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Summary

Shakespeare in Berlin asks why and how classical drama, and Shakespeare’s plays in particular, attained a central place in the development of the most consistently experimental theatre culture of the Western world. Following a chronological narrative from the establishment of a system of publicly funded theatres after the First World War through to the present day, it traces the influence of two competing models of what theatre is, how theatre ought to negotiate the relative authority of play texts and performers, and how theatre should relate to the real world. As Berlin changed—from the capital of a new republic to that of a fascist dictatorship, to a city split in two and divided between two countries and two systems of government, to an increasingly multicultural international hub of artistic activity—its theatre underwent similarly radical transformations. And how that theatre treated Shakespeare’s plays changed in similarly profound ways.

Despite the changes this book chronicles, however, a fundamental contrast between two sets of approaches to theatre that were first established in the early years of the Weimar Republic remained in place. First, there is a basic division between two understandings of the relationship between text and performance. First, the conviction that classical drama challenges modern performers and directors to find an angle on the play that allows it to retain a relationship with their own world, a challenge that authorizes an increasingly wide range of interventionist strategies. From this perspective, it is the responsibility of performance to remake the play in its own image, and the image of the performers’ time. On the other side of the divide, we find an attitude that sees the classics as either timeless or as products of a particular historical moment that need to be encountered on their own terms and that require a deep immersion into the work, with the concomitant challenge of finding ways to transport the specific mysteries or truths of the past with the means of the present. From this perspective, a performance needs to surrender itself to the requirements of the text as completely as possible, reinventing what theatre means to reflect to the fullest extent what the play seems to imagine or demand, but translated into the terms and technical capacities of the modern stage.

The second pair of contrasting attitudes concerns the theory and practice of acting. Here, in a similarly broad-strokes sketch, we might distinguish, on the one hand, the notion that actors embody human beings with specific psychological traits and physical habits, disappearing into their role as much as possible on the one hand. On the other hand, we can single out the conception of actors as portraying dramatic positions, situations, or ideas; they present a fictional character to the audience without vanishing into that character, and remain present as a version of themselves throughout the show.

These two basic theories of what acting is never quite map neatly onto the two models of how performance and play relate to each other. What all four positions have in common, though, is a shared avantgardism, a desire to question and reinvent what theatre is and does. Even the most conservative-sounding approach, the idea that a production needs to submit to the text, in the context of twentieth-
century Berlin theatre remains informed by an understanding of theatre as an aesthetic project committed to challenging established forms and conventions.

In pursuing its analysis of the development of this pair of models, the book focuses on a select number of directors and actors, in the context of specific theatres, through extended case studies of particular productions (in most cases, no more than three per chapter, and drawing on a relatively limited canon of plays). It grounds its analysis in detailed examinations of dramaturgical habits, rehearsal practices, acting methods, design approaches, and the assumptions and goals that informed the rich critical discourse surrounding Berlin’s theatre. Going beyond a thorough analysis of extant reviews and production documents, the research underpinning the book relies on original archival work on directors’ and actors’ diaries and letters, and theatres’ business records; for figures and stagings after 1945, I will draw extensively on my own interviews with artists involved in the productions under discussion. Methodologically, wherever possible I will devote as much attention to the principles and ideas that informed a production’s approach to the text and the rehearsal process as to the reception of the “finished” performance; the contrast between what theatre makers thought they were doing and how their work was perceived by critics and the public is one of the book’s major preoccupations.

Ultimately, the book is shaped by the conviction that in order to explain why Shakespeare functions so very differently in contemporary German theatre, and why there is such a gulf between what counts as “mainstream” in German theatre culture and in the theatre cultures of the English-speaking world, one has to go back a hundred years and establish the genealogy of theatrical experimentalism in Germany. A central contention of *Shakespeare in Berlin* is that dramatic works of the past, and Shakespeare’s plays in particular, have played a uniquely important role in the continual search for new theatrical forms in German theatre. More specifically, I will argue that what distinguishes this culture of theatrical experimentation is its reliance on the frequent re-staging of familiar plays in ever new ways – an approach that has emphasised performance (rather than new writing) as the driver of theatrical innovation to a far greater extent than in other Western theatre cultures.

**Chapter Outlines**

**Introduction**

Shakespeare in Germany works, looks, and sounds nothing like it does in English-speaking theatre – and this radical difference has a very long tradition. It is a consequence of a specific set of approaches to the relationship between text and performance, and to the theory and practice of acting, that have developed and grown in Germany for over a century. A good starting point for an investigation of these approaches and their application to Shakespeare’s plays is the immediate aftermath of the First World War, and no place provides a richer context for the study of their historical evolution than Berlin.

Why 1918? Because the First World War was an unprecedented watershed in German cultural life. In the theatre, the most immediate impact of the end of the monarchy and the rise of the Weimar republic was the establishment of a system of government-funded stages, with permanent ensembles, led by artistic directors who ran their theatres largely autonomously and largely free of commercial pressures.
Why Berlin? Because the capital of the new republic had more theatres than any other German city from the start, became the unrivaled centre of theatrical excellence under the Nazis, developed in unpredictable and intriguingly divergent ways during the 45 years when there were two Germanys, and regained its role as the country’s leading theatre city after 1990. There is no other place anywhere in the Western world that maintains as many publicly funded theatres with permanent ensembles as Berlin.

Why Shakespeare? Because Shakespeare’s plays, in various translations, have had a central place in the German theatrical canon for almost as long as there have been professional actors in Germany; because even under the Nazis, Shakespeare was considered, in effect, a German author; because his plays have been staged more frequently than those of any other playwright in Berlin (and elsewhere in Germany) over the past 100 years; and because there is an exceptionally large number of productions of Shakespeare’s plays that have become touchstones of theatre history since 1918, serving to crystallize specific conflicts, debates, or developments in German theatre.

The introduction will also briefly sketch out the important prehistory against which the productions discussed in the first two chapters positioned themselves. Here, I will cover two main antecedents. Firstly, the rise of Naturalism, especially at Otto Brahm’s Deutsche Theater, and the rejection of the previously dominant historicizing, pictorialist, and declamatory style of performance common in Germany as well as Britain. And secondly, more importantly, the reaction against Brahm, led by his immediate successor at the Deutsche Theater, Max Reinhardt. In place of the Naturalists’ relentlessly drab aesthetic, which extended to the rejection of all techniques of verse speaking, Reinhardt offered a theatre designed to enchant but not deceive (a paradigmatic case is the set for his 1905 Midsummer Night’s Dream, which featured extremely tall trees but also a revolve that operated, unusually, while the curtain was open). But although Reinhardt was famous for his use of cutting-edge technology to conjure up feats of theatrical magic, he also relied on actors capable of a high level of psychological nuance as well as physical activity, and consistently argued for the actor as the central element of any show. At the heart of his art lay a profound belief in the essential and invaluable childishness of playacting: he considered theatre a feast for the imagination, a beautiful dream, an illusion that is pleasurable precisely because it is divorced from the reality without. Stylistically, he was an extraordinarily difficult director to pin down, and he was open to all forms of theatrical experimentation. Even though his stage aesthetics ran the gamut from the moss floor and artificial pine scent of the 1905 Midsummer Night’s Dream to the essentially empty stage of a version he directed at Salzburg in 1927, he was throughout his career focused on a theatre that relied on and engaged the audience’s and the actors’ fantasy. Although it was rare for him to alter the texts he staged significantly, neither did he aim to subject them to rigorous analysis or deep interpretation: Reinhardt’s goal was the creation of an atmosphere and an experience in the theatre that corresponded in some way to what he perceived the play to be.

1. Shakespeare after Reinhardt: Leopold Jessner

After the First World War, Reinhardt’s theatre of magical play was beginning to lose much of its luster. Germany underwent the most profound political and social change of its recent history in the aftermath of a catastrophically lost war. Looking back at this transformative moment ten years later, the director Leopold Jessner wrote that in a time shaped by “war and revolution,” the “delectable theatre, the theatre of illusion, the theatre of nothing-but-play” had lost its cultural foundations. Jessner does not name names, but the art he describes is unmistakably Reinhardt’s. That loss of
foundations may not have been immediately obvious – in fact, Reinhardt only opened his most ambitious venture in Berlin, the titanic Große Schauspielhaus, in 1919. But by 1920, the ground had shifted: Reinhardt had moved to Salzburg, and Jessner had been appointed the artistic director of the Staatstheater (Berlin’s most prestigious theatre, which had lost its Imperial patron with the collapse of the monarchy and had become a state-subsidized venture in 1919).

This appointment was not just a moment in theatre history: it was a political shift, and Jessner saw it as such. He took his new role as the head of the first theatre of a young democracy seriously as a political responsibility. If Reinhardt’s aesthetic had been informed throughout by a desire to keep reality at bay, Jessner redefined theatre as an art that, without falling back into the representational logic of Naturalism, needed to use its own aesthetic means to comment on, engage with, and intervene in contemporary social and political concerns and debates.

Jessner has often been described as an Expressionist, but, as German theatre historians have recently argued, this is an unhelpful and misleading categorization. He certainly was the leading proponent of an increasingly mainstream reaction against scenic illusionism and actorly naturalism. Expressionism, however, was a relatively shortlived phenomenon in German theatre, and never a major influence in Berlin. Instead, Jessner should be seen as part of a broader movement to re-emphasize the theatricality of the stage and to emphasize its role as a political space (he is thus an intellectual ally of figures such as Meyerhold or Artaud, and a major immediate influence on German theatre makers including Brecht and Piscator). His core principle, especially in staging classics, was that theatre needed to touch a political nerve (the “Nerv der Zeit” is a recurrent phrase in his writings). Jessner proclaimed that directors had to be given the freedom to re-interpret, re-discover, and re-shape works from the past from the perspective of the present; a director’s “right and duty” to read old plays through the lens of the present overrode any obligation to be true to a play’s full range of possible meanings, let alone its specific historical point of origin. In this project, Shakespeare was a key author for him.

As his opening production at the Staatstheater in 1919, Jessner staged Schiller’s Wilhelm Tell. The show caused a massive scandal and remains one of the most written-about productions in twentieth-century theatre history. But his Richard III the next year was in many ways a fuller, more complete realization of his aesthetic and political goals and principles. It cut ties with a long tradition of historicized Shakespeare stagings and deliberately limited its reading of the play to the aspects Jessner considered relevant to his own time and place. He implicitly declared the specific circumstances, visual or political, of the historical Richard’s rise to power to be entirely negligible, and boiled the play down to a study of the rise and fall of a power-hungry careerist. Abstraction was the visual leitmotiv, with a cavernous stage space almost entirely devoid of conventional scenery and dominated, after Richard’s rise to the throne, by a massive staircase; primary colours laden with symbolic value characterized costumes and lighting design. Nothing on stage was meant to suggest a concrete historical moment, and everything in the text that slowed down the action was cut.

The correlative of this extreme reductionism was that whatever was there was charged with significance. Fritz Kortner’s Richard was widely celebrated as a revelation for his ability to render every aspect of his body and voice expressive of dramatic purpose. In general, Jessner eschewed individual psychology and social realism, opting instead for heightened theatricality: the production ran at breakneck pace and frequently used devices such as direct address (with actors sitting on the prompter’s box while delivering soliloquies) and choric renditions of a number of scenes. But the goal of this effort was to achieve a deeper relationship between the stage action and the surrounding political reality: the very abstraction of the staging enabled the play, in Jessner’s thinking, to reflect and comment on his
present.

In two later Shakespeare productions, these principles were further refined and developed: *Othello* of 1921 (with Kortner not, as might be expected of a star excelling as Richard III, in the role of Iago but as Othello) and *Hamlet* in 1926. The latter production was so explicit in its anti-monarchic and pro-republican politics that ultra-nationalist parties launched parliamentary debates about the staging. Jessner’s approach here, as elsewhere, was that of a contemporary director aggressively interpreting the work from a single perspective: psychological questions were no longer interesting, he declared; a modern *Hamlet* needed a new access point to the play – and he considered “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” the key phrase for a contemporary engagement with the text. To pursue that reading, Jessner made significant cuts and gave so much weight to characters other than Hamlet that critics loudly lamented the loss of lyrical beauty and any sense of the heroic – and complained that the director himself was more tangible in the show than the text or the actors.

Jessner’s work thus set up a number of principles that have remained a central strand of German theatre making for the past century. In sum: the notion that a director is as much beholden to his or her historical and political moment as to the concerns of a classical play text; the conception of the director as a creative interpreter who necessarily singles out aspects of any play while utterly neglecting others; the conviction that severe textual interventions are a perfectly acceptable means of pursuing this aggressive interpretative project; the belief that making theatre is a political act; the view that “acting” comes in different modes and guises, and different acting styles have different aesthetic and political consequences; and the sense that heightened theatricality and an engagement with the real world are not incompatible. In almost all of these ideas, Jessner’s theatre ran counter to Reinhardt’s. Between them, their two approaches to theatre, in all their diversity, have come to shape the century of German theatre after 1918.

2. Rupture and Continuity: Third Reich Shakespeare

With Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, one of the great eras of theatre history came to an end: many of the most influential figures in German theatre were Jewish and fled the country, as did artists on the political left. Jessner, Kortner, and Reinhardt, along with Brecht, Piscator, and dozens of others disappeared from Berlin’s stages, as did many of the theatre’s most high-profile critical voices. But while 1933 was a brutal rupture, that narrative, as I will argue in this chapter, has to be juxtaposed with one of continuity – of aesthetics, if not of politics. Paradoxically, the Nazi state’s desire for world-class performances in the capital, and the competition between Goebbels and Göring, each of whom sponsored a different theatre, led to an unprecedented concentration of acting and directing talent in Berlin. In this chapter, I will primarily focus on the work of Jürgen Fehling, a director whom Jessner had brought to the Staatstheater in 1922 and who continued his work there under Gustav Gründgens, staging close to 80 productions in over 20 years. The most famous of those was his 1937 *Richard III*, a show that has often been described as the most politically daring, most subversive act of theatre of the entire Nazi period.

But although aesthetically, with an extremely deep, bright white funnel of a set, its use of an almost uncut script, and its exceptional length, that production was of a part with Fehling’s general directorial approach, its close-to-overt political commentary on contemporary German politics, with murderers clad in SS-style uniforms and a Richard reminiscent of Goebbels, it was something of an outlier for him. Fehling’s interests as a director sharply diverged from Jessner’s. In particular, he was less interested in embracing the theatre as a space for political discourse than in exploring heightened
emotional states or large philosophical questions and in finding stage images capable of conveying what he saw as the mysterious qualities of classic texts. His tendency to draw a clear divide between art and politics undoubtedly explains his ability to continue his work, almost without interruption, after 1933.

Unlike Jessner, Fehling never eschewed psychological realism either; he aimed at more holistic readings of the plays he was directing, expressing a particular interest in the “fog” of difficult texts – a fog that could produce dream-like, enchanting theatrical forms and gestures without the clarity of purpose Jessner’s model of directorial intervention implies. Fehling’s theatre was instinctive, passionate, driven by the director’s intuitions and imagination – not the work of analysis or argument. He was renowned for preparing for rehearsal by deeply immersing himself in the text only to then open up spaces for actorly play, pushing his performers to their intellectual and physical limits.

One contemporary critic described Jessner as Reinhardt’s great opponent, and Fehling as the director who replaced and overcame Reinhardt’s aesthetic. Devoid of Jessner’s political mission, his sense of theatrical magic seems indeed reminiscent of Reinhardt, as is his reliance on actors as the central element in the theatrical enterprise. But Fehling’s was a dark magic (his stagings were often described as shocking or unsettling), it was grounded deeply in the dramatic text, and it unfolded in a rehearsal process free of Reinhardt’s meticulously planned stagecraft. It is this modified version of Reinhardt’s magical theatre, of which Fehling was the first and most important representative, that carries through from the early days of the Weimar Republic to the post-war period. I will trace its influence, alongside Jessner’s alternative model, for much of the rest of the book.

In this chapter as elsewhere, I will go beyond most of the available literature in drawing on archival resources, rehearsal notes, and production sketches; I will embed a new analysis of Fehling’s Richard III (which has been described in some detail by multiple scholars) in an account of his career-long engagement with Shakespeare. My focus here will be on Fehling’s Shakespeare productions under Jessner (in particular, his 1925 Romeo and Juliet and his 1927 Measure for Measure) and on the other two Shakespeare plays he staged during the Third Reich (a 1939 Richard II and a 1941 Julius Caesar).

3. Coriolanus, Thrice

Fehling’s career bridged Weimar Germany and the Third Reich, although it faltered after war. Erich Engel’s work as director, although less formative in his influence, is an even more interesting study in continuity. Engel was one of the young theatre artists Jessner brought to the Staatstheater and directed Brecht’s plays in the late 1920s, but continued to work under the Nazis despite his left-wing politics (as the most interesting director associated with the Deutsche Theater under Heinz Hilpert’s leadership). After 1945 he again became a close collaborator of Brecht’s and a key figure in the early days of the Berliner Ensemble. But rather than follow the pattern of the previous two chapters and detail Engel’s career from Weimar to the GDR, I will treat three paradigmatic stagings of Coriolanus: two of them by Engel, the third produced at the theatre he helped found in East Berlin.

He staged the first production in 1925 at the Deutsche Theater as part of an effort to establish a more politically activist sort of theatre there. But even though he could win Kortner, who was looking for a new challenge, for the lead, Engel’s venture failed. The Deutsche Theater remained a for-profit outfit, and considered an adaptation of La Dame aux Camélias a more lucrative prospect; Engel’s Coriolanus was farmed out to the less prestigious and less suitable Lessing Theatre. But in its influence, this Coriolanus became significant all the same. The show was much admired by the young Brecht,
who called it “decisively important;” it was the first and possibly only attempt to apply the principles of Brecht and Piscator’s “epic theatre” to a dramatic classic. Although not instantly celebrated, the production became a frequent reference point in the debates that erupted in the late 1920s about how classics should be treated in the theatre. It was remarkable both for its Jessner-like treatment of the text, which was cut severely to follow Engel’s anti-heroic vision of war as disastrous and destructive, and for Kortner’s deliberately mis-cast Coriolanus, an “aristocrat played by a commoner,” a proletarian despising the proletariat.

Engel’s second Coriolanus, in 1937, now at the Deutsche Theater, seems to have been much less radical – although it followed the first production in refusing to celebrate Coriolanus as a heroic figure. What I will focus on in my discussion is the question to what extent Engel’s treatment of the text and his work with actors changed or remained similar between 1925 and 1937. The original Lessing Theater show was notable, among other things, for the emotional distance it attempted to create between audience and protagonist and the analytical attitude it tried to adopt from Brecht. The 1937 staging appears to have been considerably more conventional – and was produced in a theatre whose artistic director (Hilpert) consistently advocated for performances that focused on “eternal values” to the exclusion of concrete political concerns. Engel’s aesthetic project, before and after the Third Reich, was heavily driven by his political convictions. What happened, I will ask, to a director’s theatrical aesthetics when the politics that motivate them are no longer permissible?

From these two shows, I will then leap to the 1964 Berliner Ensemble staging of Brecht’s version, Coriolan, and ask what, if any, lines of influence or continuity can be traced between it and Engel’s productions. I will be especially interested in the 1964 staging’s famous battle scenes (in Ruth Berghaus’s choreography) and the question of how the use of the actors’ bodies there relates back to developments started by Jessner and his collaborators in the 1920s. Similarly, I will discuss the lines of influence from Jessner’s extreme treatment of the play text through Brecht’s early view of classics as defined primarily by their “Materialwert” (their value as stuff to be reused and refashioned) to his later repeated efforts to adapt the play and the ultimate theatrical realization of that effort (or not) by Manfred Wekwerth, Joachim Tenschert, and Ruth Berghaus at the Berliner Ensemble. And I will consider how the relationship between politics and aesthetics in Engel’s two productions can be related to the differences between the Coriolan Brecht had envisaged in the 1950s and the Coriolan the Berliner Ensemble eventually staged under rather different, rather more disillusioned political circumstances in the GDR of the mid-1960s.

4. West Berlin’s Isolation and the Schaubühne

One of the most remarkable aspects of post-war Berlin theatre is how quickly West Berlin ceased to be the centre of the theatrical avant-garde in the Federal Republic. West German theatre underwent radical transformations in the 1960s and 70s, but the places where those developments took place were far from the former capital: Ulm (improbably), Bremen (almost as improbably), Stuttgart, Bochum; in the late 70s and 80s, Cologne, Hamburg, and Munich, even Vienna. Many of the major figures of those transformative years rarely worked in Berlin until after the fall of the wall, and none of them staged their most noteworthy productions there: Claus Peymann, Peter Zadek, Peter Palitzsch (after 1961), Hansgünther Heyme, Jürgen Flimm, and (as directors of Shakespeare) Luc Bondy and Frank-Patrick Steckel – most of the directors that shaped West German theatre from the 1960s on were active elsewhere in the country.

There are two obvious exception to this observation: many of Samuel Beckett’s plays had
important productions in West Berlin, and more pertinently for this book, the Schaubühne rose to prominence in the 1970s in part because of its work with the classical canon. After 1969 that theatre, under Peter Stein’s leadership, became one of Germany’s most high-profile stages and probably its internationally most recognized one (a status it retains today). But the Schaubühne, unlike most German theatres, did not operate as a repertory company; for most of Stein’s directorship, it ran the same show night after night until interest petered out. Compared to other houses, therefore, the Schaubühne staged far fewer new shows – and an unusually small number of Shakespeare’s plays, with only six full productions between 1970 and 1999.

Three of those will be the focus of this chapter, in both cases as instances of an approach to Shakespeare that harkens back (although certainly not consciously) to Fehling’s combination of profound trust in an ensemble and deep attention to the text. The first is Peter Stein’s two-year experiment with Elizabethan theatre from 1976-78, an effort that yielded two pieces of theatre. First, the Shakespeare’s Memory project, a promenade-style staging of various tableaux illustrating Elizabethan performance techniques and elements of Elizabethan culture; and second, a production of As You Like It based on the insights supposedly gained through the work on Shakespeare’s Memory. This was staged in a vast film studio and also had the audience moving through various sets. Stein and his team drew heavily on Robert Weimann’s 1967 Shakespeare und die Tradition des Volkstheaters (translated into English as Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater, 1978), but they appear to have ignored the political import Weimann’s work had in the East (of which more in the next chapter). Instead, they were interested primarily in a deep investigation of the historical conditions under which Shakespeare worked and in the possibility of exploring that historicity in a modern theatre – their project was immersive for everyone involved, but deliberately indifferent to connecting the work to the political world outside the Schaubühne in any overt way. (Stein’s own thinking was deeply influenced by the directorial work of Fritz Kortner in the 1950s and 60s, who brought together a similarly immersive attention to the text with a dedication to the idea that actors are Menschendarsteller – that the portrayal of actual human beings is their central task. I will begin this chapter with a brief excursus on Kortner’s importance in West German theatre, in part because Kortner’s career as actor and director is so strikingly marked by ruptures rather than continuities.)

Even more extreme in their turn away from society and contemporary politics into a theatrical universe of high art were Klaus-Michael Grüber’s productions of Hamlet (1982) and King Lear (1985). Grüber, an enigmatic figure who refused to give interviews or write about his work and famously declared that he did not know how to “interpret” a play, was as much of a textualist as Stein or Fehling before him, unafraid of extraordinarily long running times (over six hours in the case of Hamlet), and was described by his actors as a stunningly close observer of their work. Although aesthetically a very different director than Stein, the two shared these twin commitments to the text and to extreme precision in performance – and neither seemed especially concerned about the world outside the theatre in their work. In fact, the dream-like quality of Grüber’s work in particular, and the elusive genius-persona he cultivated make for a critical discourse surrounding his productions that strikingly resembles critical writings about Fehling’s (or even some of Reinhardt’s) work.

As many of the participants in these productions are still alive, the research underpinning this chapter will include my own original interviews (this is also the case for all subsequent chapters).

5. Becoming Elizabethan: History as Commentary in East Berlin

Weimann’s work was a significant influence not only on Stein, but also, in very different ways, on two
East German directors, Manfred Wekwerth and Benno Besson. Wekwerth’s *Richard III* at the Deutsche Theater in 1972 drew directly on Weimann’s book and its arguments about the difference between high and low forms of performance. Five years later, when Benno Besson was about to stage *Hamlet* at the Volksbühne, he actively involved Weimann in the production.

However, despite this shared line of influence, the kind of work Wekwerth and Besson produced and its impact could not be more distinct from Stein’s theatrical exploration of a distant historical moment. For one thing, Weimann’s specific notion of a popular theatre grounded in a playful theatricality rather than social realism amounted to a political intervention under a regime that officially promoted a notion of popular theatre indebted to a simplistic folk-realism – and that political attitude simply disappeared when Weimann’s work was received in the West. On the other hand, both the productions I will focus on in this chapter harnessed his arguments to stage similar interventions in a political debate over the status not just of realism but also of the classical heritage.

That the influence of Weimann’s historiography did not need to find expression in a historicized staging (as it did in Wekwerth’s *Richard III*) is particularly clear in Besson’s *Hamlet*, which deliberately blended early modern and contemporary aesthetics in its visual design and came close to turning Hamlet into a spokesperson for an anti-patriarchal, anti-government program. Crucially, the production thrived as much on creating conflicts between the relative authorities of text and performance as on a deep investigation of the text itself (Manfred Karge’s Hamlet delivered the “To be or not to be” soliloquy while doing pushups over a sword, for instance). And what exactly that text *was* became more unpredictable in these shows than in the West Berlin productions as well: Wekwerth produced his own translation, while Besson used a version by Heiner Müller.

What these productions represent is a theatre aesthetic that remains dedicated to a detailed historical engagement with the play, but relies equally on the actors’ presence and is committed to arriving at a staging that speaks to the world outside the theatre, however obliquely. The theatrical investigation of classics such as Shakespeare thus turned into a means of interrogating the theatre artists’ own political and social reality in the GDR; “directors’ theatre” in this context is never a purely aesthetic undertaking, but a necessarily and consciously political one. In this, as in its uninhibited attitude towards the text, this theatre harkens back not just to Brecht and Piscator (as is widely acknowledged), but at least as importantly to Jessner.

6. The Eastern Edge: Alexander Lang and Heiner Müller

The contrast between East and West Berlin only became more stark in the 1980s, with Grüber’s highly aestheticized productions at the Schaubühne inhabiting a completely different theatrical universe than the leading Shakespearean work on the East side of the wall. At the Deutsche Theater, Alexander Lang, an actor-turned-director, staged a *Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1980 that flew in the face of official government ideas about the timeless humanist values the classics represent (and which supposedly reflect the social and political ideals of the GDR itself). Although avowedly influenced by Peter Brook’s *Dream* and the lightness he saw in that production, Lang thought that the different political context a decade later required a different reading: a nightmarish *Dream* in which the state uses whatever means necessary to regulate the erotic lives of its citizens. Unafraid to make drastic cuts and adopting a performance style notable for relying as much on the actors’ physical arsenal as on the text, Lang’s production was seen as shockingly contemporary. His work was described as “adventure theatre” by one critic, which in the case of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* seems to have been true in multiple senses – including the “adventure” of building a completely redesigned set within days of the
premiere. Unlike Wekwerth and Besson, Lang was profoundly uninterested in using history or scholarship to make his point, nor did he share Stein or Grüber’s investment in the text and its complexities. His theatre was more direct and purposive, isolating specific strands in Shakespeare’s dramaturgy in order to allow his actors to speak to the present moment.

In this frankness, Lang’s work seems to reflect the changed political realities of the GDR in the 1980s – a change that is nowhere more apparent than in Heiner Müller’s 1982 Macbeth at the Volksbühne (a production that has curiously received scant attention in the extant scholarship). Müller’s adaptation, written in the 1970s and performed in West Germany long before it received its GDR premiere, was the last theatre production to receive a public, official rebuke – not from the government itself, though, but from the national youth organization. But the disapproval had no practical consequences anymore. As Müller himself commented, “If they won’t even prohibit this, things are really starting to wind up.” His Macbeth offers a relentlessly pessmistic, hopeless vision of history, and dissident critics at the time endorsed Müller’s nihilism as a welcome break from an officially dictated perspective of historical optimism. As one writer put it, the production seemed to extinguish the last glimmer of hope that things might change for the better, ever. Aesthetically, too, the production broke new ground: on a set that reproduced a run-down tenement backyard with photorealistic accuracy, Müller split Macbeth between three actors whose physical movements he limited extremely, forcing them to rely on language alone; at the same time, he let Lady Macbeth, Banquo, and other roam freely, only intervening when their approach to their roles became too psychologically coherent. There was widespread consternation about the sheer goriness of the show; in general, audiences seem to have found the production hard to take, though they came in droves. Müller at the time noted that this staging could only have been possible at the Volksbühne, because of the foundations that Besson had laid; in his view, the “here and now” to which all theatre is beholden includes the specifics of the particular stage and its ensemble. But Müller himself, closely linked with the Volksbühne in the 1970s, staged his final GDR production at the Deutsche Theater – the theatre Lang had left for the West in 1987, and the theatre where Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble staged its first productions before finding a permanent home. This monumental seven-and-a-half hour amalgamation of Hamlet and his own Hamletmachine was in rehearsal as the huge protest marches of November 1989 shook the country, and when it premiered in March 1990, after nearly 8 months of rehearsals, the state on which it was designed to comment was in the process of disappearing. Recognizing that whatever relationship to the extratheatrical world the production could construct would already be out of date by the time it opened, cast and director found themselves thrown back onto a treatment of the text as literature – but without an aesthetic toolkit for doing the kind of work that would have come naturally to Stein or Grüber. The ensuing chaos is extremely well documented in a rich archive of rehearsal notes. The show nevertheless played to sold out houses and was reviewed with a good deal of melancholy in the East German press – and with a good deal of hostility in the West German media.

7. Deconstructing Will: Frank Castorf’s Volksbühne

The split between East and West German critics’ responses to Müller’s production reflects a general division among not just reviewers but theatre makers in the two parts of Germany – a division that fully emerged into sight once the wall fell, and the two theatre cultures came into full contact. Acting styles were described as profoundly distinct, with East German actors being called “cold” and “analytical” (as opposed to “warm” and “empathetic” West German performers who thrived on
immersing themselves in their roles, unlike their Eastern counterparts, who maintained a dialectical distance from their characters). One frequent complaint that also surfaced in the Hamlet/Machine reviews was that actors stood for theses or ideas rather than people – that Kortner's Menschendarsteller in the East had become mere embodied commentaries on humanity.

No-one has stood for that mode of theatre more emphatically than Frank Castorf, since 1992 the head of the Volksbühne (where he installed a tall neon sign on the roof proudly proclaiming its allegiance to the OST ("EAST"). Castorf's actors rarely disappear into their roles, but as performers, they are about as physically and vocally agile as any in the world. Describing them as “cold” would seem to miss the mark. Castorf has long been an enfant terrible of German theatre – first in the GDR, where he was exiled to the tiny rural outpost of Anklam, and since 1990, in the reunified Berlin. But he has also wielded enormous influence: Castorf’s aesthetic has recognizably shaped what theatre looks and sounds like on many of Germany’s major stages. If there was a struggle between East and West approaches to theatre after 1990, and if Castorf stands for the East, then the East has won.

Castorf has always developed his long, exhausting shows in a fairly formless process of doing battle with a text (often novels, just as often classical works of drama), adding other sources and quotations during rehearsal, and challenging his actors by putting large physical and textual demands on them. In the context of this book, he may seem like a Fehling without that director’s dedication to the text – and one might argue that Castorf bridges the divide Jessner and Fehling opened up in German theatre aesthetics.

Before taking over the Volksbühne, Castorf had only directed Shakespeare twice, and never in Berlin (a very short-lived Othello at Anklam in 1982, and a radically deconstructed Hamlet in Cologne in 1989). But he opened his first season at the Volksbühne with King Lear, featured further Shakespeare productions as prominently in subsequent seasons (Andreas Kriegenbrug’s Othello the next year, Johann Kresnick’s Macbeth in 1995), and launched a major Shakespeare project in 1999, when both the two tetralogies were staged in a purpose-built “New Globe” designed by Bert Neumann. Castorf directed two of the plays in the cycle (compressed into five shows) himself. This latter project, the first complete rendition of the War of the Roses plays (“Rosenkriege”) in German since the 1970s, has received almost no critical attention; it will be the central focus of this chapter, not least because it represents the closest Castorf has ever come to engaging with something like the historical performance conditions of Shakespeare’s time. The cycle also offers an opportunity to compare his work as a director (on King Lear) with his work as the head of a theatre and as part of a collaborative effort; and it will form a useful case study against which to compare Kriegenburg’s Othello (as the work of another director associated with the Volksbühne in those years but not involved with the cycle), and Martin Kusej’s Richard III of 1996 (as a slightly earlier history play from Castorf’s directorship, and a production that ran into trouble as a consequence of an outside director clashing with an ensemble molded to Castorf’s own aesthetic preferences).

Beyond these productions, Shakespeare has been a surprisingly minor factor in this director’s work, and has disappeared altogether in the last decade and a half. This makes Castorf somewhat of an outlier among German theatre makers, and part of the goal of this chapter is to discuss why that might be (I will interview Castorf on this question as well).

8. The Abiding West and Thomas Ostermeier’s Shakespeares

Under Thomas Ostermeier’s direction, the Schaubühne remains a special case. It is now the only major publicly-funded theatre in West Berlin (the other four are all in the East), and in its
commitment to acting approaches grounded in the observation of everyday life, it retains something of Kortner’s *Menschendarsteller* heritage. Ostermeier is unquestionably the most famous German director on the international scene – he alone has had full-length books published about his work in English and French, and his productions, especially of Ibsen and Shakespeare, tour all over the world. However, within Germany, he is a comparatively neglected figure. He rose to stardom in the 1990s as one of the prime movers in bringing new British drama to German stages, with especially high-profile productions of Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* and most of Sarah Kane’s plays. After he was appointed the new head of the Schaubühne, though, in the early 2000s, he added major stagings of classics to his repertoire, in particular Ibsen and Shakespeare. While his efforts to explore Ibsen’s realism in the context of Berlin hipster urbanism of the 2000s garnered much critical praise, his Shakespeare productions fared rather less well – although most of them proved very popular with audiences (helped by the fact that the Schaubühne was the first of Berlin’s theatres to surtitle shows in English, for the city’s large Anglophone expat community). Shakespeare has arguably been the primary focus of his directing work since 2006: after that year’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he staged a *Hamlet* in 2008 that remains in rep to this day, *Othello* in 2010, *Measure for Measure* in 2011, and *Richard III* in 2015.

All but *Othello* feature Lars Eidinger, the Schaubühne’s mercurial star, whose Hamlet in particular has scandalized and delighted audiences worldwide. All since *Hamlet* used new prose translations by one of the theatre’s dramaturgs, the playwright Marius von Mayenburg, and Ostermeier does not hesitate to cut or rearrange those texts. In *Hamlet*, for instance, “To be or not to be” appears three times – and never in the place one might expect it. Still, by modern German standards, Ostermeier’s direction is tame. One critic has described him as a “scenic watchmaker,” someone working with precision and an eye for detail but without the anarchic energy or ambition of some of his peers. If and when his shows do find something resembling that energy, it comes from Eidinger, an utterly unpredictable performer prone to interrupting the action of a scene for some audience interaction. It is that tension between an actorly energy bordering on the chaotic and a relatively straight-laced directorial vision that gives Ostermeier’s Shakespeares what theatrical power they have; but their distinct lack of a strong interpretative angle, a commitment to a particular philosophical attitude, or a tangible political perspective separates them from the kind of work done elsewhere in Berlin (often under Castorf’s influence) and rarely endears Ostermeier to German reviewers. His productions are always sharply contemporary (he once noted that his one experiment with period costumes, in a staging of Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* created nothing but problems for the actors), but they rarely satisfy the kinds of questions critics in contemporary Germany tend to ask of performances: why is this being staged now? What does this production of this play have to say to or about the present moment?

Ostermeier started his career heavily influenced by the Russian avant-garde theatre maker and theoretician Vsevolod Meyerhold’s biomechanics and a concomitant focus on the actor’s body; in recent years, he has been more interested in US approaches to psychological realism, including the Meisner technique. This shift has necessarily moved him out of what is now the mainstream of German (and especially Berlin) theatre, although it has ensured that his productions remain exceptionally accessible abroad. His work is also shaped by the thinking of the Schaubühne’s dramaturg Bernd Stegemann, who has published two recent book-length polemics against deconstructive directorial approaches, which he regards as inherently politically reactionary. It is unclear, however, that Ostermeier’s work, in particular in his Shakespeares, is any more progressive – or is perceived as more progressive than that of more radical theatre makers.
9. Shakespeare Everywhere

Castorf and Ostermeier stand for two extremes of what Shakespeare may be on stage in Berlin now – a spectrum, it bears stressing, that as a whole falls well outside of the mainstream in the English-speaking world. But the contemporary theatre scene in Berlin as a whole is more eclectic, heterogeneous, and less easily compartmentalized than these clearly identifiable poles may suggest. Although the city has regained the unrivalled status as Germany’s theatre capital it last held during the Third Reich – one director describes it as a “theatrical pressure cooker,” driven more by the artistic competition between theatres than any other city – it is not entirely clear that anything other than the sheer number of ensembles and new productions distinguishes Berlin from other centres of theatrical activity, such as Hamburg or Munich. In fact, the same directors now regularly work all over the country; with only a handful of exceptions (Ostermeier being the most prominent), new productions by all Berlin directors, young and old, can frequently be seen in Cologne, Frankfurt, or Stuttgart, in Hamburg and Munich, and in Austria and Switzerland as well.

Identifying what Berlin Shakespeare specifically might look like today, then, is difficult – not just because the profile of Berlin’s theatre world is so diverse and diffuse, but also because Berlin is now everywhere in German-speaking Europe.

Even so, in this final chapter, I will look at one or two productions from each of the three theatres to which I have not devoted entire chapters up to this point: the Deutsche Theater; the Berliner Ensemble in its post-Brechtian form, at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm; and the Maxim-Gorki-Theater. While in their aesthetic profile, the former two are elusive, they appeal to quite distinct audiences, and achieve a kind of coherence that way; nevertheless, the repertories they stage are extremely heterogeneous.

The Gorki, on the other hand, has a exceptionally clearly defined profile, defining itself, since 2014, as a “post-migrant theatre” with an ensemble made up almost entirely of first- or second-generation immigrants and a repertory dominated by new drama. However, part of its artistic mission is the engagement with Germany’s emergent multicultural reality through highly canonical plays; in the first instance, this involved a number of important Chekhov productions. But the Gorki has now turned to Shakespeare, and I will discuss its 2016 staging of Othello by Christian Weise as a paradigmatic instance of how an ensemble highly committed to a multicultural politics seeks to intervene in contemporary German discourses about racism with the help of a 17th-century play – an impulse that, as I will argue throughout the volume, recurs over and again in German directors’ work with Shakespeare.

The Berliner Ensemble is notorious among German critics for lacking any such contemporary commitments – under its artistic director Claus Peymann, the theatre seems to be stuck aesthetically in the 1980s and politically in a hazy memory of the 1970s. Yet it performs to sold-out houses more often than any of its competitors, it thrives on staging classics, and it maintains the largest ensemble in town. It scored an unexpected critical success with Leander Haussmann’s Hamlet in 2013, though, and I will focus on that production and its reception in this chapter. Haussmann was one of the young stars of post-reunification German theatre in the 1990s, but withdrew from the stage to make films for years; his return with this Hamlet saw him bringing back an aesthetic that remained close to his earlier theatrical work but also owed something to his years of directing actors on camera. A thoroughly unpolitical staging, it nonetheless was warmly received by reviewers – even as no-one claimed that it broke new aesthetic ground. Haussmann’s work thus provides an intriguing example of what might
pass for Berlin’s harmless mainstream.

Finally, the Deutsche Theater, the house with the longest uninterrupted tradition of all current Berlin stages, prominent in all the four historical segments my account delineates, probably comes closest to offering Berliners a cross-section of German theatre work. Its large ensemble features some veterans that have acted on this stage since the years of Alexander Lang and Benno Besson; it employs some of Germany’s most celebrated actors, and has long had a reputation for having the most remarkable group of female actors anywhere. Run by a dramaturg rather than a director, it stages work by an unusually large number of directors who frequently work elsewhere as well. What it gains in glamour this way, though, it loses in artistic profile: exactly what the DT stands for aesthetically or politically can be very difficult to pin down.

I will therefore analyze three recent productions of highly diverse theatrical approach and appeal – productions that in their very diversity and specific individual strengths reflect the sheer multiplicity of artistic identities contained in this one theatre. First, Jette Steckel’s 2009 Othello, featuring a white female actor (Susanne Wolff) in the title role – for its reliance on the Deutsche Theater’s exceptional ensemble of women, for its complex treatment of the performance of race as well as of gender, and as an early but major work by a young female director who has since emerged as one of Germany’s most significant talents (with a recent celebrated Romeo and Juliet in Hamburg). Secondly, Stefan Pucher’s Twelfth Night (2015), starring Wolff (as Olivia) as well as one of the DT’s male stars, Wolfram Koch (as Malvolio) and Margit Bendokat, famous as the actor whose voice remains closely associated with Heiner Müller’s verse (as Feste). Pucher regularly makes extensive use of live music and video in his productions; here, his use of the DT’s large stage and a full arsenal of technical tricks makes for an illustrative combination with the work of an ensemble of exceptionally recognizable and present actors. Pucher’s exploration of the queer logic of the play and the remarkable stage images he creates do not always sit easily with a text and an acting style that both seem driven by a hunger for punch lines – in its own way, the production shares Castorf’s insistence on bringing together the profound and the absurd, the serious and the ridiculous. And lastly, I will discuss Christoph Rüping’s Romeo and Juliet (2015), a radically playful production on the smaller of the Deutsches Theater’s two stages (the Kammerspiele). Rüping is the youngest of the directors featured here, and while the improvisatory energy and the lack of commitment to any kind of psychological realism or textual faithfulness puts him squarely within the broad influence of Castorf et al., it is unclear what remains of that influence other than its total dedication to theatricality. There are aspects of this work that harken back to Lang’s Midsummer Night’s Dream, but without the patriarchal extra-theatrical context against which that production was staged, the politics of Rüping’s theatre are far less clear.

In the days after the fall of the wall, Heiner Müller wondered why anyone would still bother staging Shakespeare. Productions such as this Romeo and Juliet may give some sort of answer, but it is clear that the stakes are far lower now than they were before 1990. More precisely, it seems that the desire to bring Shakespeare into direct contact with contemporary theatre and the contemporary world in such stagings is no longer (as it had been since Jessner) motivated by political considerations. Instead, the radicalism of productions such as Rüping’s seems disconnected from a compulsion to make an impact on the world outside the theatre. In that sense, how Shakespeare is staged in Berlin in 2016 almost looks like a return to Reinhardt’s ideal of theatre as a delightful break from reality.