

The World According to Herbert Fritsch



Figure 1. The mustard tycoon and his family. From left: Bastian Reiber, Wolfram Koch, Harald Warmbrunn, Hans Schenker, and Sophie Rois in Arnold and Bach's Die (s)panische Fliege, directed by Herbert Fritsch. Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, 2011. (Photo by Thomas Aurin)

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Conventional wisdom has it that Germans are not funny. Brooding, tragic, melancholy, yes; but comic? Which makes it all the more remarkable that Europe's most audacious director of farce is German.

Herbert Fritsch became one of the hottest directors in the German-speaking world in 2011 at the tender age of 60, after a long career as a leading actor at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz under the directorship of Frank Castorf. As a member of the ensemble between 1993 and 2007, Fritsch starred in over a dozen productions and was regularly described as an *Extremchauspieler* (extreme actor)—a wild, intoxicating, exhibitionistic ham and scene-stealer, “revered by some, despised by others” (Becker 2011).¹ But in 2007, he and Castorf had a falling out. Fritsch turned to directing in theatres outside Berlin. In 2011, two Fritsch productions, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* from Theater Oberhausen and Gerhart Hauptmann's comedy *The Beaver Coat* from Mecklenburgisches Staatstheater Schwerin, were selected for the most prestigious theatre festival in the German-speaking world, the Berlin Theatertreffen. Ibsen's domestic drama was transformed into a Gothic horror-comedy-thriller-melodrama while the Hauptmann was hailed as an “over-the-top [...] declaration of war against Naturalism and authorities of all kinds” (Landmann 2011). That same year, Castorf invited Fritsch back to the Volksbühne where, able to make whatever he wanted, Fritsch opted to design and direct a 1913 boulevard comedy that deliberately challenged the political vernacular for which the Volksbühne had become famous. He set *Die (s)panische Fliege* (The Spanish Fly),² an otherwise throwaway 1913 sex farce by Franz Arnold and Ernst Bach, on a giant, undulating Persian rug that covered the Volksbühne's huge stage; a trampoline was hidden among the rug's upstage folds, so that when characters entered they would jump from the crest of the rug onto the trampoline, bouncing headlong onto the stage. The play centers around a rich mustard tycoon, his puritanical wife, and his panic at the likelihood that a Spanish dancer (the title character), with whom he had a one-night stand years earlier, will show up on his doorstep. (Like Godot, she never appears.) In Fritsch's hands, a comedy about the most quintessentially bourgeois mode of (self-)deception, sweeping things under the rug (a cliché in both German and English), became instead about people being swept under that same rug. Underlining the play's satirical *raison d'être*, the production's overwrought theatricality, extravagant costumes, gravity-defying pratfalls, frenzied mugging, gargantuan wigs, and silly walks heightened its social critique by violently—if hilariously—unmasking narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy. The production remained in the Volksbühne's repertoire for six years, always selling out. Like all of Fritsch's works, it stages an emancipatory joy that springs from the exuberant de-repression of desires and pleasures bourgeois society has muffled.

Along with four succeeding pieces Fritsch created for the Volksbühne, *Die (s)panische Fliege* was invited to the Theatertreffen; he was in demand as a director all over the German-speaking world, staging classics by Molière, Goldoni, Shakespeare, and Dürrenmatt (among others), as well as operas, operettas, and original pieces for which he is credited as both director and writer. The latter are especially innovative and iconoclastic comic exercises that veer sharply from text-based theatre, mixing gorgeously discordant scenic, gestural, and musical vocabularies. All feature Fritsch's own scene design and several are based on writings, songs, and performances of 20th-century experimental artists (such as Dieter Roth, Konrad Bayer, and Karl Valentin) who, like Fritsch, defy categorization. Yet for those well-acquainted with Castorf's Volksbühne, Fritsch's very rebellion against its norms ironically marks the legitimacy of his claim to an oversized piece of the Volksbühne's legacy. Patenting a uniquely crazy, yet hypnotically beautiful hybrid of knock-about farce and avantgardist performance, Fritsch is simultaneously entertainer, provocateur, madman, anarchist, clown, and revolutionary.

Although Fritsch's hypertheatricality may represent a legitimate part of Castorf's legacy, his work steers clear of politics, both the explicitly political work that was the rule at Castorf's Volksbühne and the more recent turn in Germany to a literalist, sober, confrontational, political theatre, which

1. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

2. Fritsch's emendation of Arnold and Bach's title to *Die (s)panische Fliege* makes for a play on words that translates as both *The Spanish Fly* and *The (s)Panicke'd Fly*. In both English and German the name also references the supposed aphrodisiac.



Figure 2. Wolfram Koch on diving board with ensemble in Herbert Fritsch's *Pfusch*. Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, 2016. (Photo by Thomas Aurin)

Christopher Balme dubs, in this issue, “postfictional” (2023). This activist documentary theatre is committed to a renunciation of spectacle and excess in favor of history, simulacra, and facticity. In the post-Castorf theatre landscape, Fritsch, despite—or more likely, because of—his popularity, is polarizing, a director whose work, and the unbridled pleasure it produces, makes some critics nervous (Hildebrand 2014). Or he is attacked by those who, embarrassed by the over-the-top performances of his actors, brand him, in his own words, as nothing more than “an animal trainer” (Fritsch 2014). These dismissive evaluations are, I believe, utterly mistaken and signal instead critics’ blindness to the very dark and disquieting subtext lurking in Fritsch’s work: the knowledge that farce always announces, forestalls, and disavows catastrophe.

Rather than skim the surface, I want to follow the lead of the performers in Fritsch’s farewell to the Volksbühne, *Pfusch* (2016). In the final scene (which spreads 11 battered upright pianos across the orchestra pit), a large trap opens and a swimming pool materializes center stage. Complete with diving board, it is filled by the actors with blue, grapefruit-sized Styrofoam “ice” cubes, and they repeatedly and recklessly dive into it. The piece, whose title means botch or bungle, represents a perverse thank you to Claus Peymann, then artistic director of the Berliner Ensemble, who, after seeing *The Beaver Coat* in 2011, was quoted as saying, “Fritsch is a great actor. He’s funny and cheeky, but that [production] was bellowed—amateurish folly. It’s stupid, loud, and silly. It was frightful, pure mayhem” (Becker 2011). Fritschian folly is precisely the lagoon into which I am diving, a wondrous, frightening, disorienting domain of curious flora and fauna whose contours I want to map.

Comedy Tonight

Herbert Fritsch was born in 1951 into a working-class Bavarian household in Augsburg, Brecht’s hometown. Hanging out in Munich bars with US American servicemen during the 1960s, he became a petty thief, vagabond, and junkie who, attempting to break into a pharmacy one night, was finally nabbed by the police. As a young man, Fritsch was “programmed to crash” (Seidler 2013). Pitied by a sympathetic judge, he was given the option to enroll in a Munich theatre

school to avoid a prison sentence. In 1980, he started acting professionally in Heidelberg. But he was frustrated because, in his words, “they always told me, ‘you have to be real, you have to be really Herbert.’ I said, ‘What? I don’t know who I am’” (Fritsch 2014). Fritsch developed his signature comedic style during the early 1980s in his self-produced *Null-Shows* (zero shows), in which he “did everything that was not allowed at the theatre,” walking out onstage for 90 minutes with “no preparation, no rehearsals, no consideration beforehand about what I was going to do and no articulate language—just sounds.” Despite his lanky frame and expressive and graceful manner offstage, his solo performance, he recalls, became “a real high-frequency grimace show” (Heine 2012). In 1989, he teamed up for the first time with Castorf, the “first director who really appreciated” his style of performance (Fritsch 2014). For his debut with Castorf at Munich’s Prinzregententheater, he played a masturbating Mellefont in Castorf’s controversial production of Germany’s first bourgeois tragedy, Gotthold Lessing’s *Miss Sara Sampson*, which used the Beatles’s “Why Don’t We Do It in the Road?” as a leitmotif. It was the first Castorf production invited to the Theatertreffen (Carlson 2009:98). After Castorf was appointed artistic director of the Volksbühne in 1992, Fritsch followed him to Berlin, remaining a leading actor there until 2007.

It is challenging to translate or explicate writings about Fritsch’s work as both actor and director because critics, and Fritsch himself, invariably employ odd, whimsical colloquialisms and untranslatable compound words. This untranslatability, however, does not disguise the fact that the work itself is unusually international in its sources of inspiration and often speaks a kind of gestural and affective Esperanto. Although comedy is typically more socially contingent, topical, and local in its references than serious drama, Fritsch’s influences and points of reference—the Marx Brothers, Jacques Tati, Monty Python, Laurel and Hardy, Karl Valentin, Jerry Lewis, Peter Sellers, Charlie Chaplin, and Lioriot (Bernhard-Viktor Christoph–Carl von Bülow)—represent an unusually cosmopolitan and, stylistically, wildly dissimilar crew. To these sources of inspiration must be added the historical avantgarde, both the early 20th century and post–World War II avantgardes: Dada and Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Fluxus, the Vienna Actionists, and other unorthodox insurgencies. Fritsch’s pieces trespass borders and defy generic categories by mixing high art and entertainment, comedy and tragedy, hilarity and violence.

Although Fritsch’s own pieces credit him as author, director, and scene designer, each is developed in collaboration with his acting ensemble, plus musicians who always play active roles in rehearsal and performance. Since he began directing, he has trained and developed a group of virtuoso, scenery-chewing actors (including Wolfram Koch, Bastian Reiber, Carol Schuler, and Florian Anderer) who perform in many of his shows and are uniquely capable of realizing—or rather, cocreating—Fritschian slapstick. Fritsch accordingly (and perhaps too modestly) sees his work as “a liberation from directing. It is the work of the actors who develop a piece together. The confrontations among themselves, the electricity and the tension they generate, those are the decisive points. And holding each other up. [...] That makes for a strong feeling for life” (in Ernst 2019). That passionate feeling for life guarantees that Fritsch’s work, like a bloody mary or a screwdriver, produces a vertiginous light-headedness that makes even staid audiences giddy.

Although I cannot quite unmix the Fritschian cocktail, I will try to itemize the recipe by detailing its ingredients—scene design, costumes, and music—fearing that this unmixing might (alas!) rob the elixir of its potency.

With Fritsch, the visual always comes first. Even before he started directing, Fritsch was a visual artist and since 2000, he has been engaged in an ongoing intermedial art project based on Shakespeare entitled *hamlet_x* (<http://www.hamlet-x.de/>). Its components include film, video, photography, drawing, and a graphic novel version of *Hamlet*, coauthored with dramaturg Sabrina Zwach, with 111 panels related to scenes from the play. This novel also serves as the basis for 55 short videos (as of 2021) featuring performances by a host of celebrated and less celebrated actors.

Given Fritsch’s involvement with the visual arts, it is perhaps not surprising that when he directs a performance, he starts with the scenic and spatial concept, sometimes even before he knows which play he will choose. As Fritsch explains, “the first thing I think: ‘empty space.’ With nothing, show

everything” (Fritsch 2014). Typically, his designs feature a dynamic play of deeply saturated colors; geometric forms; flat, shiny, or shimmering surfaces; washes of brightly colored light; concealed trampolines; flying equipment; and gigantic, out-of-scale props and pieces of furniture. Some of his works, such as *Murmel Murmel* (Volksbühne, 2012), use dynamic scenic elements to reimagine a traditional wing-and-drop set as a funhouse of brightly colored frames constantly closing in and moving out. *Der die mann* (Volksbühne, 2015) features a giant yellow gramophone horn and a set of bright red stairs, rotating on the Volksbühne’s turntable. For his realization of Dürrenmatt’s *The Physicists* (Schauspielhaus Zürich, 2013), the entire stage is an enormous, padded cell with bile-green walls and floor, locking in the three titular, deluded, homicidal scientists. They are guarded by a psychotic Frau Doktor and nurses sporting *Flying Nun* cornettes, who are no saner than their charges. His *Der Freischütz* (Zurich Opera, 2016) turns Weber’s rustic opera into a hallucinatory, German folklore kitsch explosion, complete with a psychedelic, flower-wallpapered forester’s hut.

Fritsch’s ability to construct surrealist stage pictures is facilitated by Victoria Behr’s larger-than-life costumes that magnify period details to the point of absurdity. Behr installed a birdcage (with bird!) in the oversize woman’s Louis XVI–style wig sported by the manservant Alain (*The School for Wives*, Deutsches Schauspielhaus, 2014); and dressed 1960s-style *Mad Men*–type in brightly colored rubber suits, shiny transparent masks, and lacquered hair (*der die mann*, Volksbühne, 2015). Her candy-colored costumes and wigs are often so elaborate and gargantuan, so overloaded with frilly details that they make the actors look like grimacing scarecrows encased in ruffled sarcophagi. These oversize costumes almost demand that the resulting awkwardness or artificiality of their movement be transformed by Fritsch into lumpy, looney, slithery choreography.

The ceaseless dance of Fritsch’s performers is ceaselessly attended by a sound carpet, i.e., musical underscoring, that runs in counterpoint with the action onstage. Music’s ubiquity and pivotal significance mean that his works are intelligible only as music theatre. Fritsch himself has long been adamant that the term “spoken theatre” (*Sprechtheater*) is odious and that music theatre is a tautology. All theatre, he argues, is music theatre because language, with its rhythm and melody, is always music, just as all “acting is singing and dancing” (Fritsch 2014). Because Fritsch has always loved “the extreme gestures of opera and ballet,” he told his *Doll’s House* cast that even without singing, they should “make it an opera” (in Kirschner 2013). Despite this directive, his work is invested less in reinventing opera than in musicalizing speech and enwrapping it in instrumental music in unpredictable ways to create “a new culture of using speech onstage.” This style is intensely musicalized but “not recitative,” and he points to Chinese opera as a possible model for “this singing-speaking” (Fritsch 2014).

To realize the complex musicality of his work, Fritsch collaborates most frequently with Ingo Günther, composer, keyboardist, musical director, and actor, whose sometimes pungent, sometimes noisily percussive scores are strongly inflected by musical minimalism while maintaining a jazz-inflected pop sensibility. Perhaps the most extreme example of Günther’s machine music is an interlude for the 11 pianos in *Pfusch* that requires actors to hammer away rhythmically at the keyboards for 12 minutes, producing slowly changing harmonies that suggest a maddening, infernal, fortissimo recomposition of Steve Reich’s *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* crossed with Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps*. Its obsessive, mechanical use of repetition recalls Henri Bergson’s basic law of comedy: “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” ([1900] 1921:29). In concert with Günther’s musical minimalism, Fritsch’s physical comedy converts humans to machine-like creatures, a conversion that is as unnerving as it is droll. Most of Fritsch’s productions feature extended solo comic routines of repeated twitches, wincing, shudders, contortions, and double-takes that become extended, minimalist themes and variations. In these rhapsodies, gestural and musical repetition, running neck and neck, show themselves to be antilogical and maniacally compulsive, “a kind of scorched-earth approach to aesthetics,” as Arved Ashby puts it. But as if by magic, the Fritschian alchemy humanizes the machine-like character of repetition, while still “disconnect[ing] the action from evident reason and rationality” (Ashby 2005:247). Because

Fritsch's gestural rhapsodies are only intermittently pantomimic, they become a kind of pure performance poetry entwined with musical scoring that refuses to play the subordinate, illustrative role usually given to incidental music. This entwinement momentarily detaches performance from representation and the communication of preconceived meaning. As Fritsch explains, his work is "not about getting a message across, it's about getting across the message the medium is telling us" (in Ernst 2019). In other words, it's about theatre exercising its fully musicalized, constantly changing theatricality.

Fritsch's production of the human as not-quite machine (as mirrored in Günther's minimalist scores) is evident not only in the gestural rhapsodies he engineers but also in his habitual multiplication of near clones. All his own pieces feature multiple versions of selves, such as the seven Beatle-lookalikes in *der die mann*, the 11 ballerinas in *Murmel Murmel*, the 13 swimmers in *Pfusch*, or the 23 janitors in *Zelt* (tent) (Burgtheater Wien, 2019). The uniform identity of Fritsch's packs of selves is often redoubled by his use of highly reflective stage surfaces that turn floors into mirrors and further multiply selves. This replication of the clones—which speaks to the problems and challenges of forging community in the 21st century—is always emphasized by the near-identical costumes that usually suppress gender difference. The suppression is especially noticeable because of the way it both emphasizes and undermines the unambiguous gender identity of the Beatle or ballerina being modelled. Most important, these packs of clones seem conscious of and slightly uncomfortable with their near identity. As a result, they are always making a noticeable effort to blend, to be one of the crowd, which also requires that they forget their theatricalized attire and mode of behavior. Reluctant or unable to conform, a performer will often, seemingly involuntarily, step forward to take stage and launch a comic or musical routine, only to be scolded by the others for the failure, or refusal, to disappear into the pack. These packs also pay perverse homage to the sometimes unnervingly cheery uniformity of the chorus line in musical theatre, as epitomized by the mechanical precision of the Tiller Girls or a Busby Berkeley chorus line. They also illustrate the proliferation of doppelgängers, doubles who pop up in Fritsch's productions of *Komödie der*



Figure 3. The ensemble as identical Vegas crooners in Herbert Fritsch, *Wer hat Angst vor Hugo Wolf?*, Schauspielhaus, Zürich, 2016. (Photo by Matthias Horn)

Irrungen (*The Comedy of Errors*, 2017), Molière's *Amphitryon* (2019), and Feydeau's *Champagnol wider Willen* (*Champagnol in Spite of Himself*; 2018), and like the packs, reveal individualism's inherent contradictions.

Although my description of Fritsch's music theatre might make it seem dauntingly esoteric, Fritsch is one of the few acclaimed German directors unafraid to be called an entertainer (*Unterhaltungskünstler*) or maker of boulevard theatre (Bazinger 2012). Indeed, he prides himself on making "full-steam-ahead theatre," which is "radically artificial, slapstick, [and] anarchic," and deliberately embraces popular music (Becker 2011). In addition to underscoring, song is always foregrounded in Fritsch's productions, as if he were taking the conventions of operetta and musical theatre and overlaying them on absurdist drama. This technique is reminiscent of Swiss-born Christoph Marthaler's, except that Marthaler's farce-inflected music theatre unfolds in a melancholic slow-motion and is much further removed from popular idioms than Fritsch's. Set in decrepit, drab, office-like spaces, Marthaler's plays drift in a kind of suspended animation, their content more abstract, cryptic, and nightmarish than Fritsch's. Correspondingly, the songs that punctuate Marthaler's works, mostly lieder, madrigals, folk, and cabaret songs, represent a more elite repertoire performed in wistfully polyphonic arrangements, different from the propulsive concatenations of pop, rock, and minimalist musical vernaculars that give Fritsch's productions their heartbeat.

Unlike Marthaler's mix of esoteric and popular, Fritsch's is sometimes discomfiting to the German guardians of high culture who gatekeep far more assiduously than their US American counterparts. Indeed, Fritsch's addiction to pleasure and the raucous laughter his work generates lead people, he points out, to accuse him of "extreme superficiality" (in Hildebrand 2014). Despite the long history of farce as political and social critique going back to Aristophanes and its modern reinvention by Samuel Beckett (and Marthaler) as tragedy, critics and scholars almost invariably dismiss comedy and laughter as trivial. In Germany, in particular, the disdain displayed by both theatre scholars and musicologists toward the lighter muse is linked, as Susan McClary points out, to the failure on the part of "the Fathers of Aesthetic Theory [...] to recognize the Hilarious among their types, thus condemning us to unrelieved earnestness in the arts." As a result, work by directors like Fritsch, as well as entire genres, most notably musicals and operettas, get "consigned to the trash heap" (2015:30).

Although the German discomfort with theatre as merriment goes back at least to the 18th century, Theodor W. Adorno is certainly the best-known theorist to set entertainment at war with art. Several generations have passed since World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall, but art is still expected to perform a civilizing mission in Germany, where the high/low binary opposition retains far more purchase than in the US. Indeed, written into German copyright law is a classification system that distinguishes between *ernste Musik* (serious or art music) and *Unterhaltungsmusik* (entertainment music). That scheme is policed by GEMA, the government-mandated royalty collecting society and performance rights organization, which awards far greater percentages to art music than popular music (see Geiger and Hentschel 2011).

Fritsch's work makes the maintenance of these categories almost impossible. Like a funhouse reflection of the Broadway musical, it turns classic source materials (plays, stories, songs, or other texts) into fodder for entertainment by soaking them in music and visuals that have a clearly defined, if complex affective force. His fondness for popular music theatre ensures that his evening of art song, *Wer hat Angst vor Hugo Wolf?* (*Who's Afraid of Hugo Wolf?*; Schauspielhaus, Zürich, 2016), turns the epigrammatic Wolf into the combined Elvis Presley, John Cage, and Burt Bacharach of the German lied. With Carsten Meyer at the keyboard and seven women singers, the piece is structured more like, and indeed sounds more like, a US American boutique musical than a traditional *Liederabend*.

Perhaps Fritsch's most extravagant transformation of play into song and dance fest is his production of Goldoni's *Trilogie der Sommerfrische* (usually translated as *The Holiday Trilogy*; Residenztheater, 2014), which he made into what is really a jukebox musical based on the songs



Figure 4. Hubert Wild, center right, as circus ringmaster Obolski and Ruth Rosenfeld, upper left, as his wife Iduna. Paul Burkhard's *Der schwarze Hecht* (*The Black Pike*, 1939), directed by Herbert Fritsch, Schauspielhaus, Zürich, 2014. (Photo by Matthias Horn)

of the 1960s Italian pop singer-songwriter Gino Paoli. Fritsch's biting realization of Goldoni's elaborately plotted social satire unleashes grotesquely posturing, platinum-wigged, sunburnt bodies on Paoli's infectious tunes. The jet-setters, gyrating in front of vibrating, psychedelic Kenneth Noland or Gerhard Richter-like striped backdrops, try to live *la dolce vita*, but instead betray the pervasive greed, lust, and corruption that make their class tick. In other words, the emptiness that is all too palpable behind their gloriously musical shenanigans exemplifies the horror and "despair" that underlie Fritsch's musical comedy (Hildebrand 2014).

To realize the complex musicality of his work, Fritsch regularly mixes performers from different institutional realms. His version of Purcell's *King Arthur* (2015) at the Zurich Opera cast the prominent actor (and Fritsch regular) Wolfram Koch in the title role, and his production of Weber's *Freischütz* included Florian Anderer as a devilishly acrobatic Samiel. His original works performed in theatres, meanwhile, habitually feature trained opera singers as stalwarts of the Fritschian "artist family," especially Ruth Rosenfeld and Hubert Wild, who bring their musical artistry to bear on all their performances (*Der schwarze Hecht* 2014:18).

These mixtures of personnel underline the difficulty of classifying so much of his work. Perhaps his original productions, like the many musical hybrids of his fellow Augsburgers Bertolt Brecht, are best considered anti-*Gesamtkunstwerke*, celebrations of a hydra-headed theatricality that delight in disjoining components and showcasing both their own performative excess and the dedicated actor/singers who make the pieces live.

Avantgardist Mythmaking

Despite Fritsch's attraction to popular musical theatre, his campaign against reason, representational art, and the delineation of generic differences links him with avantgardists like Konrad Bayer (1932–1964), on whose texts *der die mann* is based. Bayer, one of the most eccentric (and



Figure 5. The opening scene of *Herbert Fritsch, der die mann*, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, 2015. (Photo by Thomas Aurin)

tragic) postwar artists, was a member of the Wiener Gruppe, which flourished in Vienna between 1952 and 1964, the year of Bayer's suicide by gas asphyxiation in his girlfriend's kitchen. The Gruppe's many "actions" include publications, photographs, sound recordings, film, a "noise symphony," and literary cabarets, which Peter Weibel describes as "happenings avant la lettre" (1997:15). Bayer's surviving work includes concrete poetry, plays (of sorts), drawings, and countless different kinds of lists masquerading as poetry (or vice versa). Most important, Bayer and the Gruppe represented a violent reaction against a violently reactionary postwar Austrian culture that declared them "insane" and "perverted" (Rühm 1997:16). Theirs was a classic avantgardism that was "antiliterary, antiartistic, antimonetary, and antiauthoritarian," attacking art as an institution and attempting to deconstruct the difference between art and life (Weibel 1997:15). *Der die mann* (the title is an untranslatable, grammatically impossible nonphrase), performed by seven actors and four musicians, stages a collage of Bayer's texts. Giving vent to his anarchist imagination inside a hard-edged, primary-colored stage design, it uses the rotation of a gramophone horn and stairway on the Volksbühne's turntable to stage a 100-minute, endlessly inventive, tightly choreographed game of peekaboo. In the last part of the piece, it substitutes a historically based free association for plot by resuscitating Bayer's contemporaries, the Beatles (circa 1964), as a gibberish-spouting, air guitar-playing, mop-headed septet.

Fritsch's campaign against reason also links him with Karl Valentin (1882–1948), the Bavarian comedian, clown, film, and cabaret performer, and "celebrator [...] of illogic, subversion and chaos" (Double and Wilson 2004:208). In collaboration with jazz fusion composer Michael Wertmüller, Fritsch arranged and directed one of his most elaborate, through-composed pieces, *Valentin* (2017), simultaneously opera, operetta, musical, play, and stand-up comedy hour. Putting the comedian's texts through a theatrical food mill, Fritsch's spectacle employs an austere yet mobile wing-and-drop set comprised of huge sheets of brown packing paper. The piece represents a homage to the same Valentin whom Bertolt Brecht hailed as "the man he learned most from" and with whom he collaborated in the early 1920s. Brecht especially prized Valentin's performance of "short sketches

in which he played recalcitrant employees, orchestral musicians or photographers, who hated their employers and made them look ridiculous” (Brecht [1939–41] 2014:59). According to one of Brecht’s associates, Brecht “shrieked with laughter” (Calandra 1974:86) watching *Valentin*, and the critical consensus maintains that *Valentin*’s performances, which aimed “to jolt his audience out of the past,” were decisive in helping Brecht develop his theory of *Verfremdung* (Sackett 1982:132). Fritsch’s *Valentin*, which features 11 actors and a 15-piece, mostly brass ensemble, has an extremely eclectic score that mixes progressive jazz, operetta, Bach chorale, and *Schlager* (middle-of-the-road Europop). Its last 10 minutes suggest that the piece is at heart an elegy for the Weimar Republic, as the brown paper borders rise and fall dramatically like storm clouds in a baroque theatre while the actors and band, seemingly oblivious to the coming tempest, march to Robert Stolz’s rousing “Adieu, mein kleiner Gardeoffizier” (1930).

Valentin’s transformation of articulate speech into a Dada sound poem is not the exception but the rule in Fritsch’s pieces. Language does not evaporate, but is used more for its music than its sense. Of all his pieces, *Murmel Murmel* (which followed *Die (s)panische Fliege* at the Volksbühne) is perhaps the most extreme, a play whose text consists solely of one German word, “Murmel,” meaning a toy marble, the verb murmur, an abbreviation of *Murmeltier* (marmot), the trench coat-wearing private-eye dog Murmel in *The Mumbly Cartoon Show* (1976–77), or more colloquially, a testicle. Over the course of the piece’s 80 minutes, the word is intoned, screamed, whispered, sung, stretched, chewed, swallowed, burped, and spit out. Fritsch’s *mise-en-scène* ensures that the audience’s focus is not on the word’s meaning but the innumerable ways of uttering it and turning it into a verbal gesture, routine, or aria. Unlike *Die (s)panische Fliege*, *Murmel Murmel* does not have what is usually described as a plot. It is, rather, the realization of a piece of concrete poetry by the German-Swiss artist Dieter Roth (1930–1998). Associated with Fluxus and the Vienna Actionists, the “chameleonlike” Roth produced a “torrent of work” in countless media but was best known for his artist’s books, such as his 1961 *Literature Sausage*, a framed, chopped book pressed into the shape of a sausage (Paoletti 2004:104). Many of Roth’s works employ found materials, including an installation that archived his daily waste as “both diary and self-portrait” (Boldrick 2015). His “most notorious show in the United States” was the 1970 *Steeple Cheese (A Race)* that consisted of 37 suitcases of cheese that were left in a Los Angeles gallery to decompose “over the duration of the show.” In this and other still lifes, Roth “brought ‘dead nature’ perversely back to life” (Paoletti 2004:109) and all his works stage a dark, anarchic, compulsive energy. They also blur the boundaries between installation and performance, organic and inorganic, art and garbage. Roth’s 1974 book, *Murmel*, like the play, is composed of 176 pages filled with the obsessive repetition of “murmel.” But it is typeset to resemble a conventional play, complete with characters and speeches—except that the only “character” is named Murmel and the only “speech” is represented by columns and columns of the word “murmel.” Fritsch met Roth during the 1980s and promised to stage the play, a promise he fulfilled by doubling Roth’s title and turning his poetry into what the director describes as a “very strict composition” of “acoustic wallpaper patterns.” He points out that “the graphic arrangement of Dieter Roth’s text creates a certain rhythmic structure” that is emphasized by the pulse of Ingo Günther’s quasi-minimalist, eclectic musical score (Laudenbach 2012). Rather than superimpose a plot onto Roth’s poem, Fritsch used the text to make “extreme emotional and physical demands” of his 11 actors. “We cannot make beautiful scenes of dialogue out of it, which would betray the ‘murmel’ structure. [...] Scenes inevitably arise,” he notes, “but the idea is to attempt not only the anti-psychological but also the anti-scenic” (Laudenbach 2012).

Although Fritsch’s discourse emphasizes the piece’s abstract character, *Murmel Murmel* is far less forbidding than one might expect from Roth’s granitic text. An exercise in theatrical virtuosity requiring athletic, hyperkinetic performers, the piece is in three parts, with costume changes between each part. Fritsch’s kaleidoscopic set is fashioned of variously colored, horizontal and vertical sliding panels that at times approximate a proscenium stage; at others, a set of nested frames or boxes; at others, a collection of sliding screens. Given its many possible configurations, it sometimes evokes an animated, three-dimensional version of a Josef Albers or Kenneth Noland painting and makes use of both artists’ bright color palettes. In part 1, the actors are dressed like 1960s trendsetters whose louche



Figure 6. *Simon Jensen falls into the abyss*. *Murmel Murmel*, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, 2012. (Photo by Thomas Aurin)

to become the fatuous mimes who annoy tourists in city parks. These in turn are transformed into parodic versions of the balletic dancers who perform with pretentious companies like Pilobolus or Momix. In part 3, they reappear as near clones in black pants with skinny ties, bald-head wigs, and glasses, each singing and playing a melodica (or blow organ), a wind instrument with a keyboard. Lined up across the stage, they become a super-syncopated Marx Brothers version of the Comedian Harmonists, the German, all-male, close-harmony vocal ensemble that was internationally renowned in the late 1920s and early 1930s. *Murmel Murmel* ends with an elaborately staged curtain call that, like Dieter Roth's own work, represents a carnival of creativity and reinvention.

The Politics of Performance

Although Fritsch spent many years at the Volksbühne as both member of the ensemble and director, his production style is very different from, and far more popular than, that of Frank Castorf or the other directors who worked regularly at the theatre during Castorf's 25-year reign. In 1992, after German reunification, as the entire performing arts landscape was being reshuffled and theatres in the former East were being shuttered, Castorf was appointed artistic director of the then-failing, former East Berlin house. He was charged with rescuing it from irrelevance (and oblivion) by putting together, in the words of critic Ivan Nagel, "a young ensemble with a thirst for artistic innovation and the courage to create contemporary, politically relevant theatre" (in Carlson 2009:100). He did so by bringing in fearless actors such as Fritsch and Silvia Rieger, as well as directors who redrew the contours of theatrical performance and radically reconceived classic texts in order to illuminate and critique "the contemporary cultural and political imagery of East Berlin, a world betrayed by its leaders, fallen into ruins, and with little prospect of redemption" (Carlson 2009:102). Castorf himself developed a signature approach that "oscillated between styles," aided by "manic" actors like Fritsch who "perform[ed] above all their own virtuosity and their limits as human performers" (Cornish 2017:116). For over a decade, the Volksbühne remained at the center of German theatre life and "Berlin's most exciting and innovative theatre" (Carlson 2009:103). But beginning around 2005 the press and the Berlin public became increasingly disenchanted with Castorf's brand of political and aesthetic radicalism. Although Castorf remained artistic director until 2017 (to be fleetingly, albeit disastrously, replaced by Chris Dercon),³ Fritsch's productions were the only ones during the mid-2010s that consistently sold out (Schaper 2015).

3. Chris Dercon was appointed Castorf's successor in 2015 with the aim of turning the Volksbühne into a festival theatre. There were massive protests and Dercon ended up quitting in April 2018, before the end of his first season (see Woolf 2021).

poses call to mind the cool jazz "swingers" of the 1960s. The action and music constantly change, alternating between solos, pastiches of super-hip quasi-pop songs, and tutti—the actors relishing the physical contortions, poses, and mugging. Most memorably, they repeatedly stumble and fall into the orchestra pit, onto a hidden trampoline, bouncing up or crawling back onstage to continue the show, their nonchalance undisturbed.

In part 2, they enter as mock ballerinas in tutus but soon shed their tutus and don neutral masks

Since around 2010, there has been no consensus in Germany as to what “politically relevant” theatre means. Even before the 2015 refugee crisis, Stadttheater and Staatstheater as well as many artists working in the *Freie Szene* (independent theatre scene) were producing work about migration and the hardships and discrimination faced by Germans of Turkish, Middle Eastern, or African descent. In recent years, a number of additional political concerns have come to fore, many of them variations on the host of issues that in the United States are associated with identity politics. In the German-speaking world there may be a consensus among theatre-makers and -goers about the values, prejudices, and movements to which theatre should be opposed, as well as about the broad social and ethical goals for which society should aim, but there is little agreement as to how these goals should be pursued. Many of Fritsch’s former Volksbühne colleagues, such as Castorf and René Pollesch, as well as most younger directors, opt for a hypertheatrical, sometimes flashy vernacular that directly or indirectly takes on political issues. Others, for example, Milo Rau and some directors/companies in the Freie Szene, take off from the seminal work of Rimini Protokoll and She She Pop and gravitate instead toward theatre of the real performances whose disbursement of theatricality, beauty, and pleasure is more calculated and measured.

Since bursting onto the scene as a director in 2011, Fritsch has remained skeptical of the effectiveness of politically engaged theatre. He has maintained, and continues to maintain, that the latter is now ineffectual, a fig-leaf, as he puts it, for politicians and audiences alike, an art that compels people to nod in agreement instead of impelling them to work for change (Kirschner 2013). “There is a lot of consternation about politics in the theatre,” Fritsch said in 2014:

We audience down here, you actors up there, always with the same catchphrases [*griffigen Floskeln*]. In the auditorium, the audience sits and nods and says, “Yes, yes, it’s all so terrible.” And the journalists celebrate the grand gestures of honesty, which, after all, are all rehearsed.

The theatrical prodigality of his own work seems to mock the understated performance styles coded as profound. “When an actor speaks very quietly and is so self-absorbed,” Fritsch says, sarcastically, “then he must be feeling it very deeply” (Hildebrand 2014).

In contradistinction to this *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness), Fritsch champions a broad physical comedy that he argues had in fact been destroyed by the Nazis. He claims (much as Barrie Kosky does in relation to operetta; see Clarke 2023) that although West German cultural policy used theatre “to work out the guilt” of Nazism and World War II, postwar Germany—ironically and tragically—“forgot to change,” maintaining Nazi norms and neglecting to commemorate and restore what had been lost. He notes ruefully that even when directing in Berlin, “some people at the Volksbühne said to me that I am doing this Nazi theatre because it’s funny.” He points out, however, that these same people then fail to ask the key question, “What did the Nazis kill? The Nazis killed humor. The Nazis killed the clowns [...]. [T]hey killed comedians who were Jews and comedians who were not Jews because they were comedians and writers. And this was German culture!” His mission, on the contrary, is to breathe new life into Weimar comedy and cabaret, “to continue with this prewar culture, where it was cut off [...]. And this, for me, is political: to give a new way of life, to give another way of life. This is wonderful” (Fritsch 2014).

Fritsch’s skepticism toward politically engaged theatre represents a useful jumping off point for a more theoretical consideration of the politics not only of Fritschian performance, but of German theatre more generally. The more I reflect on these politics, the more I return to a theorist who most likely would have hated Fritsch’s work: Theodor Adorno. In “Commitment” ([1962] 1978), Adorno famously attacks Brecht and Sartre as exemplars of the ineffectiveness and bad faith inherent in the well-intentioned work of engaged, but ultimately naïve leftists. Adorno’s objections are twofold. The more obvious one concerns his antipathy to what he considers the redundant didacticism of most committed art, for which he borrows “the American phrase ‘preaching to the converted.’” As he wrote 60 years ago (presciently sounding like Fritsch), “[i]n Germany, commitment often means bleating what everyone is already saying or at least secretly wants to hear” ([1962] 1978:308, 317). Adorno’s second and more complex objection concerns the always already compromised, rationalized, instrumentalized status of committed art. “Works of art which by their existence take the side

of the victims of a rationality that subjugates nature”—works that advocate for the oppressed—“are even in their protest constitutively implicated in the process of rationalization itself” (315). The starker the moral, the more lethally it is contradicted by the vehicle that communicates it. “The notion of a ‘message’ in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world: the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners” (317). In other words, what Adorno calls “politically radical art” requires both “lecturer” and listener to disown their knowledge of the contract that enables such art’s articulation in the first place, yet disables it even before it can be pronounced.

In contradistinction to committed art, Adorno endorses autonomous art, especially the decidedly unpolemical works of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, which for Adorno testify to the migration of “politics [...] into autonomous art.” The political force of autonomous artworks lies not in their subject matter or message, “the totality of their effects, but their own inherent structure” as “nonconceptual objects” (318, 317) or articulation of what Adorno calls “the unspeakable” ([1970] 2002:32). For Adorno, Beckett is the master of speaking the unspeakable, whose “incomprehensibility,” obliteration of meaning, and skill at murmuring the “name of disaster [...] silently” make him unique ([1981] 2000:322, 327). Beckett reappears in Adorno’s unfinished *Aesthetic Theory*, in which Adorno takes up the question of utopia more directly than in his earlier work, admitting that the obliteration of meaning, that is, “the absolute negativity of collapse,” provides a catastrophic enunciation of utopia, which, because it “is blocked by the real functional order,” can only be conceived negatively, lest it “betray [utopia] by providing semblance and consolation” ([1970] 2002:32). Importantly, this negative utopia is not a delusion or instance of false consciousness but “the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of utopia—that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise—converges with the possibility of total catastrophe” (33). Paradise and catastrophe: each is always already inscribed in the other. Writing in the late 1960s, Adorno was doubtlessly thinking of nuclear apocalypse, which even today remains a persistent possibility. But in the 21st century this threat must now be multiplied by the reality of climate change, and the persistence of Covid-19, and other plagues to come, which gives Adorno’s doomsaying new currency.

Although I know that applying (i.e., instrumentalizing) Adorno represents a betrayal, I cannot help but calling him as a character witness for Fritsch, whose work, I believe, can be read as a reconceptualization of Beckett. I am thinking here not that Fritsch elaborates on Beckett (how could one possibly elaborate on Beckett’s expostulation and performance of meaninglessness?), but that he translates Beckett into performance. While Beckett’s articulation of the name of disaster is effected through writing, Fritsch’s medium, live theatre, is much less permanent. However, like Beckett, Fritsch inscribes opposites within each other and in his case, hilarity opens the gate to paradise. With Fritsch, catastrophe is sidesplitting. In other words, like the great comedians who inspired him, Fritsch uses the theatre to luxuriate in absurdity. Of course, Beckett too was a comic writer whose *Waiting for Godot* (1953) deliberately calls up the ghosts of Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, and other immortal comic duos. His *Film* (1965), moreover, stars Buster Keaton, one of the silent film comic greats. Indeed, Beckett’s works are littered with the debris of classic comedy. In the case of both Beckett and Fritsch, hilarity, like meaninglessness, is relational, requiring an entente between performer and spectator, and like meaninglessness, elucidation destroys it. Yet how, in the context of my argument, can I refrain from trying to explain Fritsch’s declaration of catastrophe?

Tenting Tonight on the Old Camp Ground

As a final example of Fritschian contradiction, I turn to *Zelt*, a valedictory, apocalyptic music theatre piece that premiered in 2019 at the Wiener Burgtheater at the end of the artistic directorship of Karin Bergmann. *Zelt*, a collaboration with composer/conductor/electric violinist Matthias Jakisic, is speechless—its only text consists of two lines from the recognition scene of Richard Strauss’s *Elektra* sung in a refulgent falsetto by Hubert Wild a few minutes into the piece. Although *Zelt*’s 95-minute action involves the preparation for and aftermath of two performances, one human, the other

nonhuman, its real subject is the theatre itself as a site of work, play, fantasy, machinery, and dreams. With a cast of 23 people, as well as Jakisic, and 16 tents, *Zelt* is set on an empty stage, with a shiny, mirror-like, blue-green polished floor. It is unique among Fritsch's original pieces because although the actors' performances exploit comic rhythms and gestures and incorporate comic routines, most of *Zelt* is oddly unfunny, as if the humor had been deliberately drained out of it. Although the performance unfolds at a glacial pace, it has a more clearly recognizable plot than Fritsch's other original pieces and is structured like a three-act play, plus prologue and epilogue. It tells a story of a camping trip, but it could just as well be about the end of the world, or the end of life. It is narrated not only through the activities of people and tents, but also through the constantly changing, evocative, and sometimes radiantly garish lighting (designed by Friedrich Rom). To answer the question, "why tents?" I might reference the persistent European refugee crisis and the impermanence of all shelter. Or I might point to Ernst Bloch's reading of a Viennese performance some 60 years before Fritsch's, that of Konrad Bayer, which Bloch saw as expressing "a form of homelessness here in the world and a detonation of arrangements, [...] with wit" (in Kastberger 2014).

Zelt's 17-minute prologue consists of a silent, slow-motion, ritual mopping of the stage by the full cast, dressed as a cleaning crew in bright green uniforms, yellow rubber gloves, and red shoes, caps, and bandanas (costumes designed by Bettina Helmi). Synchronized, they spread out around the space, sweep, congregate, march, mop, and move in formation like a squadron. As is usual with Fritsch, however, one of the actors is always slightly out of step with the others, the performer whose individualism both threatens and fortifies the community. At their exit, Jakisic enters as conductor and proceeds to accompany and direct the rest of the performance from his perch in front of the stage. What I am calling act 1 begins with the entrance of Hermann Scheidleder in traditional Austrian dress and clownish makeup who slowly, painstakingly builds a trekking tent. Then, the rest of the cast emerges from the tent, like a swarm of clowns tumbling out of a Volkswagen, sporting loudly colored, pseudo-folkloristic Austrian costumes, with white painted faces and pink cheeks. They proceed to assemble 15 more trekking tents (in red, orange, yellow, blue, green, or violet). Their work finished, act 2 begins as the lights dim (as if evening were falling on the campground) and all 23 actors sling a guitar or accordion over their shoulders and, huddled together at the lip of the stage, perform a rowdy, 20-minute, percussive jam session around an invisible campfire before being quickly dispersed by what sounds like a sudden rainstorm. As act 3 opens, the actors disappear into the tents and, presumably, bed. The tents begin to glow like beautifully colored Japanese lanterns and, because they have been secured to the fly system with lift lines, they fly gently into the air, dancing up and down in a graceful, magical, unaccompanied five-minute ballet. The sky brightens and the tents slowly descend to the ground, as if to offer an escape hatch for the human performers who seem to — but could not possibly — be sleeping within the flying tents. After a pause, the epilogue begins as the tents ascend one last time. In their wake, 17 heads are seen scattered across the empty stage floor, wearing white fright wigs and makeup, floating on what seems to be a smooth-as-glass, Caribbean-blue sea that stretches to infinity. Their eyes dart about in alarm as a searchlight illuminates them one by one and the curtains slowly close.

Zelt's final tableau acts as a kind of negative *deus ex machina* that causes one to rethink everything that has gone before. In this case, the gods do not descend but rather are the ones left behind as their empty vehicles rise back up into the heavens. This devastating, five-minute tableau has such astonishing power on account of its overpowering beauty and horror, or to borrow Adorno's lexicon, its enunciation of both paradise and catastrophe. It stands in mute contrast to the rest of the piece, which, except for the concert, is more about the making of performance than performance itself, more about preparation than actuality, misadventure than achievement. And while theatre has long been used both to produce and problematize the audience as collective, *Zelt*'s synchronization of a large cast of nameless figures shows that onstage labor too is inextricably entwined with the conundrum of individual and group, soloist and team, uniqueness and anonymity. As Michael Laages notes, "this is pure overwhelming theatre, [...] no joke, but rather a limitless fantasy about the collective and about all collectives in the theatre" (2019).



Figure 7. The ensemble displaying their handiwork. Herbert Fritsch's *Zelt*, Burgtheater Wien, 2019. (Photo © Reinhard Werner, Archiv Burgtheater)

The interpretation of a textless, mostly abstract theatre piece is always an iffy business. Yet I am compelled to marshal a reading of *Zelt* because when I saw it in April 2019, I felt as if I had been knocked into a delirium. Other great performances I'd seen had from the beginning signaled their momentousness, but *Zelt* caught me unawares. Its beauty and opulence were unmistakable but during the lengthy construction of the tents, the question of meaning seemed to become irrelevant. Then when the impromptu concert began, I was hypnotized by the piece's spellbinding, insane vitality. So I spent two years trying to piece it back together to understand the unintelligibility it seems to radiate, an unintelligibility I experienced as deeply, wildly pleasurable.

Zelt's prologue is a highly aestheticized translation of the tedious, backbreaking labor required to keep the shimmering stage floor spotless. The succeeding three-act play presents a protracted series of quasi-mishaps during the performers' construction and occupation of their temporary shelters. The musical performance that interrupts the action is a strangely wonky affair. After overcrowding the stage with a throng of guitars and accordions, the campers, in concert—but not in concert—raise their instruments and batter away at them rhythmically. The only problem is that they don't know how to play them, or at least, don't play them as they were designed to be played. As if inhabiting an alternate musical universe, the guitarists pluck wildly at their damped strings, turning them into percussion instruments, while the accordions wheeze voicelessly, the players punching away at the bass buttons and running their fingernails up and down the keyboards. As conducted by the passionately gesticulating Jakisic, this musical interlude is structured around a succession of hypnotically repetitive rhythmic riffs, building to a sonic hurricane that climaxes in wild, flamenco-like foot stomping. It is in effect, a minimalist percussion concerto grosso for nonpercussion instruments, complete with mini-cadenzas for each of the players in its final section. Were the dynamics not so carefully shaped, the impromptu might have devolved into a spectacle of virtuosic ineptitude. But the music is as maddeningly infectious as the players' rock-star moves are dazzling. It ends precipitously, as if a rainstorm erupted out of nowhere, the ensemble fracturing into chaos and the players running to their tents for shelter. Peace descends and the show's real headliners, who are not the human actors

but the multicolored tents, lift off and slowly dance in midair, the protagonists in a dream ballet. These exquisitely graceful nonhuman actors return to earth at the break of day, their enchanted interlude concluded, like spaceships visiting from a distant galaxy. Then suddenly, they ascend into the flies leaving behind 17 wild-looking, seemingly decapitated heads, alone together, afloat on a crystalline sea, nightmare versions of Nagg and Nell from Beckett's *Endgame* or Winnie from *Happy Days*.

Trying to understand *Zelt*, I want to enlist Adorno one last time. As he wrote in reference to *Endgame*: "Understanding it can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility," a task that proceeds from "concretely reconstructing [the piece's] meaning structure — that it has none" ([1981] 2000:322). Exiting through the Burgtheater's sumptuously neobaroque foyer and into a crystalline spring night in Vienna,⁴ I felt that *Zelt's* meaninglessness occasioned a rediscovery of catastrophe in paradise, a rediscovery compressed, or encapsulated in its final tableau. In light of that tableau, I could not help but see the piece, like the Burgtheater's impossibly grand public spaces, as a fabulous anachronism, an imperial hallucination, a reflection on Aristotelian dramaturgy long after its expiration date. In other words, *Zelt* both preserves and cancels what Adorno describes (in relation to *Endgame*) as "[d]ramatic components reappear[ing] after their demise. Exposition, complication, plot, peripeteia, and catastrophe return as decomposed elements in a post-mortem examination" (337). Indeed, *Zelt* is almost Racine in its antilogical, postmortem embrace of the three unities. But because *Zelt's* postmortem turns the tragic protagonist into a mob of clowns, it leaves me wondering how to explain the pleasure generated by a tragedy masquerading as a clown show?

Despite the precision of Adorno's scalpel, he pays little attention to pleasure, which, along with notions like "fun" and "enjoyment," retains for Adorno an "infantile quality" that renders them dishonest and dangerously suspect, in large part because of their association with the culture industry, i.e., entertainment ([1970] 2002:14). Yet even Adorno acknowledges that "if the last traces of pleasure were extirpated, the question of what artworks are for would be an embarrassment" (13). So how does one theorize the pleasure generated by a comedy that seems to stretch comic conventions to the breaking point?

Consider one of Adorno's few affirmative references to comedy in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), cowritten with Max Horkheimer, their denunciation of the culture industry. Despite their perpetually aggravated tone, Adorno and Horkheimer manage to look back affectionately and nostalgically at the subversive power of popular Hollywood comedies, which, after all, were favorites of the working classes. Adorno and Horkheimer note that "a legitimate part of popular art up to Chaplin and the Marx [B]rothers" was "pure nonsense [...] as buffoonery and clowning" that ridiculed the high and mighty. To justify their affection, they cite "[c]artoon and stunt films" that "were once exponents of fantasy against rationalism" because "they allowed justice to be done to the animals and things electrified by their technology, by granting the mutilated beings a second life" ([1944] 2002:109–10). Although both Adorno and Horkheimer could conceivably have seen live performances by Karl Valentin, Konrad Bayer, or Dieter Roth, it is unlikely they did. These latter, however, are granted "a second life" by their protégé Herbert Fritsch who stages their "fantas[ies] against rationalism" even more daringly than Chaplin.

So what do Fritsch's antirationalist fantasies prove to me? They remind me that pleasure can never be completely expunged from theatre because, like the Road Runner in the eponymous cartoon, it keeps popping back up, even, or especially, when it seems finally to have been snuffed out. In a world in perpetual crisis, the giddiness and exhilaration generated by concealed trampolines, insane musical jam sessions, and comic gestural rhapsodies offer an inoculation against hopelessness and despair.

Fritsch's aversion to the most fashionable elements of German theatre—politics, nudity, and stage blood—does not mean that his works abjure transgression. On the contrary, he could easily take

4. Although the Burgtheater dates back to the 18th century, its neobaroque home was built in 1888. It was largely destroyed in a bombing raid during World War II and was rebuilt in the 1950s.



Figure 8. Jessica Früh, Carol Schuler, and Lisa-Katrina Mayer look on in astonishment as Benedict Fellmer wrestles the title character of Paul Burkhard's *Der schwarze Hecht*. Directed by Herbert Fritsch, Schauspielhaus, Zürich, 2014. (Photo by Matthias Horn)

his place in the tradition that dates back to Aristophanes, Rabelais, Cervantes, commedia dell'arte, and Hanswurst—comedy that ridicules and punctures the pretenses of the tyrannical, arrogant, and self-important. Interestingly, Fritsch dates his love of transgression back not to art but to his own brief life of crime: “The feeling I had when I first slipped through a broken window has stayed with me all my life: you stand in a room you have conquered.” And he acknowledges that because he derives a similar transgressive joy from every performance, he endeavors to give his actors, if not criminal energy, then at least “the willingness to take risks and break rules” (in Seidler 2013).

Curtain Call

I would be remiss if I did not elaborate on one of the great pleasures of every Fritsch production, the curtain call, which invariably is as elaborately choreographed and full of surprises as the play that precedes it. Curtain calls in Germany and most of Europe are always much longer than those in the US and typically last as long as the audience will keep clapping. But Fritsch's, which shamelessly milk applause, are the most extended and ornate of all. Moreover, because curtain calls do not require complicated sound and light cues, they remain more subject to improvisation—that is, to being the performers' spontaneous response to the audience—than any other part of the show. Rather than simply staying in character, or dropping character, the actors are granted full power as acrobats to juggle both. As a result, the curtain call prolongs, recapitulates, and extinguishes the play it follows, becoming both coda and epilogue. It is often impossible to know where the play ends and the curtain call begins, because both play by the same rules.

Because *Zelt* has a more lethal final cadence than most other Fritsch plays, I see its curtain call as a kind of resurrection. It starts when the actors crawl back up on to the stage through the traps,

wriggle their way on their bellies down to the front, and one by one, like a wave of synchronized chorus girls, raise their heads to grin and acknowledge the applause. Then they jump back into the traps only to pop up a moment later gesticulating frantically like jacks-in-the-box. After finally exiting into the wings, they return with their musical instruments and line up again across the lip of the stage as if they are going to play an encore, but instead suddenly scatter, sowing musical and choreographic pandemonium. And so it goes.

Zelt's curtain call serves as a reminder that *Spiel* (play) in German and English designates both a theatre piece and ludic activity or practice. It is thus an opportunity for actors and audience to play and bask together in the glow of the intense, if transient pleasure the production has unleashed. Yet it also serves to divert attention away from the fact that a performance must finally die and that its makers have limited power to determine how long its memory will endure. A performance may be as mortal as the workers laboring on- and offstage, but a curtain call that goes on and on as if it were never going to stop is a reminder that theatre can still serve as a place of wonder, a temporary refuge from debility and death. I have several times seen a Fritsch curtain call continue even after the house lights came up, the actors skipping hand in hand around the stage until the crew started to strike the set. The disinclination to exit made me recall that although Athenian tragedy is the stuff of history and legend, the stage even today retains its mythic, ritual identity as a sanctuary, a haven from death. Or as Fritsch puts it: "The only safe place in the world for me is the stage. Offstage, my life is a mess. Onstage, everything is clear" (in Laudenbach 2012).

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