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Changing Europe, Changing Arts #2

Goethe Institut Amsterdam, 25 October 2010

Drop in and join in

Ballhaus Naunynstraße and Brunnenpassage

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From the Naunynstrasse in Berlin director Shermin Langhoff is going against German tradition and attempting to bring in more variety in themes, forms and colour. Tilman Fromelt works for an organisation that involves local people around the Brunnenmarkt in Vienna in the arts and with one another. Two workplaces for new arts and audience development with artistic offensives based on love of one's fellow man and political awareness.

There is chuckling in the audience when Shermin Langhoff throws the term 'Bio Deutsche' into the auditorium. The first impression is of a linguistic invention with an almost ecological flair: Heimat meets A-label Volkswagen turbo diesel. However, it is far from innocent. In the German debate on migration and the multicultural society, the term is frequently used to distinguish between 'real' and 'non-real' Germans. 'Bernd und Birgit' as opposed to Germans with cultural roots in other countries, regardless of whether they are first or even third generation.

Variety on all fronts

In this polarised climate, in 2008 Ballhaus Naunynstraße opened its doors. The theatre is housed in the former dancehall in Berlin's Kreuzberg district. Director Shermin Langhoff is relating to the established German theatre world, into which little is, as yet, filtering through from what is happening in the old districts of the big cities. Langhoff describes Ballhaus as an academy of autodidacts, where theatre makers from all kinds of backgrounds and from various artistic disciplines are endeavouring to give substance to 'post-migration theatre': topical performances about a society on which migration is leaving its mark.

Each year, Ballhaus Naunynstraße stages eight to ten productions, of which a number are also performed outside the theatre and even abroad. Additionally, this theatre organises theatre festivals, hosts productions made elsewhere and offers residencies. With all these activities Ballhaus Naunynstraße primarily reaches a young audience, an estimated half of which has a migrant background. "In a multicultural city like Berlin, that's not so difficult," says Langhoff. Yet, this is not something you will hear from many directors of established cultural institutions.

From fringe to centre stage

Ballhaus Naunynstraße has made itself a name in a fairly short time and according to Langhoff it has become a significant factor on the contemporary German theatre scene: “Ballhaus is gradually turning into a model theatre. First we were working on the fringe, but now we are increasingly becoming centre stage”. The theatre is gaining a following, but it also attracts criticism, especially when the taboos in the migrant communities themselves are the topic of a production. “Admittedly, in recent years more plays have been written about honour killings than there have been victims, but that does not alter the gravity of the phenomenon. And it does demonstrate the obsessions of today’s society”.

A society obsessed by differences needs art to unmask the false disparities. Langhoff has little time for professional debaters and their opinions, which are so far removed from reality: “Most of it is just hot air. You have to fill in the facts and the reasoning yourself. For me, that sets artistic processes in motion, but there are enough well-integrated migrants of my generation who respond less lightly when their loyalty is questioned by ‘Bio Deutsche’.”

Dance together, live together

Brunnenpassage’s main aim is to increase togetherness in the district, even among ‘Alpine Austrians’ who feel pushed aside by the arrival of the large groups of migrants. With the motto ‘Art for Everyone!’ Brunnenpassage opens its doors every day on the longest daily market in Vienna. Anyone can drop in and anyone not daring to can always look through one of the many windows and see what is happening inside. And that is a lot. Brunnenpassage was initiated by Caritas Wien, a help organisation with roots in the Catholic Church. In addition to the more traditional help for the homeless, social legal aid and home help for the elderly, this organisation provides access to art as something that can make a real contribution to an individual’s wellbeing and to the cohesion in a neighbourhood. People who dance together care more about each other.

Drop in and join in

Around Brunnenpassage groups with diverse cultural backgrounds live alongside one another and art is a square peg in a round hole. Against such a background, not surprisingly taking part is often more important than the artistic result. To keep the threshold as low as possible, the activities at Brunnenpassage have various entry levels. You can simply come and watch a performance. There are also the ‘touch & go’ workshops, where any passer-by can join in and leave at any time. According to Tilman Fromelt this usually works well. “During literature workshops most people say they have just come to listen, but towards the end they have plenty to say after all”. A slightly more structured option is the house productions resulting from short workshops or a series of activities.

It demands a lot of the Brunnenpassage staff to work in such an open environment. Lots of people drop in, particularly on Saturdays when everyone is doing their shopping at the market. “We’re part of the neighbourhood and people are dropping in more and more easily. The activities for children, especially, soon dispel any distrust”, says Fromelt when asked what the local community actually thinks of it. The photographs Fromelt shows are full of local residents and he knows almost all of them. That does not make him a social worker, but rather the ideal host for a cultural institution with a clientele that is difficult to reach.

Art is for Everyone

Brunnenpassage fosters the low threshold aspect of many activities and the confidence of the participants in the organisation. Inviting provocative artists is not such a good idea, in Fromelt's opinion, when you are attempting to reach the 'culture-shy'. Sometimes, the organisation attempts to confront participants with themselves, but it is extremely cautious in putting on productions that could be offensive. Inviting a Ballhaus Naunynstraße production that puts artistic and moral conventions to the test is clearly still a bridge too far. As workplaces for new arts and audience development, both organisations form a link between the established art world, new theatre makers and audiences that differ from those of more traditional institutions. They each do this in their own way, but in both Berlin and Vienna the artistic offensives are fuelled by the conviction that art excludes no one.