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They Misoverestimate Us: On the Attempt to Throw a Middle Class Pearl Necklace like a Lasso Around the Ballhaus Naunynstraße – A Comedy

By Marianna Salzmann
Translated by Robin Ellis

Laughter: is an innate expressive human behavior that develops especially in the company of others. Laughter is the natural reaction of a healthy person to comical or exhilarating experiences, but it also appears as a reaction of relief after overcoming danger. It can also function to avert threatening social conflicts and as a defense mechanism against spontaneous states of anxiety.

—*Wikipedia.de*, “Lachen”, 5.7.11

The thing about humor is that it's widely known to be a lost cause. You can't have a discussion about it, you can't argue about it, and you can't outlaw laughing. My favorite joke is the one in *Pulp Fiction* about the tomato family. Vincent Vega says to Mia Wallace: “Tell it to me! I won't laugh.” “That's exactly what I'm afraid of,” she replies. And it's true - no one laughs at this joke. Except me. For people who work in theater, humor is one of those subjects that divide the world into Germany and the rest. It's no secret that the German stage has always had a hard time with comedies. There aren't many of them, but they do exist. And if you don't count the stuffy spa town amusements, the only place that I know of in Berlin with relevant, contemporary comedies in its repertoire is the Ballhaus Naunynstraße. I've been following Nurkan Erpulat's work since his start in Hannover, and when I voluntarily go to a comedy, it's to one of his. In 2006, I interviewed him about his production *Heimat im Kopf* (“Homeland in the Head”), which had been invited to the Berlin Youth Theater Gathering (published in *freitext*, Vol. 11, *Race and Space*, p.34ff). A noteworthy project with young people about their ideas on belonging and homeland that brought tears of laughter to my eyes.

Right now everyone's talking about Nurkan Erpulat because of his play *Verrücktes Blut* (“Crazy Blood”). The play has been invited to events such as the Berlin Theater Gathering and the 2011 Mühlheimer Theater Days (where it won the Audience Choice Award), in other words to the most elite, important theater events in the German-speaking realm. *Verrücktes Blut* is a critical adaptation of *La Journée de la Jupe* (“The Day of the Skirt”), a French film from 2008 directed by Jean-Paul Lilienfeld that regurgitates the usual perpetrator/victim clichés. Together with the dramaturge Jens Hillje, Erpulat took up the basic situation—a teacher struggling with a rowdy, combative class—in order to exorcise all the clichés: the headscarf (remove it), monkey-manners, the ability to speak (correctly pronounced) German—there's almost no hot-button topic that doesn't get thrown back and forth between the young actors. In response, the teacher takes a gun from a student and shoots into the air.

A teacher takes up arms in order to give her students a better understanding of German, the language of the guiding culture, and its literary classics. The biggest clichés and prejudices are acted out Stanislavski-style, only to be brutally deconstructed within the next ten minutes. A friend who's a director told me that he's never seen such a believable staging of Schiller, but at the same time, that you never forget the premise that Schiller is being acted at gunpoint. The teacher commands the embrace between Ferdinand and Luise by firing shots.

My aim here isn't to summarize the play. By now, it's already been covered by all the established newspapers and theater magazines, who have given it recognition with multiple-page articles, interviews, cover stories. And rightly so! As for me, there are only two things that I want to point out about the production itself: On the stage, a heavy German grand piano hangs over the heads of the P.O.C. class. And: before the actors go onstage, the audience can see them slipping into their (ghetto) costumes. Nurkan Erpulat says: "This is a play about how we are seen."

So why has the play been so successful? Because it's really good, is what I'd like to say. It's true, too, but so are Erpulat's other works. *Lö Bal Almanya*, for example, a play about fifty years of guest-worker history. What about *Jenseits – Are You Gay or are You Turkish?* Not to mention the Ballhaus' other productions, which are always political, always current, always on target? What is it about *Verrücktes Blut*, why does it hit a "nerve of the times", as all the critics loudly proclaim. Why are people laughing here? At what?

I think of the interview that Shermin Langhoff, the Artistic Director of the Ballhaus Naunynstraße, gave the *taz* in 2009, in which she says, "With migration also came migrant theater, especially as cabaret, and today as comedy. This is the case in other countries, too. In the United States, for example, black people were initially present in the amusement and entertainment sectors of the majority society. They were supposed to talk about themselves and laugh at themselves. These areas are also where the biggest successes in Germany are happening right now" (*taz.de*, 18.01.09).

So far I've seen the play four times. Each time it was a different play. The audience's laughter changes the context from the ground up. At the premiere, I still thought we were all laughing together about the absurdity of what it is that this so-called integration, proclaimed from all sides, actually wants from us. By the third time, I was turning around to see who was clapping when the raging teacher (with gun) screams "and now it's your turn to shut up for once!"

Spontaneous laughter and applause aren't especially common among German theater audiences. *Verrücktes Blut* forces you to take a position. Here laughter does much more than express an opinion. Here laughter is warfare. One performance was an example of the controversy over *Verrücktes Blut*: in the audience are school classes and members of the middle class public belonging to the parent and grandparent generations. Pretty soon the audience splits into two camps laughing against each other; with calls and applause people carry out the same conflict that they engage in everyday. The school classes laugh at the teacher's stupidity, who—foaming at the mouth and with pistol in hand—wants to force students to participate in a drama class, and they encourage the actors in the class onstage with boisterous cheers. The middle class audience members laugh with a sense of liberation, that the teacher says all the things out loud that political correctness prevents them from saying, but that they've no doubt thought to themselves. I assume that this is the reason why the play has been so highly acclaimed by the elite. Instead of seeing the clever deconstruction of the clichés that fill all of our heads, people feel their clichéd thinking being confirmed. Otherwise I can't explain audience discussions like the one at the theater

conference, where questioners find it appropriate to say: “I had sympathy for the teacher, it’s like that for me, too.” Then there’s a bit of railing against the “hammer-aesthetic” and “didactics”, in order to then claim that the play lacks complexity. Nurkan Erpulat gets asked if he also “feels an urgent need,” out of which he developed the play. He smiles and asks back whether that’s meant to be a serious question. Needless to say, the majority wants to hear the hard, sad stories of the minorities among them. As soon as someone’s articulation isn’t crystal clear, you’re allowed to barge in and interrupt. Above all, no one believes the director to be capable of sarcasm. Even at a theater conference. Especially at a theater conference.

“This is a play about how we are seen.” Why didn’t anyone ask what the director meant by this statement? Because – I guarantee you – there were only a few people that understood him.

Ballhaus Naunynstraße “opened as a production space in November 2008 and has been a pioneering agency on the part of immigrant and post-migrant writers, directors, actors and producers in German theater. Its artistic director Shermin Langhoff has developed the concept of post-migrant theater, which is alive both as an aesthetic practice and as a buzzword in theatrical discourse. It draws from a broad network of 2nd and 3rd generation artists, combining genres and transnational/translocal contexts. This cultural practice acknowledges Germany’s polymigrational reality and regards complex constructs of identity as challenge and stimulus to artistic discourse. The Ballhaus Naunynstrasse offers an opportunity to artists otherwise underrepresented to develop their artistic production under a translocal perspective” (*Oliver Kontry, Dramaturge*).

Even before I was a Berliner, I was a Kreuzberger. “Real Berliners” don’t like to hear this. I don’t care. The concept of this island is in the air, and I didn’t want to breathe anywhere else in Germany. I turn into the Naunynstraße. A street, that I, as a new arrival, didn’t associate with any big events. A huge banner with a quote from Aras Ören hangs written in the air: “The Naunynstraße fills with the smell of thyme, with longing and hope, but also with hate.” From one house to the other. I look to the left—oh yeah, I know this place, it’s the NaunynRitze, that youth center. To the right is a theater. Do I know it?

Soon after this discovery, I’d be spending many evenings with friends at the Ballhaus bar. We talked about meaning and art and suddenly we wanted something. A change of conditions. This time for real. I often tend to see the world I live in as applying to everyone. This short-circuit, that everyone lives in the same world—meaning mine. That’s why it never seemed necessary to me to introduce the Ballhaus Naunynstraße in *freitext*. Because it’s become the most natural thing. The place (of representation). The island (that lives intercultural theory and doesn’t claim it). All the things we’ve been trying to do with *freitext* for years. “I first became aware of the word ‘post-migrant’ about ten years ago in the context of Anglo-American literary studies. It makes sense to me that we should also have a specific designation for the stories of the second and third generation that take place within the context of migration but that are told by those who did not themselves actually migrate.”

And like everyone else, I also tend not to hear the things I don’t want to hear. Because they interfere with my view of the world. For example, “You guys have such a sweet neighborhood theater.” At that point, I didn’t react yet. “Shouldn’t we overcome all this post-migrant stuff instead of manifesting racist labels?” All of it. These comments are either made by people who’ve never been exposed to experiences with racism or people who are repressing something. Both types contradict reality, consequently they are lying. Theater must not lie.

Verrücktes Blut opened the door for credit card-payer audiences, who drink up all the white wine. Now isn't that equality and real public theater—or is it a continuation of class conflict? As a spy in the foyer and in Ali's Bar in the basement of the Ballhaus N., you hear all kinds of things: “What's the point of this special focus on working with non-professionals?”, accompanied by the implication: aren't they just making the best of the fact that they don't actually have any professionals? Aren't they already bound to fail, due to their pronunciation and their inevitable lack of exposure to the German classics? These are the kinds of imputations that Nurkan Erpulat was already hearing during his training at the Ernst Busch School of Directing, where in 2008 he became the first student with a “Turkish background” to graduate.

What I haven't been hearing is that this is a play about the perversion of enlightenment ideals. A cry against the racist labels that are (not only) brutally shoved in our faces. No—that by now we've even come to apply to ourselves. A play with less thyme than hate; longing, but also hope. A play that's not about migrants, but rather the raging lunacy of the supposedly enlightened.

The theater-elite seems to see it differently. The general consensus is that it's a play about the hopelessness of integration, and even if they hold back from saying so directly, it slips out in heated audience discussions. Slavoj Žižek says that the first political moment wasn't the polity—white men sit in a circle and talk about everyone else. The first political moment was the resistance to it—when the excluded, the slaves protested against the fact that they weren't being included (*Plädoyer für Intoleranz*, p. 27ff.). Theater is that kind of political moment. Theater isn't about privileged groups deciding what relevant art for society is. Theater is a stage for the appeal and the challenge to take a position, made by those who don't otherwise get a chance to speak.

So what do we do? Keep going. Walter Benjamin explained that people need time to process and apply the things they've experienced. It took 20 years for *Kanak Sprak* not to echo in people's heads like an infectious disease, but instead to have a meaning—in the fullest sense of the word. The Ballhaus Naunynstraße is a milestone; the “sweet neighborhood theater” is making waves that reach beyond Europe's borders. The concept of post-migrant theater is flourishing in England, Sweden and Holland, and most recently, academics in the USA are even writing their dissertations about the Ballhaus.

Thanks to the kind of work that Shermin Langhoff and her crew are doing, we, the people with the “background” are moving into the foreground.

Yeah, sure. We will overcome.