

Essay

Staying with the trouble

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Collective forms and methods in performing arts in the 1920s and today

By Konstanze Schmitt

My name is Konstanze Schmitt, I'm an artist and theatremaker based in Berlin. In this essay, I try to connect my professional experience as a director working in the collectively driven protest opera *Who owns Lauratibor?* that premiered in the streets of Berlin as a massive demonstration in June 2021, to the tradition of the Workers' Theatre.

The Workers' Theatre has influenced historic and contemporary forms of theatre and art. In Europe and the Soviet Union, it has interacted with avant-garde movements such as Soviet Constructivism and the Epic Theatre, and has also been influenced by them. The development of the Epic Theatre –the non-illusionary and non-dramatic theatre– can be traced from the early proletarian festivals and the *Bunte Abende* format in the 19th century, to the variety-programming political revues of the 1920s and the agitprop troupes that spread all over the world. It also inspired the revolutionaries of the bourgeois theatre and music: Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, and Hanns Eisler, who developed new forms of theatre and opera in collaboration with the workers' movement.

Theatre as a performative art is especially suitable to try out, rehearse and (re)present other forms of interaction between people, i.e. other forms of sociability: in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, new ways of thinking human societal relationships – such as work, leisure, family and romantic love – were accompanied by new ways of organising; and on the question of bringing them together in order to create a new society, the avant-garde arts (and with it, the Workers' Theatre) were a powerful practice. Therefore, the formal experiments of this time can be seen as both artistic *and* political.

This text takes a closer look at the interdependencies of the Workers' Theatre with the political and artistic avant-garde, its aesthetic methods and its functions: to "Agitate, Educate, Organise". It will also ask about the possibilities and methods of a Workers' Theatre today by analysing the anti-gentrification protest opera "Who owns Lauratibor?" The opera was collectively realised by neighbours, artists and activists, and had its premiere on Berlin's streets in the summer of 2021.

What is the Workers' Theatre?

Workers' theatre emerged in the 19th century in amateur theatre groups and workers' clubs. In Sweden, it began as folk theatre festivals in the countryside, where the factories were located. Workers performed in the forests on stages with scenes made of bushes which later led to the development of slapstick or *Buskis* Theatre (Knilli and Münchow, 1970).

In 1860s Germany, several educational clubs for workers emerged, some calling themselves "Co-operatives for the acquisition and increase of intellectual capital". It was the hope of various leaders of the workers' movement that once workers educated themselves, the capitalists would no longer dare to offer them such exploitative wages (von Rügen, 1973). In their clubs, workers could meet informally and develop forms of collectivity and organisation, free from political or cultural top-

down agendas. In the popular *Bunte Abend* (colourful evening) format, all participants contributed with their specific interests or skills, giving space for all sorts of performances. The evenings consisted of songs, choreographies, short scenes or sketches, *tableaux vivants*,¹ recitals, proclamations. This type of participatory theatre “by workers for workers” was an important tool for self-education.

The Workers’ Theatre went on to be ideologised, formalised, and broadly organised at the beginning of the 20th century through its contact with the avant-garde. In the Soviet Union, the constructivists developed discussion pieces, the montage technique became a prominent factor in theatre and film, and Proletkult emerged as a mass movement of proletarian cultural groups and societies. Agitprop groups performed throughout the Weimar Republic for the workers’ cause.

The methods of self-empowerment that were central to workers’ theatre stand in contrast to most forms of contemporary theatre, which are shaped by the continuous search for (self-) expression and performativity.

In the dialectical and parallel development of the workers’ theatre and the avant-garde arts in the beginning of the 20th century, we have two main concepts: on the one hand, art as a tool for something, art as a weapon (“Kunst ist Waffe!” was the slogan by communist physician, playwright and activist Friedrich Wolf), meaning: the role of art is to agitate, educate, organise = *political art*. And, on the other hand, *doing art politically*: the production process/the rehearsal is itself conceived as a collective learning process, a common creation, and the relations within it as constitutive for the *political art work*.

Following Walter Benjamin’s call for the necessary connection between both content and form, commitment and quality,² my hypothesis is that in order to create a real debate on real estate speculation, on the questions and forms of workers’ theatre, and on the functions of art and the logics of capitalism etc., we must engage physically in the performative appropriation of spaces. Bodies can find answers and create change where language can only analyse and describe it. This is the power of performance: the body’s positioning and movement in (public) space produces a change, which is at the same time its visualisation or representation.

Agitprop in 1920s and 1930s Soviet Union and Germany

Agitprop (short for agitation and propaganda) emerged in the Soviet Union after the Bolsheviks took power in 1917 as a way to politically stir the masses and to convey the new political and social ideal of communism. At the forefront was the call to contribute to the construction of a new society that was shared by workers and many artists of the constructivist movement.

For the agitprop troupes it was about flexible, rapid, on-site deployment. Productions were made with little or no scenery or stage, and costumes were replaced by overalls or similar uniform

1) *tableaux vivants* means “living pictures” and is a form of performance in which the participants depict an image through a freeze-frame method whilst a narrator describes the presented situation.

2) Benjamin opens his famous speech about the role of art in a revolutionary society with the following sentences:

For the fact is that this debate has never got beyond a boring ‘on-the-one-hand’, ‘on-the-other-hand’: *on the one hand* one must demand the right tendency (or commitment) from a writer’s work, *on the other hand* one is entitled to expect his work to be of a high quality. This formula is, of course, unsatisfactory so long as we have not understood the precise nature of the relationship which exists between the two factors, commitment and quality. One can declare that a work which exhibits the right tendency need show no further quality. Or one can decree that a work which exhibits the right tendency must, of necessity, show every other quality as well. This second formulation is not without interest; more, it is correct. I make it my own. But in doing so I refuse to decree it. This assertion must be *proved*. And it is in my attempt to prove it that I ask for your attention (Benjamin, 1998, p. 86).

workwear. The mostly short pieces alternated between the various scenes of the piece and a speaking choir. Songs were always used; while the audience was being presented with recognisable situations during the scenes, the choir would comment and appeal to the workers as a class. The pieces were adapted to current political realities and locations with the intention of criticising, propagating and agitating. Many agitprop troupes, such as Rotes Sprachrohr from Berlin, created their plays collectively, from the research of the material to the writing and the acting, and understood this way of working as their political *and* artistic practice.

While in the Soviet Union agitation and propaganda were important political tools from the start, and the avant-garde took advantage of the “organising function of art”, as constructivist author and activist Sergei Tretyakov put it,³ it took the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) until the mid-1920s to discover that culture and art were important in the struggle for hegemony of the state. A tour by the famous Blue Blouse agitprop troupe from Moscow in 1927 sparked an agitprop theatre boom in the Weimar Republic. In 1929, there were about 300 agitprop troupes in Germany. The Rotes Sprachrohr troupe from Berlin was one of the most influential groups.

The workers organisations in education, sports and music clubs, which in Germany had existed since the 1860s (and which, especially at the time of the Anti-Socialist Laws, were popular political meeting places), empowered and politicised the masses: in 1928 about half a million workers were organised in the Arbeitersängerbund (Workers’ Singers’ Union) in Germany. That is around ten times more than in 1908; moreover, the movement was no longer dominated by men, as many women had joined the formerly all-male choirs.

Tenants’ movement 1932: *Kuhle Wampe*

The film *Kuhle Wampe or: Who owns the world* (1932), directed by Slatan Dudow and written by Bertolt Brecht, does not only portray the communist sports and leisure movement at the beginning of the 1930s, it is also one of the few filmic documents of an Agitprop Theatre Scene.

The scene, which is performed by Rotes Sprachrohr, takes place on a square stage in the public space, in the middle of a mass event. Three women performers in overalls and with enormous megaphones (the name Rotes Sprachrohr means Red Megaphone) come onto the stage. They sing and repeat an intro song about the group that consists of two lines: “We are the Red Megaphone, the megaphone of the masses, it’s us! We express what makes you sick.”⁴ More performers with instruments enter the stage, play a melody, then the storyteller begins to tell the story of a forced eviction attempt, the other performers enter the scenes in lines according to the different figures of the scene – landlord, transport men, tenants, neighbours.⁵ After less than two minutes, the performers play and sing the melody from the beginning. End of the scene, applause.

3) For example in *Die Kunst in der Revolution und die Revolution in der Kunst* (1923), and in *Der Schriftsteller und das sozialistische Dorf* (1931) (both quoted in Benjamin, 1998).

4) “Wir sind das Rote Sprachrohr / Sprachrohr der Massen sind wir / Wir sprechen aus was euch bedrückt / Wir sprechen aus was euch bedrückt / Wir sind das Rote Sprachrohr / Sprachrohr der Massen sind wir”

5) Text of the scene:

Kösliner Straße, Wedding, Hinterhaus / Da schmeißt der Wirt nen alten Mieter raus / Die Möbelträger bringt er sich gleich mit / So, laden Se mal ruff den Kitt / Sie ham sich wohl bei uns geirrt / Wir sind doch angesteuert worden, Herr Wirt! / Sie sind ein halbes Jahr die Miete schuldig / Ich war weiß Gott lang genug geduldig! / Genug! Proleten, Nachbarn, bilden schon nen Ring / Der Möbelträger fragt und es wird diskutiert / Bis auch der Letzte noch sympathisiert.



Filmstill Kuhle Wampe (screenshot)

With a big jump forward, I want to present in the following paragraphs the forms and methods of the protest opera *Who owns Lauratibor?* which is part of the tenants' movement in our days.

Tenants' movement 2021: Who owns Lauratibor?

The collectively realised protest opera *Who owns Lauratibor?* refers to itself as an activist project. It is born out of the collaboration between organised tenants, shops and initiatives in the Reichenberger neighbourhood in Berlin-Kreuzberg. Initiated in 2020 by two endangered projects, Ratibor14, a crafts people's and artists' workyard, and Lause10, a former glass factory with studios for alternative media, artists and archives for social movements, it constantly grew: the neighbourhood joined the choir of the opera, a band became an orchestra, the crew of an evicted pub became part as well as many more neighbours and initiatives with their stories of gentrification, anger and fear.

The work on the music and the text of the opera started as a part of the organization process. Author Tina Müller and dramaturg Marieke Wikesjo walked the streets, met neighbours, talked to representatives of grassroots initiatives, and in the process they found stories and some of the opera's later protagonists. Composer Anders Ehlin wrote the music especially for these protagonists, most of whom are not professional singers, and their performance in the public space. From the instrumentation to the style of the songs, the music always follows their capacities and embodies their personalities and desires. The story follows two heroines, Laura and Tibor, and their friends on the search for the magic potion of resistance through the province of Lauratibor. They meet ruthless politicians and housing investors, as well as allies in similarly precarious situations. Dramatic rigours that threaten to destroy not only the collective initiative but also their mere existence, edge

their path which ultimately takes them to the inevitable confrontation with the opera's arch-villain, the house magnate Maximilius Profitikus.

We realised the opera in June 2021 as a big demonstration against gentrification and the sell-out of the city. With a constructivist stage on wheels and a mobile orchestra wagon, it went through the very neighbourhood where our story takes place: the "province of Lauratibor", the streets between Ratibor14 and Lausitzer10 in Berlin-Kreuzberg, and made stops at many fought-over spots to tell their stories.



Scene of the premiere "Who owns Lauratibor?", 12th June, 2021. Photo: Holger Kral

In the beginning, the demonstrators-spectators were introduced to the story by Tibor, the narrator of the opera:

Dearest, Most Esteemed World Population, welcome to our opera. To our protest opera. Here, we will tell you the story of a grey, barbaric time. Back then, they called it neoliberalism, late capitalism, postpostpostmodernism. Either way and in any case: Capital had conquered the entire planet; the industrial sector burned off the last blade of grass in search of profit; the gap between the poor and the rich was wider than the tallest buildings are tall. Housing had been turned into a commodity, and people toiled most of their working hours for the fat profit of private housing companies. Many lost their homes, unable to keep up with the rising costs of their flats, shops and workplaces. Many became homeless. People were booted out of their homes and pubs by troops of thugs dressed in blackgreenblue, back then still lovingly called cops. (...) What an appalling, barbaric time it was! Open spaces disappeared. Neighborhoods became extinct. All that was alive perished. The need was big, and countless variations of the same misery existed

everywhere. This is where our story begins, one of many from that time. (*Wem gehört Lauratibor?*, 2021)⁶

Remembering the short intervention by *Rotes Sprachrohr* from the 1930s, the more than three hour-long premiere of the protest-opera *Who owns Lauratibor?* on 12th June 2021, is quite an epos on tenant's rights and the fight against gentrification. One could add: it consists of many agitprop-style scenes and songs that come together. Even if *Who owns Lauratibor?* is probably the first protest opera ever, we can connect this collective artwork and political event with more traditions that come from the workers' theatre, namely its basic goals – to agitate, educate, organise – but also to the format of the mass event.

But first, we should clarify that opera *has become* an elitist high-culture event for the upper class. This was not always the case. Like theatre, opera has popular traditions and roots that constantly found new shapes of an “aesthetics of resistance”. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker describe in their epoch-making book on colonial and postcolonial resistance movements *The many-headed Hydra* (2000) a very interesting example. After the revolt of the fishermen in Naples in 1647, the so-called Masaniello revolt, an opera was made on this early attempt of proletarian revolution. It was successfully shown in many big cities of Europe.

Agitate

Agitprop wants to agitate, that means to enable someone or a group to act. This is, in the case of *Lauratibor*, an already highly politicised, active and organised spectatorship: the Kreuzberg neighbourhood with its long tradition of anti-fascism, self-organisation, and resistance against speculation and commodification. The Kreuzberg neighbourhood with its many free spaces, individuals and groups. These spectators merge with the active people involved in the opera: soloists and choir, band members and technicians, costume designers, artistic direction etc., who share a similar backgrounds. The opera can, through the rehearsing process and the shows, enhance and fit the ties between these groups and the different generations of activists involved in it. The commonly realised spectacle becomes an instrument of self-empowerment and identification – not only in the performances but also in the process of the making and rehearsing.

Educate

Brecht developed the Epic Theatre. In order to achieve the active participation of workers in the realisation of art and theatre, and in political discussions, he produced, together with the composers Paul Dessau, Hanns Eisler and Kurt Weill, the avant-garde concept of *Lehrstücke* (Learning Plays). They were, by the way, very much inspired by the work of their Soviet avant-garde friends and colleagues, notably the constructivist author Sergei Tretyakov, whom Brecht names as his “teacher” in a poem.⁷ The idea of the Learning Play (*Lehrstück*) is that above all, it is those on stage, developing and discussing the piece, who learn. Like all forms of workers' theatre, the Learning Play is about the dissolution of the boundary between producers and consumers, between professionals and amateurs, moving towards a form of art in which all participants are active.

6) Text of this scene by Tina Müller/Ingo Tomi. Translation Angela Flury

7) “Mein Lehrer/ Der große, freundliche^[1] Ist erschossen worden, verurteilt durch ein Volksgericht./ Als ein Spion. Sein Name ist verdammt./ Seine Bücher sind vernichtet. Das Gespräch über ihn./ Ist verdächtig und verstummt./ Gesetzt, er ist unschuldig?” (Brecht, 1981, p. 741)

In 1930, Brecht and Eisler created the *Lehrstück Die Maßnahme* (The Measures Taken). It was the first great work made in collaboration with the workers' singers' movement. For the premiere, three Berlin workers' choirs rehearsed the piece (mostly untrained singers without knowledge of musical notation). Fittingly, the rehearsals took place in the evening, the premiere beginning only at 11.30 p.m. Composer Hanns Eisler wrote on *Die Maßnahme*:

I wanted to write a piece for those it is intended for, and for those who can make use of it: for workers' choirs, amateur theatre groups and student orchestras, so for those who neither pay for art, nor get paid by art, but rather those who want to make art." (Eisler, 1982)

Organise

In times of pandemic-induced isolation and individualisation, getting together becomes (even more) political. We were rehearsing the scenes of the opera outside in the garden of a community centre from March until November, with masks, gloves and scarfs. The pianist played with frozen hands, breaks would fit with rainy showers, discussions were held at camp fires in Ratibor workyard (and of course, also in video conferences).

In the long run, for Lauratibor, organising the collective means of rehearsing the collective: as we started, a handful of people with professional backgrounds in performing arts together with a few experienced activists from Lause and Ratibor were those driving the opera forward in terms of production, realisation and responsibility. In the ongoing process of collectivisation that seems to us the only consequent way for a collective project of these dimensions – there are more than 100 people actively involved in the opera. We have since the summer of 2021 come to organise the collective on a broader basis that continues to grow until today. The organisation has changed to take on the form of a soviet, the so-called *LauRat*. In this soviet, every trade is sending its (rotating and group informing) members to talk and decide about ongoing processes and things to be done. Based on a principle of consent, important matters like venues, finances, and also artistic questions such as new casts and changes in the play are being decided.

Rehearsing the collective – rehearsing collectively

It has probably already become clear that my work as a director in this opera has a lot to do with organisation and communication. We can see this as a part of doing art politically and not as things that stand outside of the artistic process. On the contrary: to separate them would mean to depoliticise the opera. And the protest opera owns and is owned by a lot of experts in the political field. So what does rehearsing the collective mean? On the one hand, it means to find a clear gesture and a reduced yet powerful and full forward form of performance, to reach best effects for a mass audience on the streets. That is why we work on precise choreographic and rhythmic movements as well as on an emphasis and empowerment of the character that every performer brings with her or him. Working individually or in groups, it is always about finding a collective solution together, trying it out.

On the other hand, it means the montage and work of connecting the scenes. What effect do the songs, speeches, the movement of the choir, or the very mass of the demonstrators have on the dramaturgy of the opera? How do we get the spectators and actors involved in a story made up of so many scenes? In the telling of this protest opera/this epic drama/this learning play/this

agitprop piece collection, the music (performed by the orchestra) and the narrator figure Tibor play crucial roles.

New humans, new bodies

Describing an artistic practice inspired by avant-garde movements, it is maybe good to mention that the new image of humanity drawn by the avant-garde, and palpable in the workers' theatre of the 1920s and 1930s, was not only shaped by a new discourse. It was also characterised by a new, rational(ised) approach to the body, conceived as modernised and optimised by the work day in an industrialised society. As a consequence of this futurist belief in technology, Vsevolod E. Meyerhold (1891-1940) developed Biomechanics in the early 1920s as a system for actors that allows an analytical and very exact realisation of movements by dividing each in different phases and eliminating all "unproductive" movements. The body is seen as a machine, the actor as the machinist. Consequently, the actors do not play psychological roles anymore, but "create plastic forms in space" (Meyerhold in Bochow, 1997).

Mass choreographies

The New York Workers' Dance Movement in the 1930s relayed – as Biomechanics – on the bodies as mechanised through the working day. But it also focused on the female body: no longer as an exotic decoration, but as a central instrument of power. Edith Segal (1902-1997) was one of the leading figures in this era; she directed many groups, bringing together artistic creation and militant political action in a world of female migrant workers through the common language of the body. Her works are called *Practice for the Picket Line* or *Scrubwoman's Dance* and took place in mass events such as strikes and demonstrations.

Talking about a "choreography of masses able to do a strike" (Segal in Graff, 1997): it can only be the result of a collective work and is something so clear, and yet so ephemeral that we cannot say if it is life or art, staged or not. Constructivist theatremaker Asja Laciš wrote on the issue in 1921:

Theater in its essence is a collective experience; it is a synthesis of arts, directed toward the future. Theater has an enormous impact on the masses and is (...) a life-bringing movement, advances directly toward the street and assumes the form of mass demonstrations, community festivals, and mass improvisations. The bottom line here is collectivity and amateur theater. Theater here wants to merge with life (Laciš in Brinkmanis, 2014).

Laciš (1892-1979) created in the 1920s a persecuted workers' theatre with mass demonstrations in Riga's streets and parks that often ended up with the arrest of their makers and performers. On her practice, she wrote:

We may work on the construction of proletarian theater at the theater workshops, encouraging (inviting) people of the working classes to join in and help. What should such theater workshops look like? These workshops must unite people who share common interests. The main value should be assigned to the collective action in order to establish a solid bond, which would then serve the common cause. (...) This work must be conducted in freely accessible workshops, and the masses should be encouraged to participate (Laciš in Brinkmanis, 2014).

Curtains closed, all questions open

Staying with the trouble means, following Donna Haraway, “making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations (...). We become – with each other or not at all” (Haraway, 2016, p. 4). Staying with the trouble has also become my motto in *Lauratibor* to survive demanding rehearsals, collectivisation processes, discussions and crisis. But beyond this practical application of the term, it means that we don't look for a utopic future with our artistic and activist work, rather we want to stay here, in the odd present, with the trouble – connecting, bonding, caring every day more.

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WEM GEHÖRT LAURATIBOR? Eine kollektive Protest-Oper, Kollektiv Lauratibor Berlin 2021-2022.

For more information, see <http://www.lauratibor.de>

