

Throughout the year 2022 I followed the work-in-progress of a Brussels-based bunch of theater makers. Three years prior to our encounter, they had initiated a series of solo works dedicated to staging *bad ideas, visions abandoned for good reason* or simply *bad taste in the performing arts*. The list of their concrete explorations comprises “deep subjects”, “foreseeable action in repetition”, “argentinian cool actors attitudes”, “amazing costumes”, “dancing and speaking at the same time” etc. (For a comprehensive overview see www.nemosquitopas.be) Seemingly unhindered by the depletion of energy caused by the pandemic the loose group upheld a hilarious series of excessively smart and funny performances, that I was lucky enough to witness.

Despite the light atmosphere of an improv-night – the *Nemosquitopas*-motto is: IF YOU AT FIRST DON'T SUCCEED / FAILURE MIGHT JUST BE YOUR STYLE – one of the works-in-progress caught my special research interest: the so-called *German Staatstheater* [German state theater], initiated by Micha Goldberg and Rosie Sommers, dedicates itself exclusively to the aesthetics of Regie-Theater, i.e. to the default format of state-subsidised theater in the German-speaking world. In their *appropriation of a form* certain structural markers of what I, throughout my PhD, am trying to grasp at got overly tangible. Be it in the long table-sequence set in some war-scenario (“Kein Kartoffel.”), the trace of Brechtian acting in its exposition (“Es war kalt!”) or the symbolic entrance of the whole ensemble into the anus of the star-actor from “Bochum Schauspielhaus”. In short, I was deeply intrigued to see a form that I was naturalized into – and that internationals usually speak of with admiration – handed back to me as an aesthetic readymade.

Part of the pastiche is the fact that German state-subsidised theater usually operates with large ensembles, which forced the makers to go beyond the scope of their initial (monologue-)format. Micha and Rosie consequently invited their fellows (who usually presented solo) to join their project. In the shows they make since, everybody speaks and acts German, whether they have a

clue of what they are saying or not. *German Staatstheater* as a signifier (a very charged one in my case) is thereby suddenly opened to a global range of interpretation.

Picking up this momentum, I used the interview with Micha and Rosie as a way to kick off my own writing about the phenomenon.

JMS:

So tell me,
how did German Staatstheater come to exist?
How did you get into it?

MICHA:

The idea comes from NE MOSQUITO PAS, a series of solos we initiated in 2019, so it was from the start a work around "bad taste". And one of the things that came up there was *German Staatstheater*, this kind of big ensemble theater. We talked and had a lot of examples from it, but mostly of when people spit ... when they speak and you see the whole spit ... when they spit each other in the face whilst speaking... You know all these kind of clichés.

Personally, I had one example in regards to German Staatstheater, a show I saw in Chemnitz once: Othello. It was with big curtains and a huge pool in the middle. And the actors were running through the water. There was a guy that was blackfacing and there was no scandal around it yet – but I still thought it was kind of weird, already then.

So my personal entrance was “bad taste”. And that of course comes from looking down at something. But what I think happened between Rosie and me - when we started working on it - is more the pleasure of doing it.

ROSIE:

I didn't see so much *German Staatstheater*, so in my case it was more linked to some big ensemble pieces that I saw as a teenager in Holland and that I was a huge fan of back then. With these great actresses and also pools, like shows by Ivo van Hove for example. There were similarities in the style to German Staatstheater and our work also departed from that. The

ambition was to explore these kind of symptoms, like the spitting, but also this very intense, emotional, (for us) exaggerated way, this very dramatic, kind of romantic view on acting.

JMS:

What is so impressive for me about your show is that you have this “high culture” of theater you’re dealing with - I’m saying “high culture” because we, the Germans, don’t look down at Othello in Chemnitz (laughs) - whilst at the same time you are offering a mirror of a broader mentality. So I wonder: Is there some overlap of that German way of human co-existence and the aesthetics of German Staatstheater?

R:

Well, when I visit Germany and I go to the supermarket, people are very... It needs to go fast, people are really annoyed. I was one month in Berlin with my dog, and there are so many issues in the streets. You get snared at every corner, it’s very controlling, in the sense of “I need to put you down, because society works like this.” People get off on saying what is right and in that way it can be very cold and harsh.

JMS:

Yes, and this really somehow makes for your relations on stage. The neighbour is an obstacle, the other person is in the way. Like in the Helene-Fischer-scene in the beginning, where there would be enough space for everyone. But only in theory (laughs). I wonder how you deal with this aggression during rehearsals? Because I imagine you two being sweet and making sure everybody feels fine – but how do you then reach these nasty emotions? It’s of course an agreement that it is this emotionally charged style you’re playing ... but is the atmosphere always transparent and clean or is there a feedback from the stage work into the group dynamics?

M:

When we worked the two of us, I didn’t feel any feedback of that kind whatsoever. But we also don’t rehearse for super long time, when with the group. We speak about the scene and then we try a little. So it’s really easy going to a certain degree. And we set the actions for the ensemble rather clear.

R:

It is easy once we figure out the emotions behind the actions. We work in fact with very specific emotions as a kind of score. In that sense it's more about emotions than content.

JMS:

What are these emotions?

M:

We are inspired by a book called Ugly Feelings by Sianne Ngai, which discusses 7 emotions: envy, irritation, paranoia, anxiety, stuplimity (between shock and boredom), tone and disgust. These are not "cathartic", they don't lead to anything, they don't transform something. Not like fear, sadness or anger.

R:

It's actually all the emotions you wouldn't link to theater. It's rather all those things that are there all the time but they don't explode. They don't get a shape...

M:

Dramawise that means: it doesn't explode in anger and by that it calms down. An emotion like envy develops by itself somehow into something else.

JMS:

That sounds so interesting, a bit like a music track that never peaks. Something suppressed. – However, seeing you scream and spit and run, I still feel very cathartically cleansed after attending your shows. As if my vocal cords have been flexed by empathy. So I'm also curious: what are the health benefits of playing German Staatstheater?

M:

It's *really* good ! (laughs) It's so much energy. And that's why people like performing it. It is this going for a total emotional outburst, even if it's not an outburst... Also, because we always have this physical approach to it.

R:

Somehow there is no distance between the action and what you're projecting. And that's where the fun comes from. It's like a marathon. You're running and you don't stop. You breathe „1,2“ behind the door and then you go again. It's one long run... And by losing energy you gain energy.

JMS:

In your German Staatstheater, you have this cast from all over the world, people from all continents, except North America maybe. I'm really curious what people connect with? Some of them do not even have associations with the language, right?

M:

It's important that everybody comes from this NE MOSQUITO PAS-adventure. So everybody knows the starting point is "bad taste" and they can connect with their own ideas around that, e.g. telenovela... even though it's not the same thing. I would say, we mostly connect by the style. We said "We don't do German Staatstheater. We *perform* German Staatstheater." And then we work almost mechanically: what is the state, what are the mechanics of a certain scene?

R:

... but without showing references really. Until here, it was also very short periods and then immediately presentations. In the future, we want to create a more common understanding of this style. And create more open situations, where people can relate in their own way - fostering the individual entrance and connection to the material. At the same time when it comes to identity we don't want to highlight that in the way it is being done these days – because the individual pleasure and comfort in German Staatstheater also comes from collectively doing it.

JMS:

Were there moments when it didn't work at all? Where someone simply couldn't connect with your proposition?

M:

We never had total breakdowns so far. But we also don't work psychologically. (laughs) The questions of the ensemble are mostly practical: how do we do it?

R:

However there was a shift: in the beginning we kept it very open, trying not to direct and having people work individually on scenes and so on. But during the last three days {of our rehearsals at Décor-Atelier} we worked totally opposite. Then, at 8 a.m. the both of us are in costumes, people arrive, we say "willkommen in die german staattheater! machen sie die kleidung an. wir fangen an." And also - with a joke in it, of course - we scream: "wir fangen an wir fangen an - all die Schauspieler zusammen". And only *after* our showing, the whole cast was like: "Aaaah, it's so nice to do." So all the rigidity of our directing - "it's got to be intense..." etc. – somehow opened up. Because it is really in the doing, in the intensily doing of it, where the pleasure lies. The motivation doesn't lie inside, but comes from the über-intensity. And of course, that is not accessible to everyone on the same terms.

M:

However, when we are channeling the authority of the German director or stage manager, people know it's a play.

JMS

And that is also a contract that is very clear to me in your show: that people will go beyond their limits on voluntary terms. People will be their "best acting self" by crossing over. I feel, they are also challenging each other in terms of the intensity you mention. Almost like a competition.

R:

Yes, it is a competition in a very bright way. It gives me energy in the moment of performing: not in the sense of "I want to be better than you.". But I'm stimulated by the amount of energy

that comes from you. It's fun to somehow be all the same. You are running together, you're one person – and get energy from each other.