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***Hamlet* and the Fall of the Berlin Wall:**

The Myth of Interventionist Shakespeare Performance

“We are stepping out of our roles. The situation in our country forces us to do this.” These were the opening words of a declaration read aloud on stage at the Dresden theater on 4 October 1989, and subsequently delivered after every performance until the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November (Kuberski 1990, 200–201). In the following weeks, most theaters in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) followed suit, with a total of fifty-two publishing some form of statement or open letter by 9 November 1989. Five days before the opening of the Berlin Wall, East Berlin theater practitioners organized the largest protest rally in GDR history. On this occasion, the actor playing Hamlet in Heiner Müller’s production at the Deutsches Theater addressed crowds of protesters, demanding free speech and uncensored press coverage in a reformed socialist state. Müller’s production itself, opening a week after the first free elections in the GDR and involving some of the most vocal artists of the protest movement, is widely regarded as one of the most significant events in German postwar theatre history (Hamburger 1998, 428; Kranz 1995, 87; Varney 2008, 9). This chapter examines the idea of an “undercover,” or interventionist East German Shakespeare as the local application of a larger, global myth concerning theater’s inherently subversive nature. It uses Müller’s 1990 *Hamlet* production as a test case to analyze how the notion of politically effective Shakespeare performance was integrated into narratives of German reunification.

Global Myths: Theater as Subversive Medium

In his seminal study of Greek mythology, Fritz Graf (1993, 3) asserts that “[i]f conditions change, a myth, if it is to survive, must change with them”. In other words, myth is a dynamic process: “The reason for the continuous mutation of myth – the motor of the tradition, so to speak (that which ensures that it will continue to be handed down from one generation to the next) – is its cultural relevance” (Graf 1993, 3). In choosing the image of a motor to illustrate the process by which myth adapts to different conditions, Graf’s definition is surprisingly close to that given by Heiner Müller (2001, 120) in his address to the German Shakespeare Society in 1988: “Myth is an aggregate, a machine to which always new and different machines can be connected. It transports the energy until the growing velocity will explode the cultural field”. This chapter traces one such potent motor or machine within theatre history, which has allowed different versions of its own truth to arise.

At least since the publication of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), there has been a widely-held belief among the theatrical avant-garde that theater is an art form uniquely suited to dissent, transgression, and subversion. In this context, theater is seen as the harbinger of revolution:

Traditionally, drama, with its practical corollary theatre, has always been the major conduit for literary dissent. [...] drama – in its performing role – uniquely promotes direct access to an audience and has always had a special appeal to writers imbued with a sense of urgency and an overwhelming need to voice their concerns and disagreements. (Brown 2008, 147)

Following Brecht’s notion of a theater that facilitates *eingreifendes Denken* (“interventionist thinking”) on the part of the spectator, this school of thought sees theater as capable of making a difference, and therefore considers its chief task to be that of political engagement (Brecht 1967, 158).

In the twentieth century, the notion that theater should be politically subversive derived its cultural relevance from the political catastrophes of the first half of that century, and thus took particular hold within Germany, the nation at the heart of these catastrophes. After the horrors of the Second World War, the separation of the aesthetic from the political was used to explain how Nazi barbarism had arisen in the midst of a cultured, civilized country. One of the most famous articulations of this issue was Thomas Mann's lecture on "Germany and the Germans" at the U.S. Library of Congress in 1945. According to Mann, the German soul was characterized by *Innerlichkeit*, i.e. the separation of "the speculative from the socio-political element of human energy, and the utter prevalence of the former over the latter" (1996, 265). By assuming that internal, spiritual freedom of culture could be divorced from external, political freedom, German artists and intellectuals had failed to prevent the political disaster of the 1930s.

Timothy Garton Ash (1991, 11) concedes that "Mann's argument has paid the price of its influence, by debasement into cliché, although it has also been refined and extended by George Steiner, among others". What Steiner adds to the argument is the realization that the humanities do not necessarily humanize; that conservation and transmission of high culture are not enough to prevent barbarism – that, in fact, cultural institutions and products can remain unaffected by political barbarism:

the libraries, museums, theatres, universities, research centres, in and through which the transmission of the humanities and of the sciences mainly takes place, can prosper next to the concentration camps. The discriminations and freshness of their enterprise may well suffer under the surrounding impress of violence and regimentation. But they suffer surprisingly little. (Steiner 1971, 63)

The idea that cultural institutions can peacefully coexist with oppressive political regimes is an important one, because it goes against the assumption that theater

necessarily has some kind of political impact. Despite Steiner's intervention, the nineteenth-century belief in the humanizing power of high culture remains surprisingly prevalent, surfacing frequently in German theatre debates after 1990.

The overriding narrative of the post-war period was that the arts should have political impact. Indeed, when we speak of "political theater", we always mean a type of theater that challenges the status quo (usually from the left of the political spectrum). Graham Holderness (1992, 2–3) recognizes this when he remarks that "political theatre can be progressive, but not regressive; socialist but not conservative; subversive but not conformist or radically reactionary". This viewpoint becomes problematic when it leads critics to consider political impact as the sole measure of a production's quality, disregarding its other aesthetic features and possible meanings. Ellen MacKay (2006, 72) criticizes that post-Nietzschean dramatic theory has created "a mythologized theatre history in which the stage plays the insurgent to a host of repressive regimes, psychic and political, formal and civilizing". This perspective goes some way towards explaining a recurring bias in studies of East German Shakespeare: the idea that Shakespeare performance has the power to inspire an oppressed people to free itself from the yoke of socialism.

Local Applications: "Undercover Shakespeare" in East Germany

When surveying scholarship on Shakespeare under socialist regimes, it is striking that most studies share the assumption that Shakespeare performance functioned as a kind of political opposition (Delabastita, De Vos, Franssen 2008; Guntner and McLean 1998; Hattaway, Sokolova, Roper 1994; Kennedy 1993; Shurbanov and Sokolova 2001; Stříbrný 2000). Robert Weimann's groundbreaking study *Shakespeare and the*

Popular Tradition in the Theatre laid the foundations for this approach by demonstrating that Shakespeare's texts had resisted authority in their own time, and that rediscovering this subversive potential could provide a practical approach to performing Shakespeare in the present (Weimann 1978, xv). Following Weimann's lead, several scholars proposed Shakespeare as the ideal vehicle for dissent in Eastern Europe, since his works were not banned from the stage, but still offered scope for coded political messages and allegorical readings (Shurbanov and Sokolova 2001, 13–14). As Kennedy argues,

the plays were used in postwar eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as dissident texts. If new plays and films critical of a repressive regime are regularly censored, producers are sometimes tempted to make the classics into coded messages about the present: Shakespeare thus became a secret agent under deep cover. (Kennedy 1993, 3–4)

The interest generated by this area of Shakespeare scholarship is partly due to the idea that postwar Eastern Europe supposedly recreated the oppressive conditions under which Shakespeare's plays were first staged, including censorship and draconian measures against oppositional writers and players.

The effect of this “undercover Shakespeare” assumption on theater historiography has been a propensity to read Eastern European history “backwards”, attempting to show that theater played a part in shaping political reality. The *post hoc* fallacy takes as its starting point important social and political events, then identifies Shakespeare productions taking place just before or during these events, and assumes a causal connection between the two. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is one such event which has inspired scholars to attribute considerable agency to the Shakespeare productions that accompanied it.

Focusing on East Germany, Lawrence Guntner and Andrew McLean claim that “[a]udiences came to expect, and party cultural functionaries came to suspect, that Shakespeare productions might just contain gift-wrapped critiques of the GDR’s socialist system” (1998, 13). They go on to attribute considerable political agency to Shakespeare productions in the *Wende*: “Shakespeare performance became instrumental in shaping a political awareness and new self-confidence among the people *that led to* the 1989 bloodless revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall” (Guntner and McLean 1998, 13, emphasis added). This statement places Shakespeare performance and the fall of the Berlin Wall in a direct causal relationship – a problematic assertion, not least in terms of evidence.

The notion that Shakespeare performance played a decisive role in the events of 1989 is bolstered by the perception that GDR theater more generally intervened to bring down the Berlin Wall:

Apart from the churches, theatres in the GDR provided the only public forums for political debate, and so it was perhaps unsurprising that it was theatre workers in Berlin who organised the first officially sanctioned protest demonstration in East Berlin on 4 November 1989. Within days the Wall had fallen, both literally and metaphorically. (Patterson and Huxley 1998, 230)

Although it is true that many East Berlin theater practitioners were involved in organizing the 4 November demonstration, Patterson and Huxley’s phrasing obscures the connections between events. It presents the 4 November protest march as an isolated event, instead of a political rally following months of peace prayers and demonstrations in Leipzig and other cities, few of which were organized by theater practitioners. Moreover, the fact that this demonstration was “officially sanctioned” could be taken to mean that theater practitioners were in the privileged position of

being able to negotiate with Party officials, without risking the brutal state intervention experienced by other protesters during the autumn of 1989.

In order to understand the interplay between East German theater and the GDR government, it is important to realize that the vast majority of actors and directors working in the GDR was committed to the ideals of socialism. Throughout the GDR's forty-year history, it was considered theater's chief function to promote socialist ideals and open up discussion of these in society. According to director Adolf Dresen (1992, 74–75), theater's intentions changed very little throughout GDR history: instead, the political reality outside the theater gradually eroded socialist ideals by moving increasingly towards “actually existing socialism”. As the gulf between utopia and reality widened, theater continued to do what it had done since the GDR's founding in 1949, namely remind audiences of socialism's original ideals – with the unexpected outcome of finding itself in the camp of political opposition, because these ideals had not been achieved (Hammerthaler 1994, 259; Bradley 2010, 3). Nevertheless, many GDR theater practitioners remained passionately committed to a theater of social and political responsibility. They were convinced of carrying out the important task of criticizing the government, whilst working within an institutional framework provided by that same government.

It is therefore important to note the diverging goals of theater practitioners and other participants in the protest movement. Many younger GDR citizens wanted freedom to travel and access to the goods and lifestyle of the capitalist West. Their mass exodus in 1989 threatened the continued existence of a separate German socialist state. In contrast to this, most artists were campaigning for *reform* of the existing system, not for rapid reunification with the West. Some of the most vocal ensembles were in fact strongly opposed to reunification. Their coordinated protest

actions must be seen as a reaction to the emigration crisis, and an attempt to preserve the GDR as a sovereign state. These contradictions between theater practitioners and other protesters were thrown into stark relief during the rehearsal period for Müller's production of *Hamlet* in the autumn of 1989.

Hamlet/Maschine and the Revolution

As more and more people were fleeing the GDR via Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and GDR citizens were taking to the streets to voice their views, Müller was rehearsing *Hamlet* in combination with his own *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977) at the Deutsches Theater, with Ulrich Mühe in the title role. Rehearsals for the production began on 30 August 1989, meaning that it quickly got caught up in the political upheaval preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November. After a difficult and frequently interrupted rehearsal period, the production finally opened on 24 March 1990, a week after the GDR's first free elections had resulted in a victory for the Conservative Party, thereby accelerating the drive towards unification. Directed by the GDR's most famous dramatist since Brecht, starring some of its foremost actors at one of the most politicized ensembles in the country, *Hamlet/Maschine* has come to be regarded as one of the most significant events in German postwar theater history (Hamburger 1998, 428; Kranz 1995, 87).

Since its rehearsal period overlapped so strongly with the events of the *Wende*, there has been a temptation to read *Hamlet/Maschine* as an illustration of these events (Heine 1999). Critics have characterized the production as “the swansong of the East German theatre,” (Ledebur 2008, 141) “a ritual wake for a country,” (Guntner 2008, 190) “a gigantic postmortem not only of Shakespeare's play but of the GDR,” (Höfele

1992, 84) and “the paradigmatic Wende-production” (Varney 2008, 9). Müller himself characterized *Hamlet* as “a play about a state crisis, about a rift between two eras and an intellectual who perishes in this rift” (Kranz 1990).

Müller set the play within a large, melting ice cube made of gauze, which gradually gave way to a desert scene of catastrophic global warming and climate change. Although the set by Austrian designer Erich Wonder gestured towards a larger frame of reference, early rehearsal notes show that Müller was very interested in showing GDR politics on stage. At the first rehearsal dramaturg Alexander Weigel stated as the production’s key questions: “why can there be no political opposition in the GDR,” and “is there an alternative to the GDR?”, concluding that the “GDR can only exist as an anti-fascist, democratic system; opening would mean destruction of its existence” (Suschke 1989a). At the same rehearsal, Mühe asked why the two Guards in the first scene do not report sightings of the Ghost to Claudius. Müller explained that during this transitional phase, “Claudius is trying to gain favor with the Politburo: while the people cheer for the new leader, the guards are still on the side of the previous government” (Suschke 1989a). The original concept, then, was very much about drawing parallels between the GDR and characters or situations in *Hamlet*. This intention continued throughout September, with production notes calling Laertes “the GDR citizen in Paris, the world traveller,” (Suschke 1989b) and “Horatio, the *Spiegel*-reader from Wittenberg” (Suschke 1989c).

As the protest movement gathered momentum, the rapid political and social changes of autumn 1989 encroached on the rehearsal process. Very little progress was made from October to November because many of the actors were involved in protest events. On 15 October, theater practitioners from across the GDR gathered at the Deutsches Theater to discuss recent political events. They had previously met at the

East Berlin Volksbühne on 7 October, coinciding with the GDR's fortieth anniversary. In the intervening week, events in the GDR had escalated: protesters and innocent bystanders on the fringes of the fortieth anniversary celebrations were beaten, taken into illegal custody, and ritually humiliated by the police. The violence continued for another two days, and since the GDR government had suspended travel to Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the month, pressure inside the GDR continued to mount.

It was in the wake of these events that the second meeting of actors and directors took place. Organized by Johanna Schall (Brecht's granddaughter), and chaired by Thomas Neumann (Müller's Guildenstern), the discussion lasted four hours. One of its key outcomes was the decision to organize a large protest rally in East Berlin on 4 November. However, neither the idea for this demonstration, nor its date, nor the proposed route, was originally the theater practitioners' idea.

On the day before the Deutsches Theater discussion, the (still illegal) citizens' movement "New Forum" had held its first GDR-wide meeting in East Berlin. In view of the growing demonstrations in Leipzig, some of the 120 members suggested organizing a similar protest in the East German capital. They intended to make this a legal demonstration by exploiting a new GDR law, which, though passed in July 1989, had not been widely publicized (Rübesame 2010, 18). However, since the New Forum was under police surveillance, its members realized that they had no chance of a successful application. It was a question of finding other people sympathetic to the movement, who were more likely to obtain government approval. Since there were many New Forum sympathizers in the theater scene, this is where the civil rights activists turned.

The subsequent events owe much to coincidence. Jutta Seidel, a dentist and New Forum member who had attended the meeting, lived next door to Jutta Wachowiak, an actress at the Deutsches Theater. Together with dramaturg Maik Hamburger, Wachowiak had been campaigning for the legalization of the New Forum among her colleagues since September. As Seidel knew the theater practitioners were due to meet the next day, she wrote her neighbor a letter, asking her to publicize the application for a legal demonstration among the theater community. At the meeting, Wachowiak read out the New Forum's application, which was greeted with enthusiastic applause (Rübesame 2010, 115).

This sequence of events reveals that the initiative for the demonstration lay squarely with the New Forum, which was, in a sense, using East Berlin artists for its political agenda. Due to their privileged position and cultural status, theater practitioners were trusted by the GDR government, and therefore had a better chance of success in applying for a legal demonstration. These artists occupied a key position at the interface of dissidence and state power. They had proven for decades that they could articulate dissent within a contained framework predetermined by the government, whilst remaining loyal to the ideals of socialism. This meant that theater practitioners were useful to both sides in 1989. The civil rights activists knew that artists shared their ideals of reformed socialism, while the GDR government trusted them not to threaten its existence. It was therefore a strategic move on the part of the New Forum to seek out people who simultaneously supported reformist ideas and benefitted from the trust of Party functionaries.

Once the Wall had fallen, rehearsals for Müller's *Hamlet/Maschine* quickly turned into a race against day-to-day politics. Realizing the huge impact this event would have on the future of the GDR, Müller stated in rehearsal on 9 November that

“the most important thing by opening night” would be Hamlet’s statement “Thrift, thrift, Horatio”, which in Müller’s translation had become “Wirtschaft” – the German word for “economy” (Suschke 1989f). At this point, Müller abandoned many of the GDR parallels he had originally suggested in order to avoid creating a “meta-allegory” (Barnett 2006, 193).

Whereas other directors might have embraced parallels between the “rotten” state of the GDR and the events in *Hamlet*, Müller’s strategy was to resist the notion of a single code for interpreting the text, as he was afraid of limiting the play’s meanings. Rehearsal notes from 17 November reveal that in Müller’s view, “any ‘GDR translation’ would be fatal; there is no longer a GDR that you could quote or defamiliarize; by opening night everything would be overtaken by events” (Martin 1989a). David Barnett claims that Müller preferred metaphor to allegory, since allegory ties every production element to a particular meaning, whereas metaphor opens up meanings outside of the author’s control. Barnett maintains that Müller adopted a policy of “strategic ignorance” in rehearsals, refusing to impose his viewpoint on a scene, in order to facilitate a layering of individual creative impulses through improvisation (Barnett 2006, 190–91). In Müller’s understanding, the audience must be a producer, not merely a recipient, of meaning, and therefore the theater’s task lies in “fashioning a set of open relations with the script that includes the actors, the director and the audience” (Barnett 2006, 190). Müller applied this idea to his directing practice for *Hamlet/Maschine*, suggesting general ideas to the actors, but leaving it to them to turn these into performances.

While Müller feared that incorporating political allusions would render the production dead on arrival, his cast were keen to continue using allegorical Shakespeare performance to comment on current events. Although according to

Barnett, Müller's refusal to impose a clear point of view was a coherent, intentional strategy, in practice it proved extremely confusing and frustrating for the actors, and at several points endangered the production's future. Mühe later described working with Müller as "a bit like being tortured on the rack," since his direction often took the form of "a sort of political joke" with no immediate relevance to the scene (Kranz 1990, 10). Jörg-Michael Koerbl (Horatio) described rehearsals for *Hamlet/Maschine* as "very boring", because "Müller requires his actors to become machines" (Rüter 1990).

This torturous process resulted in rising tension between Müller and his cast. After rehearsing the "closet scene" in October 1989, production assistant Stephan Suschke noted: "Müller has hardly said anything during rehearsal, but it still generated a lot of material: activity through lack of directing" (Suschke 1989d). Upon revisiting the scene ten days later, the notes state: "after many attempts with many different means Uli Mühe asks Müller for an acting style, for an aesthetic. Müller remains silent..." (Suschke 1989e). Despite increasing frustration among the cast, Müller continued on this course for several more months, forcing the actors to generate huge amounts of material, but refusing to decide on the final version of a scene. After the first run-through in December 1989, production assistant Thomas Martin noted that "since there has been hardly any description of what is visible or experienced, it is difficult for the actors to preserve what they have achieved, which causes insecurity" (Martin 1989c). Voicing the cast's anxiety, Jörg Gudzuhn (Claudius) stated: "I've had seventy rehearsals and I feel as though it's only been seven" (Martin 1989c).

A week after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Martin noted that the rehearsal process had reached its "hitherto lowest point" (Martin 1989a). The cast complained

that “the huge production team creates a deadly atmosphere in rehearsal,” and that there was “no concentration between stage and auditorium” (Martin 1989a). Artistic concerns mixed with political insecurity among cast and crew during this discussion, as the notes show: “Additional terrorization through opening of the borders; loss of privileges, dent in elite consciousness, renewed affirmation that the people (who is that anymore) are stupid” (Martin 1989a). This political disillusionment quickly turned into hostility between members of the production team. A rehearsal on 23 November began with “assistants and dramaturg jostling for positions”, and ended, in a particularly vitriolic vein, with Martin recording in the rehearsal notes that “Rosencrantz = assistant Suschke with his attempts to fit into a social market economy” (Martin 1989b). It seems that the lack of communication between actors, director, and production team was never resolved. In mid-December actress Margarita Broich (Ophelia) remained convinced that the production team was sitting around unproductively, “like a fat, unresponsive blob” (Martin 1989c).

In contrast to many of the *post hoc* claims that *Hamlet/Maschine* used the events of autumn 1989 productively, the actors continued to criticize that political events were not being incorporated into the production. After the opening of the borders, many cast members struggled with bitter disillusionment at the fact that their protest had achieved the exact opposite of what they had intended: the ideal of a reformed GDR had been jettisoned in exchange for rapid reunification with the West. In January 1990, Gudzuhn confessed that

This 9 November and the things that subsequently came to the surface have driven me into lethargy, because I feel as though I’ve been used [...]. That’s a very depressing incision in my life, which has devastating consequences for my existence as an actor and also for this rehearsal process. (Suschke 1990)

Dagmar Manzel (Gertrude) echoed these sentiments, pointing out that the depressing situation they all faced could be useful in rehearsal, but “at exactly that point we remain silent [...] we avoid conflict, a conflict which could be productive” (Suschke 1990). Instead of fostering creativity, Müller’s strategy appears to have resulted mainly in silence and insecurity.

The fall of the Berlin Wall had a paralyzing effect on most of the actors, who clung to the conviction that their work on stage should have political impact, and should mirror their activism on the streets. Müller’s refusal to allegorize topical events indicates that he recognized the myth of interventionist Shakespeare performance for what it was. He realized that in this case theater had been overtaken by events, that it did not have the power to change the world, or to voice the population’s pressing concerns. In a provocative statement in 1981 Müller had confessed: “it’s a problem of mine [...] that I have absolutely no interest in the problems of the majority of people in the GDR or in the Federal Republic” (Müller 1989, 25). By the early 1980s, Müller had already reached the conclusion that his theater practice would be exclusionary: “I can only see one possibility: to use the theatre for very small groups of people (it doesn’t exist for the masses anymore anyway)” (Müller 1989, 28).

Despite all of Müller’s efforts to avoid allegory, many critics did interpret his *Hamlet/Maschine* as an illustration of GDR society and politics. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* called it “a very modern, very political *Hamlet* that is at times almost too closely connected to current events in the GDR”, arguing that “neither Müller’s translation nor his production miss an opportunity to direct attention towards the GDR system” (Sucher 1990). The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* concluded that “Denmark becomes the GDR, and capitalism, ‘taking over’ the GDR, becomes

Fortinbras” (Stadelmaier 1990). Barnett (2006, 198) concludes that “Müller was doomed to failure” in his attempt to draw on a wider field of associations, since “he could not insulate his theater from the reunification that was proceeding apace in both Germanies”. Although Müller aimed to situate the production in a much wider context, Varney (2008, 14) argues that “[p]olitics in this instance would prove stronger and more able than the director to impose itself on theatre and its reception”. For most reviewers, the political context cast a long shadow over *Hamlet/Maschine*, closing down other possible horizons of interpretation.

If Müller’s approach to directing can be called a strategy, it was at best daring, at worst inept in its treatment of actors. Some of the politically active cast members felt it was naïve to be creating theater while there was a revolution going on outside, and several of Müller’s actors threatened to leave the production due to his directing style (Rüter 2008). As concerns the production’s longevity, Müller was fortunate in several respects. First, the *Wende* provided additional topicality and heightened media interest in *Hamlet/Maschine*. Second, the predetermined set design prevented the production from visually representing the GDR. Whatever topical allusions spectators might perceive in the onstage action, the setting continually suggested a larger frame of reference. Erich Wonder’s gigantic cycloramas further boosted the production’s afterlife by providing imposing production shots for inclusion in German theater histories. Moreover, Christoph Rüter’s two television documentaries dealing with the production intercut footage of *Hamlet/Maschine* rehearsals with interviews and protest rallies, suggesting a close connection between the actions inside and outside the theater in 1989 (Rüter 1990; 2008). As a result, *Hamlet/Maschine* became inextricably linked in spectators’ minds with the East German revolution, bolstering

the notion that a production of Shakespeare's greatest play had changed the course of history by inspiring its audiences to rise up against an oppressive regime.

Whilst not wishing to underestimate theater practitioners' role during the *Wende*, it is important to note that their political involvement had very little to do with theater content, let alone with Shakespeare. Although political events had a significant impact on Müller's *Hamlet*-production, the reverse is not strictly true. It is undeniable that in autumn 1989, East Berlin theater artists organized the largest demonstration in GDR history. However, the sequence of events leading up to this moment makes clear that due to their unique position in GDR society, these artists were catapulted to the head of a pre-existing movement – a fact which subsequently led many to re-script their role as originators of the protest movement. Actress Johanna Schall was one of few actors who later admitted that “[w]e boarded a moving train, and what we did came from a relatively protected position” (Wahl 2009, 42). In the case of the Deutsches Theater, the very fact of its privileged position at the artistic and financial pinnacle of GDR theater enabled the ensemble to organize its own forms of protest with minimal risk of reprisals. By charting the shifting political sands of the *Wende* we can begin to disentangle the causal relationships between theater practitioners' actions, the East German protest movement, and political change. Instead of casting theater artists as the spearhead of the protest movement, this alternative interpretation suggests that the avant-garde actually fought in the rearguard of a political movement that was already well underway in November 1989.

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