

# Taking history personally:

Knowing that neither memories  
are already memory,  
nor stories already history



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# Keynote lecture presented by Shermin Langhoff at the EASTAP conference in Lisbon September 2019

*Dear presidents and professors, deans, doctors and directors,  
Dear artists and activists, students and practitioners,  
Dearest colleagues,*

*Allow me first of all to thank those responsible from EASTAP for the nomination and invitation. You may have heard about my concept of postmigrant theatre, as it has already been an object of academic research for ten years. This self-explanatory concept, which I won't speak to today, was just about perceiving the reality of radical diversity after the stories of various migrations in Berlin and Germany, and about questioning how it could happen that, in narrations and representations, the mostly progressive (and almost entirely state-funded) German theatre was lacking the stories of those who came to Germany in the last seventy-five years.*

*I'll also not talk about any of our hundreds of new theatre pieces and productions from the last decade, but rather about our biennial Berliner Herbstsalon (autumn salon), with which I opened my first season at Gorki in 2013. Meanwhile, we have three editions behind us and will open the fourth edition on 25 October.*



It does not matter from which direction I am coming — the path to Gorki is a path through a historically contaminated area. Starting at the western side of the Brandenburger Tor where, at the third Herbstsalon, the buses of Manaf Halbouni's *Monument* towered, building a bridge from Berlin to Aleppo and, at the same time, also a bridge from the restored present day to the reality of war in this very city almost seventy-five years ago. In May 2018, revanchists, neo-Nazis and self-proclaimed 'national conservatives' lined up here again. They did so in full awareness of the power of collective visual memory. Who, in the face of flags and slogans, would not think of the triumphal procession of the National Socialists? From here on, the path leads past the embassies of those liberators that saved Germany from itself, past Humboldt University, the symbol of German so-called enlightened sciences, and past Bebelplatz, the place of that enlightened science's self-destruction. On past the Neue Wache, where call-up orders for the First World War were sent in 1914, on through the espalier of Prussian chestnut trees and up to Gorki Theatre, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's Singakademie that was never given to him, probably because he was assigned something he — as the patriotic, enlightened, romantic Prussian and protestant — had almost forgotten he was: the Jew Mendelssohn. Coming from east, when on Karl-Liebknecht-Street, I am reminded of what this country could have become, if it had not cowardly and maliciously gotten rid of this very great politician and his philosophical and poetic activist and fellow campaigner Rosa Luxemburg (who, by the way, was not mentioned in the official celebrations that marked one hundred years of women's suffrage in Germany).

On past the newly reconstructed Berlin Palace, in whose entrance the neo-baroque portal is currently being restored, its heraldic-imperial emblems that rekindling the German Empire's claim on world dominion; on past the carefully laid out looted Nefertiti, whose self-confident gaze heralds female dominion and who is casketed in museum walls made

of phallic pillars, as if one were afraid she could rise from the dead. On my way to work — which, at Gorki, is always a work concerning history — what do these signs teach me? What do I, what do the people who enter the theatre take with them inside? And what do we actively carry into this historical space, and thereby into a contemporary reality built on the eclectic foundation of these layered, fragmented building blocks? What stories do these bricks tell? And what do they hold back, what tears and whose blood, shed for the representation of power? Will we succeed in making the bricks into references that tell us of today, by means of yesterday? *Historia magistra vitae. Historia non docet.* These conceptions have been disputed since the ancient times; they shape thesis and antithesis concerning our dealings with history. The first maxim, *historia magistra vitae*, recognises the necessity of drawing lessons from history, of mediating these lessons and translating them into social practice — attitude as action. But how can I read history so that it becomes a productive force — that is, a potential source for conflict, instead of one that gets dusty in show-cases, secured and available but disarmed as an explosive power? *Historia non docet* rejects the learning process and seems to suggest that history, particularly that of the twentieth century, cannot hold in store any insights for us. It seems to suggest that all historical science does not contain any emancipatory potential, and that we need to orient ourselves permanently towards the present. But is this diagnosis not true — as bitter as it might seem? Are we capable of learning, or, asked differently, is history of any use as a teacher, as instruction for the present?

In times of new historical amnesia and overwriting of history, in a Berlin where the current elected representatives trivialise the Holocaust, one has to face these questions more than ever before. When I am walking through Berlin on my way to Gorki, I become part of this fragmented, contradictory historical-political space. I inscribe myself, my story, that of my grandmother Fatma, the daughter of farmers who re-migrated in

1913, and that of my grandfather Davut, great-grandson of craftsmen and scholars who succeeded in fleeing from the Circassian genocide in the Caucasus in 1864. Both were born in between world wars near the North Aegean coast of present-day Turkey, the former Asia Minor, southeast of the Dardanelles; as children of migrants, they lost their childhood early. Almost illiterate, they worked hard to enable all their five children to go to school. One of the often-quoted pearls of wisdom was: ‘Nobody can take what you carry in your head and in your heart away from you.’

I spent the first years of my childhood with those grandparents right across Lesbos, the island of female poets that, since 2015, we will forever remember and connect to the corpses of children washed ashore. Are they — my grandparents, and the corpses of the drowned at the gates of Europe — part of German history? Edremit, formerly Adramyttion, lies at the feet of Mount Ida, whose massif itself was said to be the seat of the gods during the Trojan War. (Currently, particularly there, the gods seem to have fallen silent.) According to the mythology, as the prize of the victorious Europeans Cassandra was kidnapped and taken to Mycenae, a prophet with a ‘migration background’ who predicted a European genealogy of violence, one that would ultimately stretch from ancient times right up to the ruins of Fortress Europe in the twenty-first century — as predicted by Heiner Müller — and spell its lineage out in blood. In Nuremberg, where I spent the second half of my childhood, I grew up amid the history of the Nuremberg Rally, the Nuremberg Laws, and everyday racism in the Federal Republic of Germany. I am not a prophet. In my personal history, there is nothing spectacular. But my history, as one of millions, is my key to reading these buildings and statues that line my way to Gorki. The question of history’s educational efficacy is one of perspective, and of how its narrative is told. To whom do we leave the prerogative to interpret; who curates the canon?

In the German language there is an insidious phrase that, in my opinion, could be the synthesis of the opposing, historically-philosophically contrapositive maxims. One says: ‘Please don’t take it personally, but...’. What follows is, most of the time, a harsh critique or even an impudence — certainly an attack. This phrase has become some sort of guiding culture at Gorki: we intend to take history and the imposition of the present day personally. For only in this way can the narrative of history become something that enables political action, or at least scepticism. Of course, we know that neither memories are already memory nor are stories already history, but from the sum of personal narratives, from subjectivities, an image arises, one that does not claim conclusive knowledge, but rather tells of a world that can be deciphered in multiple perspectives.

The fact that we, as a theatre, have decided to open with a Herbstsalon that first and foremost gives spaces and platforms to visual and performance artists had a lot to do with this thought. History (and this also always includes the present) can only become an area of tension when it consists of as many and as diverse perspectives as possible. Only in this way can we counter not only the simplifying construction of historiography, often imagined in a nationalist sense, but most of all the re-framers and relativizers, the Holocaust deniers, and neo-right-wing folk mythologists, with the narrative of a history of many, of the learning and the living. Only one who broadens the horizon and recognises the synchronicities of history and of life understands the concurrence of yesterday and today. Taking history personally: where, before an artistic friction arose (mostly in the polarisation of East and West), we, at Gorki, have committed to opening up to the whole city, to an urban society in the productive and conflictual multiplicity of today, in all its ‘radical diversity’, as the queer-theorist Gudrun Perko coined it. A coexistence is only possible in acceptance of difference and conflict. Humanity is a word that, for good reason, exists only in a singular form, but it means the plurality of many.





*Verrücktes Blut*, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, 2010 (by Nurkan Erpulat and Jens Hillje).  
Performers (from left to right): Sesede Terziyan, Rahel Jankowski, Nora Abdel-Maksoud.  
Director: Nurkan Erpulat.  
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The first edition of our Berliner Herbstsalon took place in 2013 under the banner of arrival and positioning, in a conscious recourse to history that was to become the manifestation of our way of thinking over time. ‘Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon’ was the name of an art exhibition shown by Herwarth Walden in Berlin in 1913. It took the 1903 Salon d’Automne in Paris as its model. August Macke and Franz Marc were commissioned to hang the paintings. Marc himself also put up his programmatic painting *Der Turm der blauen Pferde*. Altogether, a main part of that Herbstsalon was taken up by most of the painters of the group Der Blaue Reiter. Remarkably enough, prior to this avant-garde art show in April 1913, a debate surrounding art in the Prussian parliament arose in which a representative judged: ‘Honourable Gentlemen, we are dealing with a movement that stands for degeneracy, a symptom of a diseased time.’ Vivid applause was noted in the minutes. Eerie repetition is also a characteristic feature of all history.

With the new Berliner Herbstsalon, we attempted to set up a *genius loci* in its dialectic and with all its implications of history. The Maxim Gorki Theatre, located in the Singakademie on the boulevard Unter den Linden, was founded as a theatre of the present in 1952. Back then, it was a home for critical and dissident contemporary Soviet dramatic art. In 1988, Thomas Langhoff’s production of *Übergangsgesellschaft* by Volker Braun anticipated that atmosphere of the late German Democratic Republic, from ideological alienation to petty bourgeois phlegm and open dissidence, which would lead to the overthrow of the government and the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989. On a different November 9<sup>th</sup>, in the year 1848, the first elected Prussian National Assembly was displaced from Berlin. Before that, they had been working on a democratic constitution for Berlin and Prussia in the building of the Singakademie. Between these two events, almost all facets of that fight for a democratically constituted, just, and open society in Berlin and Germany become visible, from the proclamation of the German Republic

in 1918, to the Pogrom Night of 1938, to the persecution and killing of the European Jews, to the reunification of the city and nation that led to current disputes on the future of Berlin as a diverse European metropolis.

The November Pogroms of the Nazi regime against the German Jews had their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary when we brought the first Herbstsalon into being. We did this in a former Singakademie that — according to contemporary testimonies of the Berlin bass-baritone Philipp Eduard Devrient — in 1832, presumably for anti-Semitic reasons, voted against the appointment of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy as its director.

When the Center for Political Beauty, in the context of our third Berliner Herbstsalon in 2017, sets up a duplicate of the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in the neighbouring garden of Björn Höcke (the most famous right-wing extremist of the Alternative für Deutschland), it is not just a dissident and necessary act, after Höcke called it a monument of shame, but a reference to the irreversible tremor that impacted optimism about the progress of a European Enlightenment, at least since the mono-culturalist intensifications of the twentieth century. What stories will be told where, and how? Which have something to do with us, and which do not? The genocides and wars for which we, as Germans, have to answer, or in which we are entangled, leave their bloody tracks up to the present, even if they often are not part of the official ‘German’ memory — because, in good old German tradition, they were outsourced conflicts.

The Balkan Wars ended in 1913 in a splitting of ‘European Turkey’ into Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia. The new order of the Balkans marked one of the beginnings of an un-culture of segregation and ethnic cleansing in Europe, which found its horrifying peak in 1915 with the Armenian genocide. The year 1914 stands for the wilful failure of the German and European elites in a time of hastened transition. It paved the way for

the total shift from the allegedly enlightened modern era of the nineteenth century into a global conflagration, resulting in the destruction of a whole continent in which, to this day, conflict continues to echo.

At Gorki, we deal with all these links and continuities of history not just in context of the Herbstsalon, but also in reciprocal resonance with projects on the main stage: in a piece like *Common Ground*, in which director Yael Ronen traces the consequences of the genocide in Srebrenica up to present-day Berlin, or in the festival 'Es schneit im April', which sheds light on multiple perspectives on the Armenian genocide



*Common Ground*, by Yael Ronen and ensemble, 2015.  
Performers (from left to right): Jasmina Musić, Niels Bormann, Vernesa Berbo, Dejan Bućin, Orit Nahmias, Aleksandar Radenković. Director: Yael Ronen.  
© Thomas Aurin

and articulates warnings of these horrors in the present. The sentence by Hannah Arendt, 'The future of society depends on how it deals with minorities', can be taken as a motif for telling history and stories here. The question of how we want to coexist in the future and how this 'we' could be organised without the rustic fences of a nationally diffuse concept of identity occupied us from the beginning and became the theme of our second Berliner Herbstsalon. With the arrival of Mediterranean survivors, who fled from war and depredation to Germany and Berlin, and who saw themselves exposed to generalisations and attributions similar to those many generations of migrants and expatriates had endured before them, new discourses arose that demanded a political-aesthetical formulation and platform of empowerment. A production like Sebastian Nübling's *In unserem Namen* was foundational for the Exil-Ensemble that works at Gorki today, as a platform for professional artists who have been forced to live in exile. With a focus on artistic forms of activist practice, this Herbstsalon edition faced the banners of integration that were hurriedly dug out of the old box of political phraseology for want of propositions of real participation.

Radical diversity is social reality. Against this reality, right-wing populists in Europe and worldwide shoot forth their poisonous hate speech and try to pull the rug out from under our feet by using 'alternative facts'. 'Of course there are lies in democracy, quite a lot actually', Georg Seeßlen writes in his essay *Trumpets of Trumpism*. 'But the performance of right-wing populism says something else, actually, that "WE" are the meaning, not the external reality. The external reality disavows itself already by "applying to everyone equally". How can something be good that is there for "THE OTHERS" also?'

The task of democracy is the defence of reality. 'Democracy instead of integration!' is a statement by the network of critical migration and border regime research in Germany, that, under the impression of Thilo





*Die Nacht von Lissabon*, 2019 (after the book of Erich Maria Remarque),  
in a stage version by Hakan Savaş Mican.  
Performer: Dimitrij Schaad. Director: Hakan Savaş Mican.  
© Ute Langkafel, MAIFOTO

Sarrazin's propaganda of biologisms, came to the conclusion in 2010 that '[t]he talk of integration is the enemy of democracy' — because, by means of a toxic melange of neoliberalism and racism, it fuels the exclusions it pretends to cure. Wherever the system does not permit participation and advancement opportunities to parts of society, it rejects itself. Setting the third Berliner Herbstsalon under the motto of 'de-integration' was also an attempt to fully free oneself from this maze of integration debates.

The new keyword of the reactionary integrationists in Germany, *Heimat* is currently being projected in capital letters on every wall of the republic. But it is not being used in a sense of empathy and solidarity with the people who have had to flee their *Heimat*. On the contrary, *Heimat* is being used by right-wing and extreme right-wing forces to exclude the dispossessed and disenfranchised.

In this sense 'Heimat' is, and was always, 'fatherland' as well, and is thus inseparably linked with the patriarchy as a concept. On an international level, too, it intertwines together the systems of patriarchy, capitalism and racism — currently represented by Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin, Xi Jinping, Erdoğan, Duterte and countless other rulers in the world — that produce exclusions and expropriations, questioning democracy and fundamental human rights.

Considering the current fascist backlashes, considering right-wing extremist and racist excesses in the past decades — not least in connection to the serial murder of the National Socialist Underground, the complex of institutionalised cover-ups, looking the other way, and the failure of state authorities, all of those have radically shaken the trust in constitutionality — we need a continued confrontation with National Socialism and fascism. It is not easily imaginable that the new 'Homeland Ministry' of Horst Seehofer, our Minister of the Interior — on his





*Ein Bericht für eine Akademie*, 2018 (after motives of the narrative by Franz Kafka).  
 Performers (from left to right): Nika Mišković, Lea Draeger, Sesede Terziyan, Svenja Liesau, Jonas Dassler,  
 Mehmet Ateşçi, Vidina Popov, Aram Tafreshian. Director: Oliver Frlić.  
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sixty-ninth birthday, he is looking forward to sixty-nine deported Afghans — will be responsible for this. Even more so, since it will not count this homeland in its area of responsibility, this homeland which, with Ernst Bloch, is the place that appears to us in childhood, and where no one has yet been: ‘a socialized humanity bound to a sharing nature is the transformation of the world into homeland.’

What every child in Germany knew yesterday is suddenly no longer a reliable agreement: that homeland in this land is unthinkable without Auschwitz.

However, when common sense is in danger and ideology trickles into language, that is above all when we need art that sees itself as a culture of remembrance and that listens to the resonant chambers of history with a critical awareness. There is much to experience, not to say learn, in that. Telling is remembering. The oblivion today is humanity’s worst enemy.

The Herbstsalon, in its three editions so far, was a reference to the possibility of an artistic historiography in a sense of encountering. Encounters of the living who take history personally, and as an occasion to position their art in such a way that they extend, change and complicate the memory of the historically contaminated spaces of Europe — not just those between Brandenburger Tor and Alexanderplatz.



*Grundgesetz – Ein chorischer Stresstest, 2018.*  
Director / concept / libretto: Marta Górnicka.  
© Lutz Knospe

The fourth edition of the Berliner Herbstsalon is subtitled ‘De-heimatize it!’. The term has been borrowed from the essay ‘De-heimatize Belonging’ by Bilgin Ayata, a professor of sociology, in which she criticises Heimat as a term made irredeemable through the colonial and fascist history of violence in Germany and calls on people to conceive of other affiliations.

But there is an exclamation mark behind the signature for the fourth Berliner Herbstsalon! It’s not about resigning oneself to closing a chapter, but opening a new — maybe more angry — one. Art, as Alexander Kluge says, is not only a ‘distancing device’ but also a means of ‘attack’. Courage and confidence require stories.





*Es sagt mir nichts, das sogenannte Draußen*, by Sibyller Berg, 2013.

Performers (from left to right): Nora Abdel-Maksoud, Rahel Jankowski, Suna Gürler, Cynthia Micas.

Director: Sebastian Nübling.

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The Herbstsalon is creating a space for this: in a retrospective of visual artists, with an extensive theatre and performance programme, a conference on theory and practice and, last but not least, the Young Curators Academy, a framework for politically engaged curators from all over the world to come together at the Gorki. We are opening up a space where artists, activists, theoreticians and theatre makers from all over the world can gather together to formulate an impetus for a language that is not nationalist and racist, not male dominated and sexist, and not beholden to the arithmetic of the market and economic utilisation. We are going about our work.

And we follow Toni Morrison, who passed away this summer, and who said: ‘This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.’

