

Dietze, Antje: *Ambivalenzen des Übergangs. Die Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin in den Neunziger Jahren*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2015. ISBN: 978-3-525-30171-5; 412 S.

Rezensiert von: Jill E. Twark, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, East Carolina University, Greenville

The timing could not be better for Antje Dietze's dissertation monograph on the history of Berlin's iconic Volksbühne theater. In light of the turbulent developments surrounding the theater's abrupt changes in leadership and repertoire from 2017–2018, it is important to consider the institution's more than hundred-year history as backdrop. Dietze's research on the Volksbühne is, moreover, so much more than just the history of a famous Berlin theater or a literary analysis of several of its productions. In seven marvelously insightful, well-organized, and reader-friendly chapters, the author ties the theater's history to the political, economic, social, and cultural transformations taking place around and in it from the 1890s up to the first decade of the twenty first century. In so doing – though unwittingly at the time of publication – she supplies wide-ranging reasons why many Berlin theatergoers reacted vituperatively to the Berlin city government's appointment of theater director Chris Dercon and to his choice of productions for the 2017–2018 theater season.

The seven chapters in *Ambivalenzen des Übergangs* are divided into multiple sub-chapters that facilitate the search for specific topics. The bibliography is expansive and followed by a useful index of names. In Chapter one, the Introduction, Dietze not only outlines the contents and thrust of her book, but she also provides a brief survey of German unification as background to her later discussion of the Volksbühne in the 1990s. Although it assists the author by providing necessary contextualization, those familiar with this history may wish to skim or skip this particular subsection. Her underlying thesis posits that the Volksbühne theater directors staged provocative yet sophisticated performances conveying ambivalence and ambiguity in order to

transmit timely political critiques that encourage reflection on questions of identity, cultural memory, and evolving utopian visions.

Chapter two takes the reader back to the Volksbühne's origins as a cultural organization (Verein Freie Volksbühne) founded in 1890 and initially attracting 1.800 members, but expanding to as many as 50.000 in some years. Until the organization could construct its own theater in 1914, its performances were held at other venues. Its central purpose was to draw the working class of Berlin into the theater so as to contribute to their education, foster their appreciation for the arts, and thereby emancipate them from ignorance so that they could improve their situation (pp. 49–50). Dietze demonstrates how important the Freie Volksbühne and other such organizations were in incorporating segments of the German population that otherwise would have had no access to the arts, as well as in disseminating the political platform of the Social Democrats. Politically, the Freie Volksbühne had to keep a low profile, especially during the „Third Reich“, but it was nearly always associated with a left-leaning agenda.

Chapter three takes a different tack by providing a literary historical case study of the dramatic work „Räuber von Schiller,“ directed by Frank Castorf and premiering on September 22, 1990, just two weeks before German unification. Here, Dietze compares Castorf's production with earlier „Räuber“ stagings by directors Erwin Piscator at the Berliner Staatstheater in 1926, Peter Zadek's at the Schauspiel Bremen in 1966, and Manfred Karge/Matthias Langhoff's at the Volksbühne in East Berlin in 1971. She also ties Castorf's production back to Leopold Jessner's scandalous interpretation of Schiller's „Wilhelm Tell“ in the early Weimar Republic which inaugurated the concept of „das politische Regietheater“. Dietze draws such comparisons in order to show how Castorf developed his „vielbeschworene[r] und zum Markenzeichen gewordene[r] Zertrümmerungsästhetik“ (p. 99). She also illustrates deftly in this chapter how theater performances such as „Räuber von Schiller“ interpreted the bumpy transitional period of the early 1990s. At this time, East and West Germany were struggling to come together politically, economically, and

culturally, and the Volksbühne fulfilled its expected role of reflecting and commenting on the evolving societal transformations. The fact that Castorf's „Räuber“ ran at the Volksbühne for a decade testifies to its immense popularity and influence on Berlin's theater landscape and urban identity.

Returning to a more traditional historiographical approach in Chapter four, Dietze describes how and why the Volksbühne was maintained by the city and state of Berlin, and became a federally funded cultural institution in the financially precarious years after reunification. She evinces its tenuous position by comparing its fate with that of several other Berlin theaters, such as its counterpart with the same name in West Berlin and the Staatliche Schauspielbühnen which were closed. In this chapter, Dietze draws effectively on archival documents and official reports such as the *Gutachten zur Lage der Berliner Theater im Auftrag des Berliner Senats*, otherwise known as the „Nagel Report“ after its primary author, Ivan Nagel (p. 188). After thus embedding the Volksbühne into the Berlin theater landscape, in Chapter five she homes back in on the Volksbühne by highlighting the significance of several of its performances in the 1990s. Here, she illustrates how these performances revived avant-garde artistic traditions and called them into question. The performances served as means of coming to terms with the National Socialist and GDR pasts, performing memory work, playing ambiguously with both West and East German identities, and conveying criticism of ideologies such as neoliberalism and its sociopolitical and economic repercussions. In so doing, the Volksbühne entered into a global, transnational, post-socialist, and post-utopian discourse of the arts that first emerged in the 1970s (p. 306). The final main chapter interprets Swiss director Christoph Marthaler's postdramatic production „Murx den Europäer!“ as a comment on the growing nationalism and neonazism in Germany in the early 1990s. A major strength of Dietze's treatment of Marthaler's play is her differentiated discussion of how the director presented East and West German characters, and various everyday artefacts from earlier decades, ambivalently as much more than just „Ostal-

gie“ or „Westalgie“ in the limited sense of nostalgia for the past.

Ambivalenzen des Übergangs is not the only scholarly book that features a history and analysis of the Volksbühne and its vast array of theatrical productions. Thomas Irmer and Harald Müller's edited volume *Zehn Jahre Volksbühne: Intendanz Frank Castorf* (2002) focuses on Castorf's productions of the 1990s, as well. For English-language readers, furthermore, Denise Varney's edited volume *Theatre in the Berlin Republic: German Drama since Reunification* (2008) also provides a solid, basic introduction to the theater's recent history. What sets Dietze's book apart is that she traces the Volksbühne's history in detail forward from its nineteenth-century origins, making important connections with its past and that of other Berlin theaters as well as with other avant-garde theaters in Germany and beyond. She thus helps readers understand why and how the Volksbühne evolved into a significant cultural institution and has maintained its status until today. The book's primary weakness which can also be seen as a strength is that it contains a good amount of repetition which can make reading some parts of it tedious. The advantage of such an approach, however, is that each chapter can be read and understood independently of the others. Many answers as to why some Berliners reacted negatively to Chris Dercon – such as the theater's close ties to the city's left-wing, artsy, grungy, and alternative identity – can be traced back to the Volksbühne's history as Dietze tells it.

Jill Twark über Dietze, Antje: *Ambivalenzen des Übergangs. Die Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin in den Neunziger Jahren*. Göttingen 2015, in: H-Soz-Kult 13.12.2018.