

Theatre

Backlash in Berlin: the theatre row that puts globalisation centre-stage

How a change of director at the Volksbühne has become a fight for the city's soul



MAY 26, 2017 by: **Guy Chazan**

The current production of Goethe's *Faust* at the Volksbühne contains a gag that might seem a little cryptic to non-Berliners. A tall man with a funny Belgian accent holds forth about the show, calling it "misogynist" and "a little provincial". Faust responds by pouring a pint of beer over his head. The audience hoots with laughter.

The episode is a not-so-subtle dig at Chris Dercon, the Belgian-born former head of London's Tate Modern art gallery, who later this year takes the reins as artistic director of the Volksbühne, one of Germany's most famously radical and cutting-edge theatres. It is emblematic of the tidal wave of abuse

and opprobrium that has swept over him since his appointment was first announced in 2015 — an outcry that echoes a global debate sweeping the arts from London to Los Angeles.

In an interview a stone's throw from his new theatrical home, Dercon, 58, says he has been blamed for everything from Donald Trump to climate change. “Just to set the record straight — Brexit is not my fault,” he jokes.

Yet the old guard at the Volksbühne is still seething. “It’s a hostile takeover,” says Carl Hegemann, the theatre’s literary editor. Dercon wants to turn a repertory theatre with its own permanent ensemble of actors into a “kind of production studio and festival venue for visiting artists and companies”, he says. “The old structure will be effectively abolished.”

Few could have predicted how explosive the Berlin city government’s decision to tap Dercon would be. Last June, about 200 people, including some of the theatre’s most famous actors and directors, wrote an open letter to the Berlin Senate condemning the move. “This change represents the historical levelling and demolition of identity,” it thundered, adding, in a suitably literary flourish, “it is an irreversible caesura and break in the theatre’s recent history.”



The theatre's façade © Viktoria Sorochinski

In part they were lamenting the prospect of a world without Frank Castorf, an erratic genius who led the Volksbühne for 25 years and turned it into one of Germany’s most dynamic, innovative and political theatres. City Hall’s decision not to extend his contract and to replace him with Dercon was a bolt from the blue. “He had been considered immortal,” says Franz Wille, editor in chief of the magazine Theater Heute.

Critics sniffily dismiss his successor as a “curator” straight out of the highly commercialised London art world, a man unversed in theatre. But the critique of Dercon’s supposed lack of credentials only partially explains the outrage. On a deeper level, the row is a conflict about clashing views of contemporary culture, as well as competing visions for the future of Berlin. Should the city open itself up to the winds of change and take its

place in an increasingly internationalised cultural scene? Or should it man the barricades and fight to preserve its distinct, local identity?

Dercon is firmly in the international camp. At a hotly anticipated press conference earlier this month, he announced plans for a four-week series of premieres at the theatre's new annex at Tempelhof, a disused airport in southern Berlin, that bristle with big foreign names such as Boris Charmatz, the French choreographer, and British rapper and poet Kate Tempest. His detractors say Dercon is part of a plot to make Berlin a more marketable destination for non-German-speaking tourists and the European creatives who have put down roots in trendy neighbourhoods like Neukölln, Friedrichshain and Mitte, the Volksbühne's home.



Hegemann finds such efforts patronising. "It's as if Berlin is a village and now the big wide world is coming here," he says. Dercon, however, is unabashed about making his new domain more accessible to tourists. The theatre has to cater both for "those who can think in German and those who can't", he tells me a few days before he publicly revealed his grand plans. "And there are many of those here. If you go to Neukölln and try to order a cappuccino in German, you might not get it."

Indeed, in terms of its ethnic mix, Berlin has changed utterly over the past couple of decades. The city was once on the front-line of the cold war, its heart ripped in two by a 12-ft-high wall. The west side was a provincial backwater, the home of squatters, anarchists and penniless artists; the communist east side was grey, shabby and repressed. Since German reunification in 1990, the wound at its heart has healed in almost magical fashion. It is

now the proud, confident capital of Europe's strongest economy, a booming metropolis that likes to see itself on a par with New York, London, Paris and Tokyo.

But some old Berliners resent the changes — the EasyJet set on their stag nights, the hipster start-up crowd sipping flat whites in Mitte, the trendy property developers who have gentrified whole neighbourhoods, pushed up rents and driven out the original inhabitants. City authorities have tried to tame the forces of change, cracking down on Airbnb and property speculators. But to many it feels like a losing battle.



A scene from the premiere of the Volksbühne's 'Faust' in March © Thomas Aurin

As Berlin culture secretary in 2015, Tim Renner decided to usher in a “radical new start” at the Volksbühne by appointing Dercon to replace Castorf. As paymaster he had the right: it is one of five Berlin theatres that are lavishly subsidised by the local government. Last year 87 per cent of its €21m budget came from Berlin. But in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* recently, Renner admitted: “There is this fear deep in the collective psyche that the city is losing its identity.” Fifty-eight per cent of the city’s population arrived after 1989, he said. Around 120,000 people were moving to Berlin every year, 68 per cent of them from non-German-speaking countries. Meanwhile, each year 50,000 original Berliners move out of the city. “The gap is widening all the time.”

These sensitivities partly explain why Dercon has become such a hate figure for the Berlin crowd, routinely painted as a symbol of gentrification and the globalised, sanitised world of “event culture”. (It was an impression that he only reinforced at a public discussion last year when he half-jokingly said it was time to “think global, fuck local”.) One man poured beer over his head at a party. Another shouted “You dog!” at him in the street. “Urgh, my God,” he groans. “I was not used to that.” Much of the abuse washes over him, but he admits to being genuinely hurt by the

accusation that he is a “neoliberal” — a strong term of abuse in the liberal left cultural world of Berlin. It’s all the more ironic, he says, because “in London I was considered a bit of a leftie”.



It’s also surprising because Dercon himself rails at the politics of austerity that have made London such a harsh environment for artists. “I see it at work, I see what it does to people,” he says. “We had many collaborators at the Tate who needed to do two to three jobs, working at ridiculously low wages. And artists moving out of London . . .”

His response to his critics is a debut programme that epitomises his fluid, genre-bending sensibility — an interdisciplinary potpourri of dance, performance, film and the theatre of the spoken word. Freedom, he says, lies at the heart of the whole enterprise. “As an outsider, I’m able to lay claim to freedom, for the Volksbühne, for its artists, its audiences and our programme.”

For some in Germany, London is a place where artists are hyped and people are just out to make money

The Volksbühne has its roots in a late 19th-century organisation that offered cheap theatre tickets to

Berlin’s working-class poor. Soon it had accumulated enough funds from its members’ yearly subscriptions to build its own theatre, which went up in 1914.

The new building, emblazoned with the words “Art to the People”, was in the heart of proletariat Berlin, an area where communists routinely battled police for control of the streets. In the 1920s it was home to Erwin Piscator, the brilliant German director who revolutionised theatre with his use of film

projections, mechanised sets and complex scaffold stages. Destroyed by Allied bombs during the second world war, it was rebuilt in the 1950s using steel from the rubble of ruined houses.

The new Volksbühne became a favourite stamping ground of East German dissidents, who flocked to its subtly subversive productions. It was at the forefront of the peaceful revolution that brought down East Germany's communist regime in 1989. But after reunification in 1990, at a time when a number of East Berlin theatres were forced to shut down, its fate hung in the balance.

It is widely believed to have been rescued by Frank Castorf. Born in East Berlin in 1951, the son of an iron goods salesman, he had worked for years at provincial theatres in East Germany before taking the reins at the Volksbühne in 1992. He soon earned a reputation for his long, complex, political productions, which often dispensed with normal narrative structure and employed video and multimedia to dazzling effect. Under Castorf, the theatre also became renowned for its frank treatment of the theme of reunification — a process that many in East Berlin observed with ambivalence and suspicion. “It was the most anarchic theatre and also the most artistically innovative and creative,” says Franz Wille.

Erhard Ertel, who studied with Castorf and now teaches at the Institute for Theatre Science in Berlin, says the director saw himself not as an aesthete but as a “political activist who wanted to do political art”. “He was influenced by Woodstock, and that line from The Doors song — ‘We want the world and we want it now’,” he says. “He wanted to transfer the vitality of rock music on to the stage and communicate it directly with the audience.”

Castorf himself was once asked why there was so much shouting in his shows. “If something's burning, you don't just whisper the word ‘fire’,” he said. “You shout it out!”

Under Castorf, the Volksbühne attracted punters from east and west and became a linchpin of Berlin's punky, avant-garde party scene. “But it was also a pocket of resistance against what East Berliners saw as the cultural colonisation of their city,” says Wille. “And recently it's seen itself as the last holdout against gentrification.”

The *Faust* now showing at the Volksbühne is classic Castorf, all seven hours of it. In it, he uses Goethe's classic as a pretext to explore Europe's colonialist, imperialist past and its consequences — war, racism and terror. In Castorf's telling, Faust, far from being the great striver after knowledge and power who subjugates nature to his will, is portrayed as a slobbering old man in a rubber mask harassing women in metro carriages. In the final scene, which should show Faust's soul being taken up to heaven by angels, Castorf has him riding around on a child's tricycle accompanied by circus music.



Former Volksbühne artistic director Frank Castorf (second from left), in 1951 © Getty

It quickly became one of the hottest tickets in town. The reviews were rapturous, though elegiac. “This theatre, it’s sad to realise, is still the coolest in the Republic,” wrote Christine Dössel in the *Süddeutsche*.

Dercon seems certain to take the Volksbühne in a new direction. Though he studied theatre and worked for much of the 1980s in the Belgian and Dutch experimental theatre scene, he is best known as a curator, and some critics were underwhelmed by his opening programme.

“In the future Volksbühne, you will rarely encounter the kind of theatre where actors, led by a director, occupy themselves with literary texts,” wrote Matthias Heine in *Die Welt*. Others think the criticism is overdone. “He’s been completely demonised, accused of all the deadly sins,” says Wille. “People aren’t really giving him a chance.”

Nicholas Serota, who for the past three decades has headed the Tate, and who invited Dercon to take the helm at Tate Modern in 2011, believes he will breathe new life into the Volksbühne: “What attracted us to him is that he’s very committed to an international view of art and to bringing together the visual and performing arts,” Serota tells me.

He thinks Dercon’s appointment is a chance for the Volksbühne to explore new horizons. “Theatre has been envious of contemporary art as a forum for young people to participate in,” he says. “The visual arts have opened themselves up to performance and attracted audiences on a scale that theatre can only dream of.” And Dercon will, he says, help to inject new adrenalin into a city that has, in art terms, “lost its edge in the past five years”. Berlin doesn’t have the novelty value it had in the 1990s after the fall of the Wall, says Serota. “It’s no longer a place that people are itching to go to. Chris’s appointment is about trying to address that.”

Can Berlin become more like London, a city where art has become more accessible and inclusive than ever before — thanks to the efforts of people like Serota and Dercon at the Tate? It lacks the kind of public space for art that is as big, bold and popular as the Tate’s Turbine Hall: its museums are stuffy, somewhat old-fashioned and under-populated, its private galleries cutting-edge but niche.

More to the point, should it? Some Berliners are ambivalent about London’s success. They see galleries that have reduced art to a financial asset class for oligarchs, in a cultural scene that is international and cosmopolitan but has somehow lost its moorings. “For some in Germany, London is a place where the art scene is out of joint, where artists are hyped and people are just out to make money,” says Sven Riclefs, a Munich-based theatre critic. “Dercon is seen as symbolising that world, which is crazy. He really doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

With his interest in film, dance and visual art, Dercon has also been accused of trying to undermine the hallowed German tradition of “*Sprechtheater*” — the theatre of the spoken word — which the Volksbühne enshrines, and which is seen as a key element of the country’s “*Leitkultur*”, or the dominant culture. Dercon admits to being baffled. “This whole idea about identity politics, Germanness and *Leitkultur* is something I don’t understand,” he says. “I don’t get it because I’m Belgian, and I suffer from a multiple identity crisis, which is innate. Belgians don’t have any identity.”

The battles he faces in Berlin show no sign of abating. The new culture minister Klaus Lederer, a left-winger who has been an outspoken defender of the old Volksbühne and is sceptical of the changeover, announced that he wanted to re-examine Dercon’s contract. He later relented, but the relationship remains frosty.

Dercon insists he doesn’t mind a political fight. While in Rotterdam, he says, he was one of many in the art world who had run-ins with Pim Fortuyn, the rightwing populist politician. “What I shy away from isn’t politics, but the old notion of ideology, this ideological struggle,” he says. “It’s like trench warfare. And it’s absolute nonsense.”

Guy Chazan is the FT’s Berlin correspondent

London v Berlin

Visitor numbers 2016

London 19.9m

Berlin 4.9m

Attendance figures in 2016

Tate Modern, London, 5.84m

Foundation for Prussian Culture, Berlin*, 3.65m

Volksbühne, Berlin, 140,000 paying visitors

Paying theatre audiences

National Theatre, London (2015-16 season), 2.5m

All five Berlin state-subsidised theatres** (2016), 728,401

**The organisation that groups together all of Berlin’s main state museums and galleries, such as the Pergamon Museum, the Gemäldegalerie and the Hamburger Bahnhof*

***The five are the Berliner Ensemble, Deutsches Theater, Volksbühne, Schaubühne, Maxim Gorki Theater*

Sources: MasterCard Global Destination Cities Index; Association of Leading Visitor Attractions; Berlin Senate Cultural Administration

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