



Article

The Europeans

The Europeans – FIX&FOXY's Post-Dramatic Approach to the Classics

By Mads Thygesen

The early 2000s were a time when Danish theatre drew many new impulses from director's theatre and its deconstructive approach to the reinterpretation of dramatic classics. These impulses can also be found in FIX&FOXY's first theatre production *Europæerne* (The Europeans), which was performed at Det Kgl. Teater's (The Royal Danish Theatre's) experimental stage in Turbinehallerne in 2005. *The Europeans* can be seen as the performance that initiated FIX&FOXY's artistic work, and in many ways, it constitutes a model example of their conceptual approach to the development of new performing art with a political edge¹.

The dramaturgy of *The Europeans* was developed for the Royal Theatre in a collaboration between dramaturgs Jeppe Kristensen, Benedikte Hammershøi and Tue Biering, who were also responsible for directing the play, and Christian Friedländer, who designed the set. The basic idea was to perform a montage of works from the European drama canon (e.g. Euripides, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Schiller). Common to the works included in the montage was that they all had – in one way or another – European wars as their dramatic focal point.

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In this paper, I will analyse *The Europeans* (2005) in order to discuss how the seeds of FIX&FOXY's poetics and conceptual thinking are laid in this early performance from 2005. In continuation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's ideas of the post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann 1999), I will show how the production uses the classics as an opportunity to intervene and interfere with a current historical and political context. Initially, therefore, I will argue that the concept of the post-dramatic holds important insights that can help us locate some central themes and problems in *The Europeans*. Lehmann's central idea is that the post-dramatic theatre is moving in the direction of "der Auflösung der logozentrischen Hierarchie" (Lehmann 1999, p. 159). As the choice of words suggests, Lehmann bases his theory on the deconstructive point of view that European theatre has hitherto been characterised by a logocentric hierarchy, insofar as dramatic theatre is sustained by the idea that there is an absolute order and meaning, which everything can be brought back to². In line with deconstructive thinking, however, Lehmann argues that post-dramatic theatre erases and

1) The performance was announced as the first project in FIX&FOXY's portfolio, but the partnership was not formally established until later. In 2006, Biering and Kristensen further developed their collaboration in the performance *Come on, Bangladesh, Just do it!* (The Royal Theatre), where they developed the concept of the performance together.

2) For a more extensive discussion of deconstructive dramaturgy, see Niels Lehmann's thesis *Dekonstruktion og Dramaturgi* (1996) and his article "Performance efter dekonstruktion" (2006), where he, among other things, problematises the way deconstruction is often used as a synonym for "fragmentation" or "disintegration of totalities" in order to promote an avant-garde ideal of art production that differs from classical art.

undermines the hitherto unquestionable authority of the text. If we thus ask how the post-dramatic stands in relation to the classics, it becomes clear that, according to Lehmann, the crucial new development concerns the degree of freedom in the interpretation of the work. Theatre is no longer bound by the playwright's work, Lehmann argues. The text is no longer the all-dominant authority in theatre, but merely figures as an element on equal terms with other theatrical elements (such as for instance sound, light, space, body, etc.)³. It is this commitment to rethinking and revitalising the classical plays that we recognise in FIX&FOXY's *The Europeans*. Not only on the performance level itself, but also in the conceptual thinking that forms the basis of the reinterpretation of the classics. The idea, in short, is to deconstruct the classics and perform them in a kind of *mash-up*, bringing the plot of the works into a contemporary context. In this way, the audience is invited into a vital and playful theatre space, where they reflect on how our present is connected to the European canon.

From Concept to Production

In FIX&FOXY's artistic practice, the concept of status is the central idea that forms the basis of the artistic intention and thinking of the performance. The concept is formulated on the basis of an analytical process, which usually take complex and intangible conflicts as their starting point (Kristensen 2019). That is, conflicts that, according to Kristensen, do not invite rational consensus, but rather cause unrest, conflict and disagreement. In other words, in FIX&FOXY, the staging is based on the concept, but also differs from it as a structure that is created collectively by the director, set designer, actor, lighting designer, dramaturg etc. during the rehearsal process itself. The staging thus acts as the plan that ensures the repeatability and structure of the theatrical performance, while the performance itself has the autonomous status of an event that can vary from evening to evening.⁴

This duality is very much present in *The Europeans*, where Tue Biering's staging allows for improvisation and comic scenarios where the planned actions can actually go wrong and/or fail for the actors. This adds a touch of irony to the performance of the classical works, making it clear to the audience that this is not a production that is true to the work, but a self-reflexive reinterpretation that questions the canonical status and authority of the narratives. On the whole, *The Europeans* appear as a kind of *mash-up* created by merging two or more works, as FIX&FOXY superimpose the classical narratives and place them in a contemporary space. Unlike a musical composition, where the producer has seamlessly superimposed a vocal track from one familiar song onto the instrumental track from another familiar song, Biering refrains from covering the seams in the production. Instead, he allows them to emerge in the most grotesque and surprising ways, to evoke various alienating effects (*Verfremdung*). In continuation of Willmar Sauter's reflections on *The Theatrical Event* (2000), we can say that the production makes a virtue of highlighting the interplay

3) For more on the political engagement of post-dramatic theatre, see Gade 2010. In this context, it is important that Lehmann's theory is more comprehensive and nuanced than I can present it here. In his comprehensive work *Tragödie und Dramatisches Theater* (2013), for example, Lehmann shows that his dramaturgical thinking is not limited to the concept of post-dramatic theatre, but on the contrary is connected to an extensive knowledge of European theatre history and the particular role that the concept of the tragic has played in the dramatic canon.

4) Cf. my article about "Interaktion og iscenesættelse" (Interaction and staging) (Peripeti no. 11, 2009), where I discuss the dialectic between staging and performance with reference to, among others, Jens Roselt's *Phänomenologi des Theaters* (2008) and Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Ästhetik des performativen* (1999).

between the sensory, artistic and symbolic levels of the theatrical situation itself.⁵ The production contains many sensory surprise attacks (for instance a strong focus on sound, smell, water, sweat, blood, etc.) that draw the audience's attention to the immediate presence of the theatrical situation. In several sequences, in short, the focus is more on theatrical power and energy than on the question of how best to convey the knowledge and information contained in the classics. Furthermore, the audience's attention is constantly directed to the way the actors perform and the scenic solutions used in the staging (all of which relates to what Sauter calls the artistic level of the performance). In line with post-dramatic theatre – and with a clear inspiration from the German *Regietheater* – *The Europeans* attempt to revitalise the classical works by creating significant surprises and disruptions in the theatre space.⁶ The recurring device is that the staging emphasises the theatrical position of speaking and creates double exposures (for instance of actor/role, narrative/space) by evoking the classics in another time: the audience's own present.

The performance opens with a prologue in which a messenger (Kristian Holm Joensen) lies in the pool and recites Friedrich Schiller:

“This scene
encourages the poet to leave
common everyday life,
to observe life from a place,
which corresponds better to the great time,
in which we live, full of hope and unrest.
Let the poet's imagination for a moment
recreate the horror of bygone days,
that we may rejoice in our own time
and the hope of an even better future.”
(Kristensen, Biering and
Hammershøj Nielsen, 2005)

With a thick irony, the messenger thus frames the theatrical situation and invites the audience to step out of their own time, to live in a bygone, mythical time that contains the background of their own narrative (the symbolic level). *The Europeans'* approach to classical works is entirely in line with Kristensen's article *Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts*, in which he reflects on the relationship between the modern individual and grand, collectively committing narratives: “Our performances [...] often have as their conceptual starting point the fact that in our lives, we all come into contact with stories, whether imposed on us or appropriated, about who we are and who others are.” (Kristensen). This is consistent with the conceptual starting point of *The Europeans*, where the interweaving of the

5) Cf. Sauter, Willmar: *The Theatrical Event* (University of Iowa Press, USA 2000), where he distinguishes between the sensory level (everything that the audience senses), the artistic level (for instance the way the play is performed and the artistic skills of the actors) and the symbolic level (the space of meaning created in the performance). See also Michael Eigtved's introduction to theatrical communication in *Forestillingsanalyse – en introduktion* (Forlaget Samfundslitteratur, Copenhagen 2007, pp. 95-106).

6) Here I am thinking in particular of the signifying stress that is often part of the staging in Frank Castorf's theatre performances, see also Peter Boenisch's reflections on “Composing the “signifying stress””: Frank Castorf in Boenisch (2015), pp. 169-176.

classical works investigates how our European narrative and heritage have contributed to shaping our immediate world, our identity and, not least, our problematic relationship with 'the others'.

The Scenic Space

Christian Friedländer's scenography functions as a spatial manifestation of the conceptual starting point: Danish allotment garden idyll meets a Europe shaped by wars and genocide. This means that the visual elements of the performance create a metaphorical framework that acts as a supporting strand throughout the performance.⁷ The montage of classical works is set in a garden, where the audience is positioned on either side of the stage space. This means that they can see themselves reflected in each other. Above the stage space hangs a collection of flags with coats of arms (for instance eagles, shields, lions), which do not have any direct references to specific European cities or nations. Nevertheless, the flags point to the fact that the Europe we encounter at FIX&FOXY is an assembled family of small states fighting each other in continued territorial wars.

On the symbolic level, the set thus accentuates *The Europeans'* general play with meaning and representation, because the visual elements of the performance (present) are in sharp contrast to the narrative space (past). All the scenographic elements are taken from the present: Garden furniture, a gas grill, empty bottles and an inflatable swimming pool are placed in the middle of the stage floor, which is covered with artificial grass. On one side is a greenhouse. A shed in the other. A well-dressed but untidy man desperately tries to launch a kite. Another man, carrying a sign saying "kiss 10 kr.", lies asleep on a sunbed. In other words, it all signifies an ordinary Danish villa garden, where that has not been cleaned up after a wild stag party. Not a battlefield where the Greek tragedies are now to be played out.

Performing Style and Role Doubling

At the level of the narrative, however, it turns out that the two men are King Agamemnon (Morten Eisner) and Achilles (Mads Wille), whose army is prevented from travelling to Troy because "the wind has failed". However, this primarily becomes clear through dialogue when an officer enters the scene and addresses the king with the words: "Agamemnon, our army is assembled, it is ready for battle. Yet we are stuck here." In the theatrical enunciation, in short, it is the utterances (verbal expression) that signify that we are witnessing a scene from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (406 BC), while the visual elements of the performance rather refer to the audience's own present. In this way, all the classical tales are transferred to a contemporary context, where the heroes and villains of the past enter the Danish garden – all the roles are embodied by the six actors (Helle Fagralid, Ditte Gråbøl, Lars Mikkelsen, Mads Wille, Kristian Holm Joensen, Morten Eisner). The references to the year 2005 are also reflected in the acting style, as the actors often make the characters appear as a crude caricature with reference to modern phenomena (such as football, politics, stag parties, pop music, the EU, etc.). In other words, this device provokes different emotional and cognitive reactions in the audience when they recognise their own reality in the classical scenarios. Moreover, the performance style obviously points to the fact that the actors present themselves on stage as themselves (i.e. individuals with gender, age, body, temperament, etc.), while simultaneously portraying a character from the European canon. For example, when Helle Fagralid plays a variety

7) Cf. Michael Eigtved's description of the theatrical universe as "an overall description of how the concept of the specific performance is embodied" (Eigtved 2007: 124). By extension, Eigtved describes the performance's *supporting strand* as a "metaphor, key phrase or image that can encompass an overall sense of the performance's basic idea" (Eigtved 2007: 124).

of female roles, a *mash-up* of meaning occurs between the women of the different classics and eras (such as for instance Euripides' Iphigenia, Shakespeare's Katharine, and the role of "Helle" in the show's contemporary scenes, where the actors step out of their roles).

The dramaturgical starting point for *The Europeans* is found in Euripides, who places King Agamemnon (Morten Eisner) in an irresolvable conflict. He is the leader of the Greek army on its way to Troy to reclaim his brother Menelaus' wife, Helen. But the army is trapped because the wind has failed them. The goddess Artemis demands that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia (Helle Fagralid) to get the wind that can bring the ships to Troy. The conflict is insoluble because Agamemnon is torn between the interests of his family and those of the state. If he sacrifices his daughter, he fails as a father and husband. The consequence will be that he loses the trust and love of his wife and children. If, on the other hand, he refuses to sacrifice Iphigenia, he fails in his responsibility as army commander: "The nation demands, whether I like it or not, that she must be sacrificed; against it I am too weak", Agamemnon argues, – "Our people must live in the free, democratic world; we must never stand by and watch barbarians violate our fundamental values". In *The Europeans*, Agamemnon chooses to sacrifice Iphigenia, and he does so deliberately, luring her to Aulis under the pretext that she is to marry the goddess's son Achilles. The opening scene takes the form of a stag party, where the festivities have gone too far, and on the whole, there is little divine about the hungover Achilles. Unlike Euripides' tragic portrayal of human reactions to the inevitable (fate), Agamemnon's reasoning is also not very convincing when he tries to justify the sacrifice of his daughter to save the free world from "Muslim terror". The visual expression puts the tragic plot in a grotesque light and makes it easy for the audience to understand the plot, as they can translate the tragic events into their own time – a time when Agamemnon's actions appear incomprehensible. Therefore, the audience's sympathy must necessarily be with Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra (Ditte Gråbøl), who persuades Achilles to help her protect Iphigenia. The shocking outcome, however, is that Iphigenia continues to choose to let herself be sacrificed in the service of the greater cause: "Take my life and overthrow Troy. Give me that as a monument. It will be remembered – it will be my reputation," she pleads, adding "It is a disgrace when barbarians rule over white people. Mother, barbarians must be controlled! They are slaves, we are citizens of the free world". The statement thus refers to the privileged position that the "whites" (*The Europeans*) occupy in the narrative, while the others (slaves, barbarians and Muslims respectively) appear primarily as an invisible threat to the Western world order. In short, she wants her sacrifice to stand as a monument (a memorial stone) that shows the greatness of their war against the barbarians. All this is a clear and ironic gesture, through which the production points back to the audience's own position in relation to the war on terror, which was a topical and important issue in the political debate in 2005.

The scene ends in a bloody scenario in which Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter inside the greenhouse. Here, Biering's direction places great emphasis on both the sensory and symbolic levels as the bloody sacrifice is taken to the grotesque. Agamemnon returns with Iphigenia's bloody bridal veil and gives it to Clytemnestra, after which he places Iphigenia's heart on the grill to sacrifice it. The nauseating smell of the fried meat spreads through the theatre room as the officer sucks on his finger and sticks it in the air. The stage picture is concluded with the (effect) sound of wind blowing, signifying that the army can now travel on to Troy.

Montage and the Compulsive Repetition of War

With *Iphigenia* as dramaturgical starting point, Biering stages a total of 9 scenarios, all of which draw material from the European canon (from Greek tragedy to absurdist drama). The various scenarios open as a kind of boxing match with a sign bearing titles such as “Territorial War”, “The Endless War”, “Prisoners of War”, “Revenge I-III”. In the two final tableaux, “Fortress Europe” and “Court”, however, the actors partially step out of their roles and into a disturbing present, where the dramatic material is drawn from specific political events. The fragments of the dramatic classics are thus interwoven in a montage of wars and conflicts, where the repetitions refer back to the starting point: the sacrifice of the innocent Iphigenia.

The theatrical situation is constantly kept open and we can see that it is the same actors who portray the different roles. This also means that the actors spend a relatively large amount of time and energy entertaining the audience with their more or less successful attempts to portray roles and situations. At the same time, the staging plays on the recognitions in terms of meaning that occur when the same actor plays different roles. In the second scenario of the performance, entitled “Territorial War”, for instance, the same actors enter Shakespeare’s dramas about kings, where the English try to conquer the garden (France) because of a neighbour dispute. A neighbour dispute that plays heavily on cultural clichés and prejudices: The simple and drunken Englishmen want to play football, but there is no room for that in the garden, where the French celebrate with music and champagne. In contrast to Shakespeare’s famous depiction of the Battle of Agincourt (1415), in which the English longbows turn the tide of battle, the present-day scenario ends in a ludicrous duel in which the French King Charles, dressed as a sports fencer, is served out in tennis and beaten up with a racket by the English King Henry.

In keeping with the post-dramatic approach, the string of canonical European dramas is finally interrupted by a disturbing re-enactment of scenes from the UN War Crimes Tribunal against the former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic (played by Morten Eisner)⁸. The double exposure of fiction/reality and actor/role (Eisner/Agamemnon/Milosevic) means that the audience can recognise the patterns across the scenes and interpret it as a total narrative that the European tragedy is linked to the Greeks and the sacrifice of Iphigenia. For although there is no logical connection, the doubling of roles creates a link between the narratives that puts both past and present atrocities into a disturbing perspective. In the extended scenario where the war criminal Milosevic delivers his lengthy defence speech, for example, it becomes very clear that history has taught us nothing, but that barbarism is allowed to continue. In FIX&FOXY, however, *The Europeans* are trapped in the hopeless compulsive repetition of war, where violence only breeds more violence. And the performance does not end with a redemptive and just punishment, but instead lets Milosevic’s defence speech fade into a scenic and musical inferno.

FIX&FOXY’s Conceptual Thinking

With its radical deconstruction of classical works and playful acting style, which uses alienating devices (*Verfremdungseffekt*) to prevent the audience from becoming fully immersed in the narrative and forgetting to be critical of the characters’ statements, FIX&FOXY’s *The Europeans* writes itself into a post-dramatic theatre form. It is post-dramatic because the staging explicitly breaks away from a principle of fidelity to the European canon and its founding principles. In contrast to a more

8) The trial was ongoing when the show was performed. It began in 2002 but was never completed because Milosevic died in his prison cell in the spring of 2006.

mimetic approach, where the ideal is that the audience is not invited to reflect on the idea behind the performance or on the actors' performances, FIX&FOXY attach importance to exposing the interplay between the sensory, artistic and symbolic levels in the performance. The intention of the many double exposures, shifts and doubling of roles is to use the classics as an opportunity to intervene and interfere in a current historical and political context.⁹ Now, it is not in itself post-dramatic that the action is transferred to the present, because this device is often used in theatre productions where the staging is based on an interpretation of a dramatic work in order to relate to the spiritual problems of our own time.¹⁰ The post-dramatic rather lies in the deconstructive approach to the classical works, where FIX&FOXY critically addresses questions such as: Why are the "great" dramas such a significant part of our cultural inventory? What norms and values do they carry? What role do they play in our own narratives? And how can we relate to them critically and/or reflexively when they are performed on the national stage today?

The Europeans clearly draw inspiration from post-dramatic theatre, where it is almost unthinkable to uphold the authority of the text and fail to engage critically with the cultural heritage represented by Euripides, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Schiller. To sum up, one can say that the concept of FIX&FOXY is deconstructive in the sense that they relate ironically to the internal hierarchies and underlying values of the works. They also relate critically to the educational ideals and aesthetic expectations that the audience of the Royal Theatre may have in relation to the staging of the classics. It would be fair to say that FIX&FOXY have long since abandoned the idea that there is an artistic measure for determining whether the classics are represented in a "correct" way. But their conceptual approach to *The Europeans* does not merely break free of the fixed work (the text) and renounce the instructive authority of classical educational thought. Nor do they lapse into an ironic game where they can freely use their newfound freedom to evoke arbitrary meanings and effects. In my view, they rather attempt to open up the form and content of the works towards the present in an effort to examine and test the artistic, cultural and political boundaries of the works.

As far as the referential relationship between the theatrical performance and its environment is concerned, it is therefore crucial that *The Europeans* link to some very specific historical and political events, the topicality of which plays a significant role in the overall statement of the performance. To put it simply, there is little sense in viewing *The Europeans* in isolation from its historical and/or political context. Indeed, the critical dimension of the performance lies in the fact that it invites the audience to observe specific events in a new and surprising way. In this context, two historical circumstances played a particular role in FIX&FOXY's approach to *The Europeans*. First, Denmark had just become a nation at war in 2005, which serves as a point of reference for the performance's underlying strand about the unsettling compulsive repetitiveness of war. Hence the performance did not conceal its political standpoint, as its portrayal of Agamemnon/Milosevic appeared as an overt critique of the discourse of "the ends justify the means" on which the war on terror was then founded. Second, in 2005 Denmark was to hold a referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty, which was based on a lofty narrative that "Europe's cultural, religious and humanist heritage"

9) See Solveig Gade's *Intervention og kunst: Socialt og politisk engagement i samtidskunsten* (2010), where she presents a thorough analysis and discussion of the political dimension of post-dramatic theatre.

10) Cf. Irina Malochevskaya's "Regiskolen" (Tell Forlag, Norway 2002), where she takes Konstantin Stanislavsky's artistic method as her starting point for a description of the director's process of interpretation. See also Runar Hodne's reflection on the relationship between staging and concept in "The Truth of the Mask – A reflection on Concept Development in Theatre", in Pålsson and Balevieiute (eds.): *Looking for Direction* (Uniarts Helsinki, Helsinki 2022).

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formed the basis “for the development of universal values: the inviolable and inalienable rights of the individual, as well as freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law” (Folketingets EU-oplysning 2005, p. 9). However, *The Europeans*’ deconstructive approach to the classics gives rise to a scathing critique of the grand narrative of a common Europe that has learned from all its many wars and conflicts. In other words, the form/content dialectic of *The Europeans* centres on a critique of the conditions of possibility of reason and rationality.

In FIX&FOXY, the whole idea of a grand narrative in which man is at the centre of an evolution leading to freedom, knowledge and progress is not given much space, and there are no convenient solutions to the narrative of *The Europeans*. The staging of classical works should therefore be seen as an attempt to bring the more uncomfortable aspects of European cultural history into play on the national stage. This ambition is a recurrent feature of FIX&FOXY’s artistic work, but it is nevertheless supported by the hope that it continues to make sense to investigate and stage the intangible and uncomfortable. In his reflections in *Love Theater: Uåndgribelige konflikter* (Love Theater: Intangible conflicts), Kristensen writes for example that it does not make sense for them to work with the conflicts in a traditional dramatic form, where a safe and convenient resolution of conflict is provided. At the same time, however, he maintains that “we [...] have not been willing to give up the idea of the need for change. This has placed us in the peculiar position of wanting to participate in conflicts as creative theatre artists in ways other than through a classical critical position” (Kristensen, 2019).

In the Europeans, FIX&FOXY’s particular position also shows itself in the way in which they relate to the duality of the Royal Theatre’s institutional purpose as it is stated in the Theatre Act. “The Royal Theatre must continue the classical traditions, while at the same time developing a contemporary performing art through its activities”.¹¹ This is not a monumental historiography that preserves the great and memorable of the past, nor is it an antiquarian effort to protect and preserve classical traditions and values. In my opinion, it is rather a critical approach to the history of *The Europeans*, in which FIX&FOXY maintain their own uncertainty and relate reflectively, humorously and thoughtfully to the people, actions, stories and works of the past.¹² In line with Lehmann’s thinking, *The Europeans* in this way appears as a Trojan horse, sneaking post-dramatic theatre onto the national stage to attack the artistic framework and expectations from within. The following year, this willingness to test the boundaries of the Royal Theatre led to *Come on Bangladesh, Just do it!* (The Royal Theatre, 2006), in which FIX&FOXY outsourced the Golden Age romance *Elverhøj* (Elves’ Hill) to actors from Bangladesh. *The Europeans* was based on the European canon in order to show how European culture and identity are shaped by wars and conflicts.¹³ In FIX&FOXY we are confronted with a chaotic and incoherent world where wars and conflicts have thrown Western civilisation into a fundamental identity crisis. However, they maintain an element of hope and a will to change in their artistic work, and the fundamental identity crisis they first grappled with in *The Europeans* has subsequently given rise to a string of thought-provoking performances, each of which has confronted us with the uncomfortable aspects of existence.

11) See the Danish Theatre Act, Ch. 2, §2. Online at: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2003/1003>.

12) My distinction between monumental, antiquarian and critical history draws inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas on the utility of history. Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1994.

13) The same conceptual approach to classics is applied in FIX&FOXY’s *Parsifal* (2011) and *Et dukkehjem* (A Doll’s House, 2014). Tue Biering later reapplied this conceptual thinking in the performance *Det europæiske slagtehus* (The European Slaughterhouse, Odense Teater, 2022), in which the entire ensemble at Odense Teater perform eight of Shakespeare’s history plays from Richard II to Richard III.

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