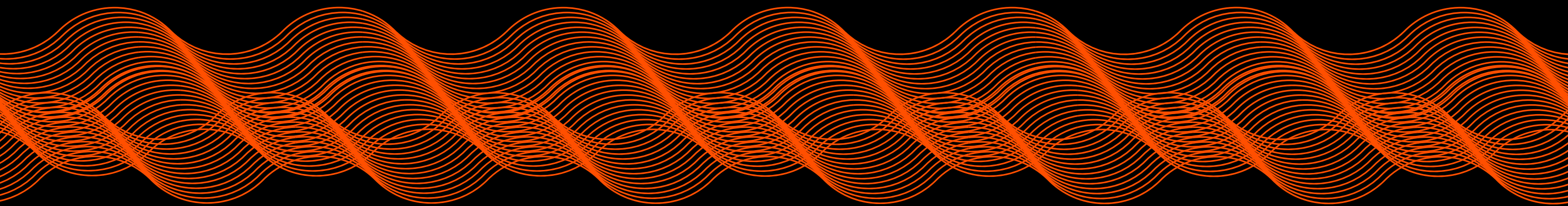


# Developing the Imaginaries and Fantasia of Theatre Institutions:

an Interview with  
Shermin Langhoff

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# Interview



We grab hold of Shermin Langhoff after her opening keynote at the second EASTAP conference, held in Lisbon in September 2019. Seated in the red audience seats in the Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, we congratulate her and the Maxim Gorki Theatre for being elected as EASTAP associate artist/theatre in 2019. And we congratulate EASTAP that Langhoff and her theatre have accepted the invitation. In her keynote, Langhoff mainly focused on the series of the Berliner Herbstsalons — four in total — that the Gorki has curated and housed under her auspices. In our conversation with her, however, we are interested in hearing more about the demands that changing publics pose to theatre institutions; about strategic labelling; and as to how institutions may actively seek to decolonise themselves.



**SG:** *At the Maxim Gorki Theatre, you are doing an incredible job in relation to reaching new audiences and creating a space where members of the public who are not necessarily familiar with theatre feel welcome and represented. Pertaining to this, can you share your thoughts about the questions and demands that the changing publics and audiences which come with Western, postmigrant societies pose to cultural institutions?*

**SL:** Well, in the globalised world of the historical present, we have the reality of postmigrant societies all over the world, not just in Berlin. One of the key aspects of the current situation could perhaps be said to be a general sense of disorientation about how to deal with changing societies and new migrations. And we do not get any bigger visions of new societies from the politicians (especially not the European ones) to help us here — neither in terms of how to empathise with and relate to one another, nor in terms of how to organise or (re)imagine society. So, we are facing a situation defined by a lack of visions and *fantasia* on the part of politicians. At the same time, it was the politicians in Berlin who started to raise the question of representation of the city's population in the 2000s — Berlin has a very diverse population with about one hundred and sixty backgrounds — in state funded theatres instead of theatres or cultural institutions themselves. I have to be honest and say that, when I started working in theatre in Berlin at the beginning of the 2000s, the question of 'the others' only arose when the theatres started having problems filling their seats with their usual audiences. The question was first and foremost about how to secure a future audience in the theatre. It was not about curiosity, generosity, or about seeing stories or canons from different perspectives than the prevailing ones.

From the beginning, I rejected that call for 'the others' in theatre. I mean, who is 'the other'? To me, it has always been misleading to speak about 'audience development', since what we need to develop is not just 'new audiences'. We also need to develop the already existing audiences,

as well as the imaginaries and *fantasia* of the theatre institutions themselves. Therefore, for me the question was never about teaching 'the others' how to become an audience. It was about the fact that there were a lot of very talented artists and activists out there, who were already working in film and literature, but whom the German theatres were not interested in. For me, the interesting thing was always the stories that were not told, the lack of narrations and perspectives of the othered artists that were not working in the theatre, those whose works were not staged.

When we write new stories and put other protagonists than usual on stage, it can certainly help foster empathy or even solidarity for these 'others'. But what interests me, really, is the encounter between different publics that takes place in the theatre, and that this encounter goes both ways, as it were. In fact, perhaps the most important thing about Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, and also the Maxim Gorki Theatre, is when a very diverse audience of very different social and cultural backgrounds and different generations come together. When the 'old white autochthone' audience member gets to meet the young person of colour and listens to new common stories. So, from the beginning, for me making theatre was also about educating those who were already going to the theatre with their predefined expectations and needs. It was very much about educating those — the *bourgeoisie*, that is — who feel entitled to take up all the space and who really believe that the space belongs to them. But I am also thinking about you and me, us who make a living doing theatre studies and theatre practice. We also need to open ourselves up to, and learn from, the encounter that can take place in the theatre.

**AR:** *I would like to ask about the position of the Gorki Theatre in the landscape of German theatre and, more generally, in the European theatre environment. Is, in your opinion, 'postmigrant' theatre possible in other theatre contexts, or can we assume that there are parts of Europe that, due to different political, economic, and/or governmental situations, are not ready yet for postmigrant theatre?*

**SL:** When, more than a decade ago, I launched the concept of post-migrant theatre, everybody was laughing about it. Nobody really asked what the limits of it were, or whether it was possible to do it only within a specific German context. I would say that when we started out with postmigrant theatre, it was possible to do it, simply because nobody had done it before. In other words, our success was not due to me being a genius; it was just because, until then, no one had approached theatre in this way, from this perspective. Today, however, I would say that postmigrant theatre is something that is growing as a signature all over Europe and which has been especially influential on German theatre. The fact that theatre schools and academies in German speaking countries have started accepting many more students with migrant backgrounds is an important aspect of this.

But then again, before getting too enthusiastic about it, I would actually say that, if postmigrant theatre eventually became something of a trend in Germany, it is in fact already declining. People have started saying that we deal too much with minorities and ‘the others’; we have to deal more with ‘the Volk’ and the majority. In my keynote lecture today, I spoke about the concept of ‘Heimat’, which means ‘Homeland’ — though it cannot really be translated because it has a specific notion in German history and identity. It is a concept which not only the right wing is embracing and subscribing to. It has also been adopted by the left, by the greens, by the liberals, by everybody. I would say it is because the politicians have no *fantasia*. They do not have the courage, and they do not feel responsible for inventing new concepts of humanity and society, not even in the face of the radical diversity, which characterises the postmigrant societies in which we are embedded. I mean, Germany is facing big issues of racism — from anti-Semites and racists in the parliament, to right-wing terror on the street, killing innocent people because of their ‘otherness’, their religious, cultural, or national backgrounds. Instead of investing in anti-racist campaigns and

new laws for intersectional justice, the government, as well as big parts of the opposition, cling to the Heimat term and seek to re-appropriate it from the right wing. In this way, they are saying: ‘We claim the Heimat in order to prevent the fascists from capturing it. We claim our homeland’. In reality, these new approaches to homeland are connected to migration policies; a reaction to the so called ‘refugee crisis’ that results in homeland security, strengthening borders, and ‘saving Europe’. It is definitely not about democracy, the constitutional state, or the ‘values’ of Europe.

What I am missing — and I am quite certain this goes for a lot of other people, too — is a republic to which I feel politically attached.

**SG:** *Perhaps the Gorki could be conceived of as an institution for experiencing the diversity of identity and the political belonging you are talking about?*

**SL:** Yes and no. We can raise questions and criticise political realities, but we cannot replace politics and laws of citizenship, elections, etc. Just to make it clear, to us, postmigrant theatre means a political, urban city theatre, which reflects the city with all its populations, stories, conflicts, and multiple perspectives.

In the last years, through Gorki’s Exile Ensemble with artists from Syria, Afghanistan, and Palestine, as well as artists like Marta Górnicka from Poland, Oliver Frlić from Croatia, and Yael Ronen from Israel, the Gorki could be seen as some kind of asylum for artists from all over Europe and beyond. Indeed, from the outset it has been crucial for me to work transculturally and bring artists, actors, writers, and directors with different backgrounds and different perspectives to the theatre.

In the beginning our three main directors were Yael Ronen, Sebastian Nübling, and Nurkan Erpulat. The perspectives they present were

important. With Yael Ronen, I wanted to bring a Jewish perspective of the third generation of survivors of the Holocaust, who were dispossessed in another time, to the German theatre. In the interest of clarity, I am putting it very direct and somewhat un-nuanced here, because Yael is, of course, a lot of other things than ‘a Jew’!

Then there is Sebastian Nübling. You could say that even his name, ‘Nübling’ — it is derived from ‘Nibelungen’ — points to his ‘arch-German-ness’ (*laughing*). As a member of the post-war German generation, he was an antifascist and already did his first intercultural theatre projects during his studies. Throughout his career, besides always searching to develop new forms and expressions, he has been interested in the diversity of society and in the next generations. This was really important to us.

Our third main director, Nurkan Erpulat, was seen not only as ‘the Turk’, but also ‘the gay’. In Berlin we have a lot of Turkish background communities, the biggest population of migrants, and we also have a lot of queer people and communities. The first play Nurkan and I did together was *Beyond — Are You Gay or Are You Turkish?* We produced the play during the festival ‘Beyond Belonging’ that I curated at Hebbel Am Ufer (HAU) in 2008. We brought it to the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse in 2009, and we also went to Istanbul with it. From the perspective of the German majority, a minus and a minus could make a plus. As a gay Turk he contradicts the expected macho-concept. He can become an exoticised desire as well as a ‘more emancipated, more Western, more integrated’ person — even though gays are still fighting for recognition and rights.

Before coming to Germany, Nurkan studied theatre in Turkey. Then he came to the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts in Berlin. And he came here with a specific idea about Berlin, about Berliner Ensemble, etc., as it happens with young theatre lovers from Turkey when they move to Berlin. But in Berlin, even in the theatre scene, he found

that he was turned into the ‘other’; he was kind of transformed into ‘the Turkish migrant’ through the perspective that German colleagues adopted when looking at him.

Beside the directors of the theatre, from the beginning the ensemble has been absolutely crucial. The actors of the Gorki theatre are just fantastic actors with a wide range of possibilities and languages, who at the same time represent the diversity of Berlin and Germany today. Without these talented, joyful performers and co-authors of plays which are being developed at the Gorki — without Sesede Terziyan, Dimitrij Schaad, Taner Şahintürk among many others — our theatre would not be possible. And last but not least, it is about the authors and authorships. Beside our incredible authors Sasha Marianna Salzmann and Sibylle Berg, we have directing authors like Yael Ronen.

**AR:** *One of the main issues that many artists have to consider is the problem of ‘label’ and labelling themselves in specific categories of theatre and performance that are surely limiting. What are your ideas about labelling given the fact that your theatre is regularly referred to — or labelled — as postmigrant theatre?*

**SL:** Personally, I am not calling what we do postmigrant theatre. I would rather say that we are a political, urban city theatre, since the term postmigrant in fact refers to the society (city) itself. Initially, the term represented a critical approach to how we habitually see and perceive society, and it included a call to shift perspectives and change receptions by telling new common stories that we were lacking. If we were really going to label our theatre it would rather be ‘Female Jewish Author’s Theatre’ — as we have, amongst others in-house, directors with Russian-Jewish backgrounds like Sasha Marianna Salzmann, one of Gorki’s main directors; Yael Ronen, who comes from Israel; as well as the young playwright Sivan Ben Yishai; and director Marta Górnicka, who has a Polish-Jewish background.



But really, it is not about labelling. It is about taking history personally. It is about looking at, and analysing, our contemporary condition and trying to bring it together with history. And in the end, it is not concepts that make theatre, but people, and all the artists. My work is — beside my critical, political, and aesthetical questions and approaches to German theatre — based on the fact that I really love people and am sincerely interested in them. In the projects, I am igniting, I try to bring together, the right brains, hearts and hands. My goal is to bring people together who have something to tell to others. Those who know why, and for whom, they want to make theatre. Those who have a reason for doing theatre. With that said, if you do not label yourself, then somebody else will. I guess this was one of the reasons why I initially launched the term postmigrant theatre. Because, if others are going to label you anyway, you should be the one to label it first.

**SG:** *We would be very interested in hearing more about how you, on a very concrete level, seek to decolonise the institution you are heading. What does it mean — to you — to decolonise an institution and how do you practice it?*

**SL:** What does it mean to decolonise the theatre institution? Well, there are two key points as I see it. The first concerns the space. Who feels entitled to the space? Who thinks he owns the seats — in the audience, as well as backstage; in the offices of dramaturgy, in the workshops, and artistic directorships? Why does somebody have this self-understanding, and why do others not? One way of decolonising the theatre space would be to signal to those, who are familiar and comfortable with the theatre space, that it does not just belong to them. In fact, especially in the backstage, someone must give up some space in order for others to take *their* space. At the same time, it is also about inviting those who did not feel entitled to this space in the first place to the theatre.

How to invite concerns the second major point. In order to decolonise an institution, which is deeply rooted in a white, Western canon, it is absolutely crucial to have people with migrant backgrounds represented in the theatre's various departments, ranging from the board, to the literary department, to the affiliated artists, including directors and actors. Not least in the literary department, where the programming of the theatre takes place, is it extremely important to have a diversity of perspectives and experiences represented. But, you know, it is a long process to build such a department. You won't necessarily get the best dramaturges with migrant backgrounds straight away. Such dramaturges do not just fall down from the heavens. You have to train people, and you really have to work hard on it. In concrete terms, this means that you need a big literary department, where you can have young dramaturges learning from the experienced dramaturges. We have brought up three young dramaturges, in the first years, who are now based at the Vienna Burg Theatre, at Berliner Theatertreffen, and at Hannover Theatre. So, like I said earlier, the process of moving beyond the centre-periphery perspective, which the postmigrant approach entails, is certainly spreading and taking place at other theatres than the Gorki. We are not the only ones anymore who seek to decolonise the institutions and the inherited ways of thinking which come with them. Luckily!

**AR:** *In Europe and the US, theatre discourses are currently shot through with debates concerning representational matters: who is allowed to represent whom on stage? Does someone need to possess a certain experience in order to represent someone with this experience, etc.? While some claim that this is absolutely crucial, others claim that theatre should be a site for experimenting with, and for exploring, identity positions in ways different to the 'rules and norms' reigning outside the theatre. How do you position yourself in this very complex debate?*

**SL:** Currently, Oliver Frlić's show *Anna Karenina or Poor Folks* is running at the Gorki. In this performance, Asian, black, brown, and white performers are playing members of the same aristocrat family. When I watched it, I did not think for a second that they did not look alike; instead I was fully absorbed in the world they created. So really, it is about perception, it is about the suspension of disbelief, and it is something we can train. We can learn to adopt a perspective where we do not first and foremost think about differences in colour and gender and, at the same time, the play can take an intersectional perspective and point out racism, sexism, and the question of class differences that underpin the conflicts. It also points out the dialectics of a bourgeois feminism and, furthermore, of a proletarian revolution. And I really believe that the new generations are already perceiving reality differently than my generation.

But again, your question also has to do with privilege. When some years ago Brett Bailey's highly contested exhibition *Exhibit B* — partly a re-enactment of the famous colonial exhibitions of 'the exotic bodies' of black and other indigenous people — in which black Berliners took part as extras, was being shown in Berlin at Berliner Festspiele, a panel was organised. Three white men and one white woman took part; all in charge of big institutions, or famous curators and artists with privileges, including Thomas Oberender, the director of the institution in charge. These persons talked about the freedom of art and about the critical approach of Bailey. They kept on trying to legitimise the exhibition and the fact that it was state funded. At some point, then, the artist Grada Kilomba stood up and asked whether they would approve and allow a re-enactment of Auschwitz made by 'autochthonous second generation Germans after the Holocaust' with the call for the participation of 'real Jews' as extras. Suddenly everybody fell silent. This really brought it to the point for me: when you are in a position of cultural hegemony, it is extremely important that you acknowledge both collective memory and personal memory and see the lacks of official memory. Likewise,

it is absolutely crucial that you expose sensitivity and sensibility to those who are not included in the cultural hegemony, in which you might hold such a privileged position that you have become blind to it. Like I said earlier, it's not only about remembering history — it's about taking it personally.

