



## On the Representation of Artists of Color in German Theatre

*Azadeh Sharifi*, 18 December 2013

### **1. Introduction**

Black artists, indeed all artists of color, are traditionally underrepresented in contemporary German theatre. In my paper I will deal with the debate on blackface in a broader context. I will argue that the criteria used to justify blackface are similar to those explaining the underrepresentation of artists of color in German theatre in general. I will focus on the structural and institutional aspects of the debate. The three major questions posed are: Who is represented on stage? Whose perspective is shown? And for whom is this art made? I will discuss the question of equality in German cultural institutions by questioning the power of definition.

### **2. Overview**

The debate on blackface included aesthetic as well as structure-related arguments. The proponents argued that blackface is a neutral theatrical device with no racist connotation in the tradition of German theatre. While the discussion focused on the aesthetic aspects of blackface and the freedom of artistic expression, it also caused a controversy concerning the participation and representation of black artists.

Besides the aesthetic debate, the supporters of blackface – mainly white artistic directors, theatre professionals and journalists – claimed that there are not enough black artists in Germany. Moreover, since there were not enough black roles in the Western European canon, the companies saw no need to employ black artists. These arguments imply one clear assumption: black artists can only play “black” or “ethnic” characters.

In my research I encountered similar arguments with regard to the representation of post-migrant artists at German national and city theatres. My research focuses on “post-migrant theatre,” a term coined by Shermin Langhoff, former artistic director of Ballhaus Naunynstraße. In 2007 she curated the festival “Beyond Belonging” at the theatre Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin. The term “beyond belonging” was a first attempt to overcome the notion of nationality-based identities and to place the criteria for art above those of ethnicity.

When she was appointed as artistic director of Ballhaus Naunynstraße in 2008, she needed something to appropriate the discourse on migration and integration by referring to the common term “Migrationshintergrund” (German for “having immigrant roots”).<sup>1</sup> The term post-migrant<sup>2</sup> was coined to describe a social state no longer defined by the process of migration but in which migration was recognized as a phenomenon of social developments. Post-migration is based on the heterogeneity of society and the diversity of the experiences of its individuals.

Ballhaus Naunynstraße is the first and so far only venue addressing these questions concerning German society by dealing with the intracultural<sup>3</sup> context, and it has quickly become the place where innovative and politically relevant theatre by black artists and artists of color is shown. I would argue that Ballhaus Naunynstraße is a theatrical space in which art can exercise a subversive force that is transforming German society.

### 3. A matter of quality?

For several years, Ballhaus Naunynstraße was the only institutionalized post-migrant theatre in Germany. This changed when Shermin Langhoff was appointed the new artistic director of the Gorki Theater. But what about other venues? Since there are still hardly any artists of color in the national and city theatres, change has to happen not at an individual but at a deeper and all-pervasive level. While a few venues have started shifting their focus to get involved with artists of color, most of the city and national theatres remain ‘white’ when it comes to artists, productions and audiences. This brings us back to the arguments put forward in the debate on blackface, i.e. that the paucity of black artists

---

<sup>1</sup> Initially, “Migrationshintergrund” (literally “migration background”) was used by the Federal Office for Population to distinguish between the German and non-German population. Over time, it began to be popularly understood to describe anyone in Germany who is not German by right of blood (*ius sanguinis*). Even third or fourth generation Germans would thus be listed as a “person with a *Migrationshintergrund*.” The term “Migrationshintergrund” was used after the law of citizenship was changed in 2000 from *ius sanguinis* to *ius soli* – the right to citizenship for any individual born on German soil. This suggests an institutionalized distinction between German and non-German bloodlines. While – or perhaps because – the term “Migrationshintergrund” stigmatizes even third or the fourth generation Germans due to their immigrant ancestors, there was also a clear need for a new language and a new perspective on German reality. By this I mean the cultural diversity that has existed since the first guest workers arrived in Germany in the 1950s. It was in light of this that the term “post-migrant” was coined. On the one hand, it refers to the circumstance that most of these artists’ families had moved to Germany sometime during the last 60 years, and they were therefore still categorized as immigrants. On the other hand, these artists were born or had grown up in Germany and had been socialized there. Their stories performed on stage thus show their view on German society.

<sup>2</sup> This term is now used by artists of color and artists with a mixed background all over Europe. See: *Europe Now*, n. d., web, <http://europenowblog.org/about>, last accessed: 18 Dec. 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Intracultural here refers to Rustom Bharucha’s use of the term as the internal cultural differences within German society.

and artists of color in theatre companies refers to a lack in “ethnic” characters, thus implying that artists of color are confined to their own ethnicity. Moreover, this argument contains an unspoken judgment of quality. The decision-makers at these venues obviously do not use the word “quality,” but when they reword it by saying that there are not enough artists of color, it suggests that artists of color do not satisfy their concept of artistic quality.

A discussion on artists of color in Vienna comes to mind. One of the panelists was the manager of the famous Austrian theatre school Reinhardt-Seminar. At the beginning of the discussion he read out a list of artists of color who had successfully graduated from his school. But when someone in the audience asked why these artists were not part of the German-speaking theatre companies he remained silent and could not provide an adequate answer.

Of course, there are a number of artists, directors and curators of color in Germany. But they are not part of the German system of national and city theatres and therefore not part of mainstream German theatre companies. They mostly work as artists in independent theatres. It is important to mention the difference between national/city theatres and independent theatres. The independent theatre scene is international, and a mixed cultural background forms a constitutive part of the identity of almost every artist. Yet there is a huge difference in funding between those two theatre systems. Being a part of the official companies and institutionalized venues comprises a number of benefits – not just in monetary terms but also regarding the power of definition.

#### **4. Authenticity vs. self-representation**

One of the more problematic arguments in this debate is that of authenticity. While opponents of the practice of blackface in contemporary theatre demanded self-representation, their arguments aroused criticism concerning the issue of authenticity. My stand is that self-representation cannot be equated with a demand for authenticity. Self-representation claims a space for artists of color within institutions and on stage, but it does not refer to the casting of roles with “authentic” or “ethnic” actors. I think it is very important to distinguish between these two arguments.

In the debate the opponents questioned the need to represent a “black figure” through the construction of skin color. However, if there is a need to deal with ethnicity on stage, why can't it at least be done by a black actor? Yet, suggesting that a certain dramatic figure could be played by a black actor should not be equated with the demand for an ‘authentic’

cast. It merely indicates that the discussion on ethnicity should be shown on stage from different perspectives. And a black actor could represent one of these.

While anti-blackface activists were lamenting the lack of self-representation, the artistic director of the Deutsches Theater, Ulrich Khuon, complained that this would lead to an unwelcome focus on authenticity.

In an interview with DeutschlandRadio Ulrich Khuon stated: “Artists nowadays argue that the idea of theatre representing the Other should be challenged. And that, instead of representation, participation of speech and performance should be privileged. But not every part must be cast authentically. This would undermine what theatre can actually afford: alienation as a new way and an extrinsic point of view enabling an irritating perspective on the subject.”<sup>4</sup>

I would completely agree with Ulrich Khuon’s argumentation, except that I would reject his criticism of the debate. Authenticity would demand that Hamlet could only be played by a young, white, Danish actor and not, for example, by an old, white actress, while self-representation opens up a space for reflection on stage.

## **5. The audience: For whom is this art made?**

When we talk of blackface as a neutral theatrical device this suggests marking the difference between the Other and Khuon’s statement on the alienation effect of blackface thus only refers to white spectators. Audience members of color are excluded. This once again resembles the broader discussions on the representation of artists of color in German theatre.

My previous research dealt with the participation of immigrants in German theatre. In my dissertation thesis I questioned second and third generation immigrants about their experiences being part of German theatre audiences. Most of the interviewees – and sometimes even their parents – were born in Germany. The interesting conclusion I could draw from their statements was that almost everyone described the theatre space, especially the city theatre, as a place where there was no room for them as people of color. I should probably mention that the typical – at least statistically – audience of the German national and city theatres consists of mostly white, well educated fifty- to sixty-

---

<sup>4</sup> “Nicht alles muss authentisch besetzt sein,” Ulrich Khuon in an interview on Deutschlandradio Kultur on 11 January 2012. Cf. also U. Khuon, “Nicht alles muss authentisch besetzt sein,” *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, 11 Jan. 2012, web, [http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/ulrich-khuon-nicht-alles-muss-authentisch-besetzt-sein.1013.de.html?dram:article\\_id=172737](http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/ulrich-khuon-nicht-alles-muss-authentisch-besetzt-sein.1013.de.html?dram:article_id=172737), last accessed: 18 Dec. 2013.

year-olds. The interviewees not only described their exclusion from the audience body but also from the performance, because their perspectives and stories were not represented on stage. When asked what they would prefer, they always mentioned a production or venue that included a post-migrant perspective, where the diversity and heterogeneity of German society would be reflected in the story, the aesthetics and also through the cast on and behind the stage.

A few national and city theatres are trying to reach a more diverse audience by offering educational programs. They – I again feel compelled to point out that these artistic directors are white and lack any migrant experience – base these programs on the image of the uneducated immigrant who needs a pedagogical introduction to the arts and to theatre in general. By contrast, the audiences at Ballhaus Naunynstraße are diverse, with at least one third composed of people of color.

## **6. Conclusion**

A 'white' perspective dominates the power of definition at theatres and cultural institutions in Germany. There is a blatant representational imbalance at German theatres. By and large, artists of color and black artists are still not given the chance to represent their perspectives on the stages of these venues. As a result, the debate on blackface and on whether it is a neutral theatrical device cannot be discussed in earnest and with sincerity. Who is represented on stage and how and for whom this art is made should be discussed by taking into account diverse perspectives and by creating the possibility of self-representation for artists of color at these cultural institutions and theatre venues.

## **Bibliography**

R. Aareen, *Art history as a common heritage. „Whose Heritage?“ Conference*, London 1999.

K. Amine, "Double Critique: Disrupting Monolithic Thrusts," *Textures. Online Platform for Interweaving Performance Cultures*, 27 Mar. 2013, web, <http://www.textures-platform.com/?p=2800>, last accessed: 18 Dec. 2013.

R. Appignanesi, "Introduction. 'Whose culture' Exposing the Myth of Cultural Diversity," in *ibid*, *Beyond Cultural Diversity. The Case for Creativity. A Third Text report*, London: Third Text Publications, 2010, n. pag.

H. K. Bhabha, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The question of agency," in *ibid*: *The location of culture*, London, New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 245-82.

J. Bloomfield, "Crossing the Rainbow. National Differences and International Convergences in Multicultural Performing Arts in Europe," *IETM international network for contemporary performing arts*, 2003, web, [http://ietm.org/sites/default/files/crossing\\_the\\_rainbow.pdf](http://ietm.org/sites/default/files/crossing_the_rainbow.pdf), last accessed: 18 Dec. 2013.

M. Brauneck, *Ausländertheater in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in West-Berlin. Arbeitsbericht zum Forschungsprojekt 'Populäre Theaterkultur'*, Hamburg: Pressestelle der Universität Hamburg, 1983.

R. Bharucha, *Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization*, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

D. Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," in: *Representations*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1992, pp. 1-26.

D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008.

E. Fischer-Lichte, *Das eigene und das fremde Theater*, Tübingen: Francke, 1999.

K. N. Ha, *Hype um Hybridität. Kultureller Differenzkonsum und postmoderne Verwertungstechniken im Spätkapitalismus*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005.

N. M. Haakh, *Islamisierte Körper auf der Bühne. Identitätspolitische Positionierung zur deutschen Islam-Debatte in Arbeiten des postmigrantischen Theaters Ballhaus Naunynstraße Berlin*, MA thesis, Berlin 2011 [unpublished manuscript].

K. Lornsen, *Transgressive Topographien in der türkisch-deutschen Post-Migranten-Literatur*, Diss., University of British Columbia, 2007.

E. Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *ibid.*, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 173-98.

S. Sappelt, "Theater der Migrant/innen," in C. Chiellino (ed.), *Interkulturelle Literatur in Deutschland*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000, pp. 275-93.

A. Sharifi, *Theater für Alle? Partizipation von Postmigranten am Beispiel der Bühnen der Stadt Köln*, Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 2011.

© All texts  
copyright by  
the authors.  
Texts were  
originally  
created for  
"Textures –  
Online  
Platform for  
Interweaving  
Performance  
Cultures" at  
Freie  
Universität  
Berlin,  
sponsored by  
the Federal  
Ministry of  
Education and  
Research.