adepten der Giessener Schule. Die Neuen Coolen", *Grenzgänge. Das Theater und die anderen Künste*, Gabriele Brandstetter, Helga Finter and Markus Weßendorf, eds. Narr, Tübingen 1998, pp. 317-326, 317.
6. Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson: *Applied Theatre. Research. Radical Departures*. Bloomsbury Publishing, Sydney et al., eBook, 2015, pp. 3-4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
8. Uwe Wirth, "Dilettantische Konjekturen", *Dilettantismus als Beruf*, Safia Azzouni and Uwe Wirth, eds. Kulturverlag Kadmos Berlin 2010, p. 24. Author's translation.
9. Cf. *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, eds. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2011.
10. Cf. O'Connor/Anderson, *op.cit.*, p. 21
11. Hans-Thies Lehmann has disseminated the notion of 'Postdramatic Theatre' through his popular book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Routledge, New York 2006.
12. Cf., e.g., Tobias Becker: "Die Dilettanten aus Hessen" in *Spiegel Online*, 19 December 2012. <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/das-buch-von-der-angewandten-theaterwissenschaft-a-873656-druck.html>, accessed 25 January 2016.
13. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, p. 50.
14. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2003, p. 20.

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