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Theatre in the Arab World –
Perspectives/Portraits from
Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia*Rolf C. Hemke***Editors' note: activism and autonomy – political aesthetics
and aesthetic politics¹**

These days, few regions of the world enjoy as much presence in our media as the Arab world, with its revolutions, revolts, and wars. And there has barely been, in the reporting of world historic events, such a strange mixture of sympathy, dismay, and incomprehension, as in the coverage of what has been going on in Tunisia and Egypt, Libya, and Syria since December 2010. Arab theatre, however, is not mentioned in the coverage. The following three contributions were written with the context of the upheavals in mind, and with the awareness that theatre is often the most political and the most spontaneous of all forms of art. Hence, theatre can function as a seismograph of societal conditions (Rolf C. Hemke, *Theatre in the Arab World*, 2013)

The following three perspectives on Arab theatre are drawn from Rolf C. Hemke's book *Theatre in the Arab World* (*Theater der Zeit*, 2013) – a sequel to his journalistic and artistic engagements with the theatre of Sub-Saharan Africa (Hemke 2010). The focus of this particular book, so he writes, is the *practice* of theatre and its art-based aesthetic responses to political upheavals.² In his words, the work discussed refers more so than not to dramaturgical and directorial work on text-based performances. The directors discussed start from a text or elaborate a textual framework during the course of their work together with a creative team. This chapter, as we will mention below, therefore offers a somewhat traditional and yet distinct take on the relation between aesthetics, politics, and reflexivity. The three perspectives discussed also stand in sometimes-conflictual dialogue with Clare Foster's propositions in

1 her chapter for this volume for our historiographic and ethnographic
2 study of theatre, but we believe that they nonetheless (or for that
3 matter) offer an interesting conversation and juxtaposition. These three
4 contributions do not deal with playwrights, choreographers, or perfor-
5 mance artists in particular, but with very personal dialogues between
6 Rolf Hemke and the directors as well as their artworks. Hemke's *Theatre*
7 *in the Arab World*, so he writes himself,

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9 should not be understood as an encyclopaedia, nor does it raise any
10 claim to be representative in its selection. Quite the contrary: these
11 contributions are the result of a very subjective research and curating
12 activity that I have had the privilege of carrying out for my employer,
13 the *Theater an der Ruhr* in Mülheim an der Ruhr.

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15 These three essays reflect theatre directors' responses to politically
16 complex and violently charged situations in failed or unsettled states.
17 Their work could be characterised as mobilised and intervening thea-
18 tre. However, they do not represent the same kind of interventionist
19 performance as those described by Jeffrey S. Juris or Alex Flynn or the
20 aestheticised politics analysed by Ananda Breed (all three this volume).
21 Instead, they relate to observational assessments of more *immanently*
22 aesthetic political performances than some of the other contributions.
23 As Hemke spelled out in the preface to *Theatre in the Arab World*, these
24 performances refer to a foundational dramatic 'object', a literary text.
25 Simply because they therefore require a sensitive and often personal
26 and subjective reading on behalf of a particular and traditionally set-up
27 audience – as opposed to a politically mobilised collective (see Foster,
28 this volume) – they are therefore not of less transformative or self-
29 reflexive value. Hemke's observations provide us with a critic's analysis
30 of the semiotics and intentions motivating these stage-performances.

31 These text-based theatre performances are not political in the sense
32 of an overarching ideologically driven interventionist project, but as
33 immanently artistic and literary engagements with conflictual politi-
34 cal contexts and their socio-psychological reading by intellectuals and
35 artists. Thereby, they allow us to consider the 'political of the aesthetic'
36 rather than merely aesthetic politics. It is important to be aware that
37 while these performances are not post-dramatic and relational in the
38 sense of a ritual participatory protest march, for example, they open
39 spaces for discussion and subjective contemplation, thus combining
40 dimensions of aesthetics, identity politics, and semiotics. In contrast to
41 the settings described by Clare Foster (this volume), we here see theatre

1 projects that at times were forced to return to 'more private spheres'
 2 outside the 'open public view'. It is important therefore not to denigrate
 3 such differently public realms of interpretation and meaning-making
 4 into a less political realm – Lila Abu-Lughod's analysis of private sym-
 5 bolism and literary politics in her seminal study *Veiled Sentiments* (1985)
 6 is a case in point.

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 8 **The *Theater an der Ruhr* and international theatre**
 9 **collaborations**

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 11 Rolf Hemke's work for the German *Theater an der Ruhr* and their
 12 *International Theatrelandscapes* requires some contextualization, too. The
 13 *Theater* was founded in 1980 by philosophers Roberto Ciulli and Helmut
 14 Schäfer as well as stage-designer Graf-Edzard Habben. The three came
 15 together in the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr, which is located near the
 16 industrial city of Duisburg, a city of nearly half a million inhabitants in
 17 the densely populated and now largely post-industrial Ruhr region near
 18 the Dutch border in Germany's 'mid-west' (2010 European Cultural
 19 Capital), an hour north of Cologne. It created a new kind of contrac-
 20 tual relationship with its host municipality Mülheim. The contract
 21 made the theatre a *partner*, rather than either a commercial enterprise
 22 (the Anglo-American model) or an establishment of civil servants and
 23 state employees (the German model). This allowed it to rethink the
 24 appropriateness of common German public theatres, whose impact
 25 and outreach are often exclusive to certain milieus. The *Theater an der*
 26 *Ruhr* became what *Berliner Festspiele* director Thomas Oberender calls
 27 an *Institution of New Type*; an organisation responding to a missing link
 28 between artistic practice and organisational structure. The 1988 'Theatre
 29 of the Year' (*theater heute*) is a forerunner for public-private partnership
 30 alternatives to the highly structured German theatre system and to
 31 international theatre collaboration, now commonplace in much con-
 32 temporary theatre (cf. Matthias Lilienthal, ITI, HAU).³

33 The founder of the theatre, Italian émigré Roberto Ciulli, did so in
 34 order to enable his ensemble to enjoy a more flexible and less bureau-
 35 cratic implementation of their arguably most interesting ongoing
 36 projects: the so-called '*International Theatrelandscapes*', an exchange pro-
 37 gram that was supposed to address the questionable lack of sustainabil-
 38 ity inherent in often short-lived cooperations of theatre festivals. This
 39 project has brought the *Theater* to well over 40 countries of the world,
 40 and established pioneering co-productions with Yugoslavian Roma and
 41 Sinti, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, to name but a few.⁴

1 While the *Theater an der Ruhr* was granted a lease for a permanent thea-
 2 tre house, a former Roman spa in the picturesque Raffelberg park, by the
 3 city of Mülheim, it did not become one of the many typically German
 4 city-theatres. German cultural policies operate on the basis of a federal
 5 system. In other words, all state expenses for ‘cultural activities’ are chan-
 6 nelled through three political entities: the Federal Government (*Bund*), the
 7 Federal States (*Länder*), and the municipality. This is significant in so far as
 8 more than half of the annual ten billion euros of cultural subsidies derive
 9 from each of the 16 Federal States and not from the central government;
 10 and with regard to theatre, this is even more drastic: more than 60 per
 11 cent of all theatre subsidies derive from the nearly 12,000 municipalities
 12 and more than 2,000 cities. This highlights the significant political role
 13 (*Kulturhoheit*) attributed to such decentralised municipal administration
 14 of theatre funding and it serves as a prelude to explaining the prevalence
 15 of the German city-theatre as well as the marginality of alternatives to it.
 16 As part of a city-theatre, Ciulli and his companions would have become
 17 employees of the city (*de facto* civil servants) in a politically nominated
 18 institution. They would have moved to other houses soon thereafter
 19 with new ensembles coming in on fixed-time contracts. Budgets would
 20 be set by the city and bound to their official *d’accord*. This is how many
 21 of the more than 150 stages are run in Germany. Instead, Ciulli and his
 22 co-founders came up with a hitherto unheard of contractual gesture:
 23 they negotiated with the city to become joint shareholders of a company,
 24 instead of being civil servants. The *Theater an der Ruhr* thus became a non-
 25 profit shared enterprise between three artists and the city of Mülheim.

26 The *Theater an der Ruhr* created an *Institution of New Type*: less bureau-
 27 cracy, more space and flexibility for art and innovation. They minimalised
 28 the administrative apparatus to just a handful of people, and foregrounded
 29 the acting ensemble and artistic directorship with an explicit central aspi-
 30 ration: travel. As its director and founder, Roberto Ciulli, articulated:

31 we founded the theatre for the stranger, in every country: To the peo-
 32 ple in Chile or Turkey, where we staged plays about torture in prisons,
 33 or to those in Iran who suffered from censorship. Fundamentally, the
 34 Theatre an der Ruhr has a vision for its international programme that
 35 seeks to achieve one thing: the encounter between strangers and the
 36 encouragement to engage with their experience, at home, elsewhere,
 37 internationally. Therefore, we don’t do what is classically understood
 38 foreign cultural politics, that is to say, to export German theatre
 39 elsewhere, or to import Kazach theatre to Germany. We don’t resur-
 40 rect national identities. Instead, we harness the potential of theatre
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1 to cultivate cosmopolitans. (Annette Heilmann 1999: 44–45; Bartula
2 and Schroer 2001: 87–90)

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4 For a long time, Ciulli acted as a quasi-cultural diplomat at the same
5 time as he directed the theatre's productions. Yet over time and as he
6 got older, he decided to outsource some of his personal networking. Rolf
7 Hemke's role in the theatre facilitates the international exchanges of the
8 theatre, bringing him to the major Arab and African festivals in recent
9 years. Many of the artists he has been in touch with over the last decade
10 have also been invited to the *Theater an der Ruhr*, such as the authors
11 mentioned in this contribution.

12 As Thomas Engel, the director of the International Theatre Institute
13 (Berlin) writes in his foreword to Hemke's volume:

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15 It is over two years since the Arab Spring ignited in [the Arab cultural
16 area and] field of tension; hope for new and more just social structures
17 now lies with the various insistent forces in the bloody battle. No time
18 for art, maybe? Wrong: artists and intellectuals have been driving
19 forces in the search for identity and mobilisation of the reform move-
20 ment. Theatre gave a means of expression to longing and hope, and
21 stood uncompromisingly on the side of those who rebelled.

22 In Germany, the interest in this social transition process is great,
23 but there is an overarching lack of knowledge of the theatre and
24 its stakeholders. [Rolf Hemke provides these theatre people] with a
25 chance to speak, to write down their thoughts about the world and
26 their country, and [to] explain what drives them to create theatre,
27 so passionately and obsessively, whilst gambling with their lives. We
28 would like to find active partners for these people in Germany. Rolf
29 Hemke's work aims to serve that purpose.

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31 Rolf Hemke's book *Theatre in the Arab World* appeared in two bilingual
32 publications, German/English and French/Arabic.

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36 **Issam Bou Khaled – a fight against the absurdity of his own**
37 **existence**

38 *(translation from German by Andrea L. Schmidt)*

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40 'In my opinion, the greatest catastrophe today is that our everyday
41 life has become so absurd. The people live this war with a certain