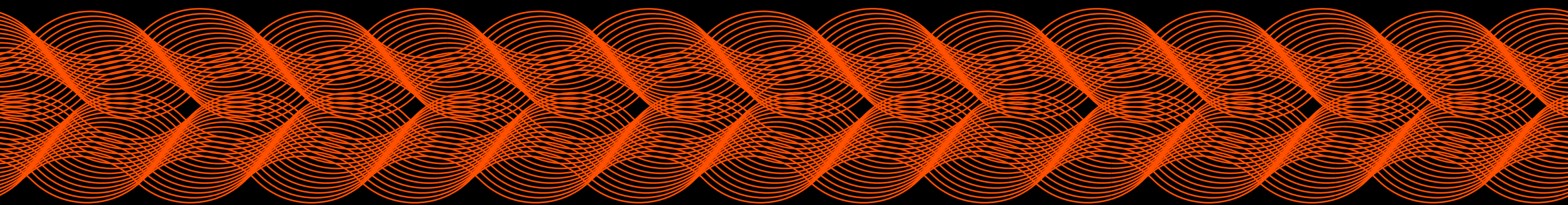


# Enquete: Working at the Gorki

interviews with  
OLIVER FRLJIĆ  
MARTA GÓRNICKA  
MARYAM ABU KHALED  
SEBASTIAN NÜBLING  
SESEDE TERZIYAN  
Yael RONEN



In relation to this issue's Artist in Focus section, featuring the Maxim Gorki Theatre, we posed three identical questions to a number of artists affiliated with the theatre. Below are the responses of artists ranging from directors, to actors, to writers.

We would like to thank Susanne Hentschel, Xenia Sircar, and Freya Treutmann for their tremendous help in establishing contact with and, in some cases, also interviewing the artists.





# Oliver Frlić

director at Maxim Gorki Theatre

*What has been decisive for your choice to work with the Maxim Gorki Theatre on a continuous basis?*

The fact that Gorki has been continuously creating the space for different social groups which were for so long underrepresented and invisible — not just in the German theatrical context, but in the European one as well — was decisive for this decision. And I also liked the readiness of the theatre to question dominant modes of social and theatrical representation, to deconstruct the norms and normatives of so-called high art and the hegemonic matrix produced and reproduced through it.

*What do you find particularly appealing, and possibly also challenging, about working in the house, seen from your particular perspective as a director?*

At this point, the most interesting thing for me is where Gorki could/should go in the future. As we see, the times are changing rapidly. This raises the question — how can theatre as a medium reply to the velocity and density of the changes in the world we live in? Can we cling onto the already existing theatrical forms? Social media and the internet completely changed the economy of attention and our perception of reality. What should we — theatre workers — do in this situation? Those are just some of the questions I am asking myself on the daily basis.



*The Gorki is often labelled as an institution for postmigrant theatre. Do you identify with, and are you comfortable with, this designation? If yes/no, why so?*

I can't identify with any kind of label. But I understand that it is much easier for the media to reduce the complexity and richness of Gorki to one or two labels and a few catchphrases.

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# Marta Górnicka

writer and director at Maxim Gorki Theatre

*What has been decisive for your choice to work with the Maxim Gorki Theatre on a continuous basis?*

The Gorki's new way of thinking about the society which builds this institution was most important to me: the political and social philosophy of that place, which in itself serves as a polyphonic and multilingual chorus, expressing tensions and social conflicts, allowing diversity to resound while being fully engaged in finding a common space. At Gorki Theatre, work joins together people of various experiences, biographies, cultures; some travelled a long way before they found themselves here: from Turkey, Poland, Palestine, Israel, Iran, Bosnia, or Syria. This theatre has the courage to face the greatest political challenges, leave the comfort zone, lay bare the paradoxes of democracy and





systemic violence. With full determination, the theatre asks itself questions on the social effectiveness of art, on transcending its limited function of merely representing conflicts, on artistic and institutional practices (which are, at the same time, social practices), with full critical awareness of the limitations with which an artistic institution must struggle in these situations. This is why I have the feeling that Gorki Theatre and I are connected by the same mission. For ten years, in my work as a director, I have been creating the politically engaged chorus as a polyphonic, individualised social body. The chorus as a practice of protest, rebellion, and radical critique, but also an encounter of diverse bodies and voices, and therefore a search for the (im)possible community. I see no other direction for theatre today. I am not interested in theatre without its social or political mission.

*What do you find particularly appealing, and possibly also challenging, about working in the house, seen from your particular perspective as a director/author?*

The Gorki is a machine going full speed ahead — not just a machine of performances, but also of ideas. A multilingual team of people; an enormous network of artists and activists concentrated around the idea of a diverse, open society. I had an opportunity to find this out when I was preparing a chorus performance of *GRUNDGESETZ* at the Brandenburger Tor for the twenty-ninth anniversary of German reunification. A fifty-person chorus was gathered, one which reflected the full diversity of today's society, only a part of which can enjoy all of the rights guaranteed by the constitution. What is key for me is the openness of this institution in the social sense, but also in the artistic one: the readiness to experiment, the openness to a new thinking on theatre and through theatre. Never before have I come across such support for artists, such trust for their choices, such readiness for non-standard activities and for the creation of conditions for growth.

I have the sense that extraordinary registers are connected in this theatre: the readiness for confrontation and conflict with great attention given to people, and something I would call the practice of tenderness. Everyone here is from somewhere, many have had the experience of an escape, difficult change, uprooting. I think about this in the categories of feminism, understood as broadly as it can be. In its best version, feminism is work for everyone who is marginalised socially, economically, culturally — whose failure is built into the system. In this sense, tenderness is a practice of resistance and rebellion. These are the terms in which I see the attitude and philosophy embodied into this institution by Shermin Langhoff, a practitioner of deep feminism in the theatre. What may be perceived as a challenge — diversity, multilingualism, but also strong social tensions around the institution — is an advantage for me. This is the matter in which I work.

*The Gorki is often labelled as an institution for postmigrant theatre. Do you identify with and are you comfortable with this designation? If yes/no, why so?*

At the moment, there are no other societies than postmigrant societies. Thinking in other terms makes no sense — although, at the same time, in many people this awakens fear and the sense of a growing need to return to the category of a closed and separated national community. In my view, the postmigrant society is the modern society — one which neither represses reality, nor masks it with phantasms of national cohesion. The theatre has the responsibility to work with such a society and enable it to be really represented, both on the stage and in all of its structures. Therefore, I take no issue with this designation.

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# Maryam Abu Khaled

actress and member of the ensemble  
at Maxim Gorki Theatre

*What has been decisive for your choice to work with the Maxim Gorki Theatre on a continuous basis?*

First of all, working with Gorki wasn't a decision. I came here for a project with Yael Ronen and we just fell in love with each other — the Gorki and me. That happened because the theatre is political: it's of colour and I am a black actress, an Arab and Palestinian who comes from a political background, and that's why we fit. This is the kind of theatre that I want to do right now. I enjoy finding my identity as an artist also through political statements. So, I think we chose each other, it's not only me who chose Gorki. I don't think any other theatre would fit for me now. Politically, I found a language at Gorki that enables me to speak about myself and my people.

*What do you find particularly appealing, and possibly also challenging, about working in the house, seen from your particular perspective as an actress?*

What I find challenging in this house is coming to a new culture and a new language. It was hard not to speak the same language like the other actors in the beginning (except the ones coming from Syria, Palestine, etc. like me). But what I love about the Gorki is that they give you a chance. I recently played in *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo – Ein*



*Widerspruch*, directed by Sebastian Nübling. I have a big role and I'm leading this play, which is in German. This is what I appreciate and what I'm thankful for — Gorki seeing me like an actress and giving me the chance to learn the language and find out whether I would like to act in that language or not.

Also challenging for me as a Palestinian is talking about the political situation in a German context. But this theatre is so different! I can work with Yael Ronen, an Israeli director, and I can share my political opinion openly. It's a place that fights for freedom of expression.

*The Gorki is often labelled as an institution for postmigrant theatre. Do you identify with and are you comfortable with this designation? If yes/no, why so?*

I feel comfortable being a refugee here, but at the same time I am annoyed if people only look at me this way, if they brand me as 'the refugee' or 'the immigrant'. I don't have a problem sharing my story and speaking my mind in front of a German audience — on the contrary, the German audience has to learn about our stories and be confronted with them. I am comfortable with the Gorki being labelled as postmigrant, as long as I have the power over my story — and not other people who categorise me as something I'm not. This drives me crazy.

Interview by Susanne Hentschel

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# Sebastian Nübling

director at Maxim Gorki Theatre

*What has been decisive for your choice to work with the Maxim Gorki Theatre on a continuous basis?*

Well, two things, I would say: the people and the programme. I have been affiliated with the Maxim Gorki Theatre since Shermin Langhoff and Jens Hillje started heading it together. With their approach to the so-called postmigrant theatre, they both wanted for this institution, in all its ways, to be made by people that also represent this city [Berlin]. That was the first thing I liked. And secondly, the people that they started to invite interested me.

We were four directors in the beginning: Nurkan Erpulat, Hakan Savas Mican, Yael Ronen, and me. That was the concept. Shermin and Jens wanted a director's quartet at the Gorki and each would do around two productions per season. And all of us did like one show in the main hall and one side project. The Gorki has a permanent ensemble but also quite a big group of artists that just do single, project-based performances where you can try out completely different formats. And I think it is important to be open and curious to this and also to understand that theatre is not only some kind of high culture, but that there is a richness of forms and therefore also a richness of people doing this.

At the Gorki, I also worked with mixed ensembles, some people that didn't go to drama school and others that already had some years of





performing at municipal theatres behind them; or some that taught themselves autodidactically. This interests me, and I think in this we find a real richness. When I observe, especially, the rehearsals, I notice the diverse backgrounds of experiences. One thing is the education or the way that led them to do theatre, but behind that often stand life journeys and personal experiences. I would say this manifests the so-called postmigrant identity. Which first of all is a buzzword.

*Can you say more about 'postmigrant theatre' as a label? Do you identify with it and are you comfortable with this designation?*

Postmigrant theatre is, first of all, a self-definition. But yes, people also understand the Gorki that way. Shermin put this name out in the world — it already came from Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, where she worked before. There were already similar ideas present. 'Academy of autodidacts', 'postmigrant theatre', these were concepts that developed with time and were then put into a bigger context.

And yes, I think postmigrant is a fitting label, because it reflects that we don't live in a migrant society, but in a society that consists of all kinds of people that, for different reasons and in several ways, decided to — or ended up — here and live here. And this is an actual state. We live all together in co-dependency and also profit from each other in different ways. And from my perspective, with my reality of life, this is true and for this I can identify very well with this designation.

The postmigrant approach in theatre also exists in other countries. But I would say in the UK, for example, castings are completely different. There I already saw twenty years ago much more diverse ensembles on stage. Actors with different cultural backgrounds, for example, could play siblings without any problems. They might have had completely different skin colours, but the text simply said that they were siblings,



so nobody questioned the cast. They were brother and sister. Full stop. And Germany needed a long time to get close to that. Until today, if casting a person of colour people overthink incredibly what this means for the character or for the story — my god! Why is it important which skin colour Hamlet has? We are unfortunately still far away from accepting that it doesn't matter how someone looks. In Germany, it is still very conceptual. If you want a certain actor for a certain part, you feel like you always have to explain what the deeper meaning of that choice is.

*So why, at the Gorki Theatre, do you have a so-called 'Exile Ensemble'? Why not simply a mixed ensemble? Why do you separate?*

Well, the Exile Ensemble is part of the ensemble. We name it separately, because there is different funding. It is also formed through artists that came for a project to the Gorki but had an unstable status of residency in Germany. So, it was our starting point to give them a legal base and to create funding options to enable them to work. But the different ensembles, in any case, work closely together. On paper they are separated, but in reality they cooperate. There were a few productions in the beginning that were exclusively done with the Exile Ensemble, but now they are mixed and simply considered one ensemble.

It is also part of the self-definition of the Gorki Theatre that we are a house of exile. Theatre itself somehow always seems a certain kind of space of asylum. Of course, it is also a hard business, but you have a lot of freedom in many things. To express yourself, to move, to discuss, to deal with time. At least here in Germany where the municipal theatres guarantee some kind of stable working conditions.

Interview by Freya Treutmann

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# Sesede Terziyan

actress and member of the ensemble  
at Maxim Gorki Theatre

*What has been decisive for your choice to work with the Maxim Gorki Theatre on a continuous basis?*

I began working with Shermin Langhoff in 2008/2009; back then, we were at Ballhaus Naunynstrasse in Kreuzberg. With a small group of artists, we sowed the seeds of postmigrant theatre, so to speak. We created pieces including *Die Schwäne vom Schlachthof*, *Schnee*, *Lö Bal Almanya*, *Verrücktes Blut*, and many more. In 2013, when the request to take on the Gorki Theatre came, I had no doubts about continuing to amplify our message with my theatre collective.

*What do you find particularly appealing, and possibly also challenging, about working in the house, seen from your particular perspective as an actress?*

Gorki is a versatile house, and this is reflected in everything: in the people who work here, the stories we tell, and the audience who comes and listens. It's a house that has embraced the diversity of our society and given it a place to be shown and narrated — from the people who've experienced it.

That is simultaneously the appeal and challenge of Gorki: not to become dogmatic, to remain open artistically and thematically, to examine





one's own artistic-political responsibility, to have no fear of failure, and not to lose the spirit of the collective.

*The Gorki is often labelled as an institution for postmigrant theatre. Do you identify with, and are you comfortable with, this designation? If yes/no, why so?*

Ten years ago, we began to create theatre with this designation. Post-migrant theatre emerged from real necessity, as it were. It emerged from a society that was not being represented narratively on German stages. Previously, the majority generally narrated about the minority. Now, the minority can tell its stories itself. This was, and remains, the most important task, because the perception of diversity in our society was very limited. As Naika Foroutan said, 'migration is a process that contributes significantly to society's formation'.

So how do I feel now about this designation? Ten years ago, I would not have thought that a misanthropic, racist party would enter the Bundestag. Back then we were debating about Sarrazin — and that was bad enough. Things are changing in the cultural scene, but slowly, very slowly... we are miles away both from a natural understanding that societies are colourful, and from developing a spirit that moves beyond national identities. But that is exactly what a forward-thinking society needs.

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# Yael Ronen

director at Maxim Gorki Theatre

*What has been decisive for your choice to work with the Maxim Gorki Theatre on a continuous basis?*

I had trust and belief in the political agenda that Gorki was offering. Here, I met the most exquisite collection of people that I enjoyed working with and was inspired by. It felt like it had the possibility for a different spirit, and Gorki is small enough to be experimental. Also, there was good resonance for my concept of work.

*What do you find particularly appealing, and possibly also challenging, about working in the house, seen from your particular perspective as a director/author?*

What is appealing is that, as I am doing two projects for Gorki every year, I have an ongoing and deepening relationship with a group of actors. Together we can develop a language, we can develop a style. Also, we have a very unique relationship with the audience coming to the theatre: I feel that Gorki has the most diverse audience. Not only is the staff of the house diverse, also the people who are coming here. A lot of people who usually wouldn't go to the theatre find their connection here. So both is appealing for me, establishing a relationship with the artists, but also with the audience. What is challenging is to go on different journeys and not bringing the same formula each time. It's about establishing a relationship, but to make this relationship dynamic enough to keep on growing and evolving.





*The Gorki is often labelled as an institution for postmigrant theatre. Do you identify with and are you comfortable with this designation? If yes/no, why so?*

I'm not in the position of a postmigrant — I'm a migrant (my son would be the postmigrant hopefully). Obviously, I can't identify with the 'post' of 'postmigrant' because I'm still an outsider and a stranger to this place on many levels. I'm not uncomfortable with the label, either, but I hope to be seen as an artist beyond this title as well.

Interview by Susanne Hentschel

