

Theater Without Boundaries:
Inside and Out

A Statement of Intent
For the DAAD Scholarship

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1. Introduction

Theater is inherently collaborative: it involves the combination of various parts, such as words, acting and design elements, to create a coherent whole. The traditional approach is to view these parts as distinct ingredients, to be incorporated only after the work on each has been done separately. Undeniably, this tradition has produced very meaningful works, yet it should be possible to create theater even more focused by seeking to organically integrate all aspects of theater *throughout* the creative process. The standard process of American theater, that is, the process of specialization, is that of a machine, in which each person performs a specific task and does not step outside the proscribed boundaries of that task. In the past century, particularly the second half of the twentieth century, there have been numerous theater groups, such as the Living Theater and Open Theater, which have tried to go beyond this model and evolve a more organic process, one that is a product of, and therefore much more expressive of, the interconnectedness of people in our society. Many of these groups have been motivated by a desire to revitalize theater in our society. This is a serious cause, not just for theater practitioners, but for anyone who has experienced the power of live theater. The number of people in the latter group continues to shrink, however. Truly collaborative theater, the theater studied and practiced at the Institut für Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft in Giessen, promises to allow more perspectives to inform a work and thus expand its accessibility and significance. I believe that one of the major impediments to meaningful expression is the creative process used. At a time of polarization, separation and disunity in society, a theater that will seek to unify its audience must seek unity in itself as well.

2. Background: Problem and Past Approaches

The standard manner of production in America at the moment functions somewhat like an assembly line: each contributor performs his or her specialized task and then passes his work on to the next person who performs his or her own specialized task. An actor acts and does not consider how the lighting is designed; the person who hangs the lights does not consider how the costumes are made; and the costume designer does

not consider how the script might be improved. Within this structure of specialization, there is also a standard hierarchy. At the top is the script, which is understood to require all other elements to serve its needs. Directly under the script is the director, who oversees the support of the script by all other elements, meanwhile deciding on a specific interpretation. Below the director are the designers, who create and adjust according to the wishes of the director. At the very bottom are the actors, who work in the smallest creative space of all in this system. They must act within whatever textual bounds are set by the script, whatever emotional bounds are set by the director and whatever physical boundaries are set by the designers. These are the usual guidelines for a production process rather than absolute rules, but nonetheless, they are ubiquitous in our theater community.

As mentioned, a number of well-known theater groups in the past fifty years have undertaken a more collaborative approach to making theater. The Living Theater, founded by Julian Beck and Judith Molina in 1947, increasingly experimented with theater pieces that were created from input by all members of the group. Although Beck and Molina were unquestionably the leaders of the group, their process evolved to the eventual collective creation of works such as “Paradise Lost,” which began to break down distinctions such as “author” or “actor,” and question the assumption that to be one was to preclude the possibility of being the other (Tytell). Joseph Chaikin, a former member of the Living Theater, went on to form his own group, the Open Theater, which continued to explore what could be created from organic group work in which everyone experimented with and had input in to words, movements, actions, and design. The overall structures of works such as “The Serpant” or “Terminal” were determined by a process which constantly involved the whole group as they explored a particular theme (the fall of man in “The Serpant” and death in “Terminal) (Baker-White).

In Chaikin’s own words, “a company of actors –in relation to the work that they are performing– is a community” (Chaikin 28). His work as well as the work of his predecessors in the Living Theater emphasized the communal aspect of theatrical creation. Both of these theaters chose their works democratically or created them organically. As a result, a hallmark of their productions was the encompassing nature of their work. A freedom to create whatever they wanted to, rather than creating within

narrow confines of proscribed roles, meant that each individual could cross traditional boundaries and bring together words, movement, and sound. The fundamental difference in their productions, in which the collaboration functioned moment to moment, from those in which actors must adapt after the fact to someone else's work, cannot be stressed enough.

3. Approach

What interests me is the possibility of production which is not just *collaborative* but *collective*. That is to say, my aim is to explore performance creation in an environment where the individuals are not limited to fields of specialization. Almost any theater work is collaborative for the simple fact that it involves the work of more than one person. This does not mean that there is necessarily a close relationship between them, however, or that the work of one has a direct influence on that of the others. The collective work which interests me would be a process in which the contributors are instead involved in all aspects, or in all aspects which they are equipped to deal with (and there is a constant effort to increase understanding in all areas).

My approach will not differ greatly from groups which pursued the same goal in the past. The reason that the work continues to be significant however, is that theater, like society, is always changing. In a sense, every production must, or at least has the potential to reinvent the wheel. Because collectivity in theater has been attempted and in some cases accomplished in the past in America and in Germany, does not mean that the work is usable now. The techniques used can be studied, but the productions that would result now would inevitably be different. As times change, so must theater. What I intend to study is not the preparation for a specific production but rather a process to work on any production.

4. Justification

At the moment, there are few places where one can study theater creation with an emphasis on *collective* creation. The Institut für Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft, headed by director and composer Heiner Goebbels, is one of them. Unlike most theater schools in Germany and America, it is not specialized and it does not separate the theory

and history of theater from the practical nuts and bolts. The school has courses which span all possibilities in theater: design, acting, movement, technical theater. What unifies all of these within the program is a search for unification of purpose in all elements. All classes are taught with an eye towards integrating theory and practice, and combining the possibilities of each individual field into an all-encompassing theatrical experience.

It has been one of the positive trends in the arts to look for new approaches and inspirations from abroad. I know little of Germany's past contributions to the area of collective theater. Thus I would like to explore the past and present German practitioners in a context which embraces such an approach. Again, the theater I seek is one of unity, one that can be inclusive of cultures and ideas different from my own very specific background. By studying at the IATW, I hope to broaden my cultural understanding and thereby add to my artistic arsenal. At the same time, the IATW is inclusive of other cultures as well. In recent semesters there have been classes on Kathakali, a traditional dance-theater form of India, as well as an acting class with the American director Lee Breuer, who, along with his company Mabou Mines, co-created the recent off-off-Broadway hit, *Dollhouse*, based on Ibsen's play. Based on these as well as other examples, it is apparent that the IATW looks to examine the potential of theater foreign to itself.

As a final product, I intend to create a production, based on the methods I have learned and in collaboration with other students at the Institut. At the IATW, this is a standard practice which is not only embraced by the school, but which is the basis of the program. As there is an equally heavy emphasis on the practical aspects of theater, the Institut not only has its own stage which is used for student productions but also has connections with the Stadttheater Giessen, which hosts both the "Theatermaschine," the school's annual student showcase, and "Diskurs," an international theater festival organized and carried out by the students of the IATW.

5. Work Plan

–Oct: Assist with Diskurs, the theater festival run by the students. This will be primarily a period of observation, as I begin to explore the Institut's method's and approaches to theater, as well as the kinds of theater they explore in their festival.

–Oct-Feb: Undertake a full course load at the Institut during its winter semester, exploring specifically how the various areas taught in classes are integrated in a practical manner.

–Feb-Apr: Begin concentrated effort on developing a final project, involving the skills and knowledge learned in the past semester, and seeking to collaborate with other students of the university. Also during this period, I intend to research other major practitioners of collective theater in Germany, both that are presently working as well as that have made contributions in the past.

–Apr-Jul: Continue with a full course load for the summer semester, continuing the practical exploration of an integrative approach to theater. Also, continue to develop my work in collaboration with others in creation of actual theater pieces. Produce a paper on my practical experiences within the context of German collective theater.

–Jul: Participate in the Theatermaschine, presenting the work I have developed with others.

6. Career Goals

During my study in Germany, I intend to seek out contacts with German theater practitioners so that I might have the possibility to continue theater work in Germany, either immediately after my experience at the IATW or in the near future. I hope to continue to explore theater outside my own culture, and to explore contemporary German culture for its own sake. At the same time, depending on my situation upon finishing my studies, I am also interested in graduate school programs for acting. I would audition at the URTAs (University / Resident Theater Association), at which there grad schools offer admission as well as assistantships. Ideally, I would like an assistantship to continue the study of acting, but without losing sight of the integrative approaches I have learned in Germany. Following grad school, I would like to begin a theater group in the United States which would apply such approaches, continuing in the tradition of Chaikin's Open Theater and the IATW.

Works Cited

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Baker-White, Robert. *The Text in Play*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1999.