

Christel Weiler

Generations of Smiles and Laughter

For almost twenty years I have worked as a university teacher and scholar. My field of work is primarily performance analysis, the aesthetics of contemporary theatre and performance art. When I began my career at the age of twenty-seven I still felt very close to the students I was teaching. They were almost my age, they wore similar clothes, we shared common views, we met in the same places. But, at the same time, all of a sudden, I found myself on the other side, in the realm of power we had attacked so violently in our previous discussions during the students' revolt. Now I had to prove that I knew how to teach, that I could communicate my knowledge and opinions in an interesting way, in order to generate fruitful discussions and turn "my" students into professional, learned and responsible spectators.

Looking back I have to smile at how very strict I was with them. They had to read a lot, they were not allowed to bring their dogs, they were not allowed to knit during the sessions. I took it for granted that they were all present on time and did not leave the room before I had ended our meeting. Not that I ask them to do the opposite today, but it is all these rules and regulations which, at first glance, in every first session, define you as a teacher, an authority, a person who is not a student any more, the person on the other side.

At that time I didn't have much personal experience of theatre. My knowledge came mainly from the audience perspective, as a spectator. As often as I could afford I went to the Schauspielhaus to see the classics, but also I tried to see performances by the independent groups, which were multiplying at that time. So my approach to theatre was a bit limited and one-dimensional, theoretical and intellectual rather than a matter of real knowledge and understanding. Nevertheless I was driven by curiosity and a kind of enthusiasm, which I didn't really understand myself. Of course, I hope that the students also learned that curiosity and enthusiasm in my lessons, but whether they did or not,

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beginning to learn to teach for me and beginning to learn to study for them was a common starting point. It was the first step of a (possible) history full of theatre and theatrical experience.

Years later - after I had participated in various sessions of ISTA, observed Robert Wilson at work, seen many of his performances, witnessed the rise of a challenging new European theatre, moved to another university - I found myself in a startling situation. With practice and time, having had the chance to learn how to learn and to learn how to observe the work of different directors, my knowledge and understanding of theatre had increased. Theatre people asked me to collaborate, to work as a dramaturg and thus contribute to their creative process. I also spent my evenings in the student theatre at Giessen University where I was now teaching.

One night I felt somehow out of place, dislocated. Watching a student performance I had to acknowledge that the "kids" were referring to names, places and events of which I had hardly heard. They laughed at words I couldn't recognise, as allusions to whatever experience in everyday life.

The performance they were presenting dealt with their biographies and the stories they had witnessed during their lifetimes. Their laughter excluded me, made me feel different, separate from them; their laughter established them as a generation in their own right. Suddenly they were teaching me a lesson: to keep up with contemporary theatre I had to see that their history was different, that even their approach to theatre was different. It was necessary for me to realise that a generation filled with the imagery which comes from constantly watching television and all kinds of movies, living with computers and video, techno-music and hip-hop - all these phenomena almost unknown to me - had a different

approach to theatre, not based on literature or any desire to impersonate a fictional person on stage. Fictional characters appeared on the monitors and screens they used; the people on stage exclusively re-presented themselves as ordinary people. In a way they were refusing to be "theatrical", instead insisting on the recognition of the theatricality of "normal" bodies, gestures and speech. Nevertheless in all the novelty, and even heterogeneity, they offered to their audience, one could sense their talents and sensitivity.

The following period took me to Berlin where I'm living and teaching now. Many of these former students - now young self-reliant artists - also try to make their living here. Some of them have become good friends, whose work I continuously observe and comment on, or try to support as well as possible.

At the university things are different again. I am working in the theoretical as well as in the practical field now, which means that while I am still teaching performance analysis I also work with small groups of students on what we call scenic or theatrical projects. In the performance analysis courses I now also refer to theatre history, in the sense that I am pointing to the variety and multitude of performances I have had and still have the chance of seeing.

For the students my life in theatre is theatre history, at best a fascinating kind of history. They know hardly anything about it, neither the names of directors, actors and stage designers, nor theoretical or aesthetic views and positions. They come to university to study *Theaterwissenschaft* in order to find out whether they like it or not, whether they are fascinated by it or not. Only rarely do they study the subject because they are passionate theatre-goers; sometimes they even admit that they prefer to go to the movies.

Nevertheless they talk about what they have seen on stage as if they were experts, although they have seen at the most seven to ten performances in their life, and of those three on video only. So for me there is a double task: to make the students open their eyes and ears and go as often as possible to the theatre, and after that, to make them talk about what they have experienced in a very precise and considered way. My teaching mostly consists of asking questions and offering alternative answers to what they seem to know for certain. I could also say that they need to become aware of their arrogance and pseudo-know-ledge, which means a certain degree of frustration; at the same time, they should feel increasingly attracted to theatre, even if they don't understand why.

The practical work I am doing in collaboration with my actor-husband helps with that process. It doesn't aim at the staging of a given text but tries to establish a creative space within which they can make experiences using their own bodies. The students are asked to write their own texts, direct their colleagues, decide on aesthetic and theatrical strategies, observe each other and comment on their experiences and perceptions. All we do is the framing, structuring and organising of this process, sometimes offering hints, a kind of feed-back, responses and critical remarks, but the results of this work are primarily the responsibility of the students. As a rule this practical work has a great impact on their view of theatre. In doing they learn how difficult making theatre can be, how important it is to be reliable, to be prepared, not to miss a day, and hopefully they gain respect for the work they see on stage, whether they like it or not.

Although I am perhaps even stricter than at the beginning of my career, I enjoy

my age and the younger generation as well. The dramaturgy of their lives is different from mine, perhaps from ours. It is a dramaturgy of the desert. In the desert things appear on the horizon; they may be real, they may be mirages. In the desert things silt up, drip, blow away, vanish, fade away, go with the wind. You have to be a nomad to live there. But in order to build a house you have to make a decision on solid ground. Maybe they will leave the desert one day. Maybe my work will lead them to that point.

On the other hand, the experience of the next generation has been premiered in the theatre of our present lives. Like all the generations before we have to confront the fact that there is a generation following; a generation with its own ways, its own history, its own theatre, even if that proves to be a repetition or variation of things past. In all probability this generation gap is not bigger than the gaps before. The point is that it is our gap, and that at least for a while we should see what is happening in the desert, because it's from there that the future will come. We should welcome it with a smile.

CHRISTEL WEILER (Germany) was born in 1952. She has been teaching Performance Analysis at Frankfurt, Giessen, Mainz and Berlin Universities. She works as a dramaturg, for example collaborating with Gilla Cremer, and writes essays on contemporary theatre. Her actual field of research is the relationship between theatre and history, memory and forgetfulness.