

Finding the other stories

**A research
on more diverse perspectives
and contemporary dialogic storytelling
in theater for children in a no-longer-white society**

First exploration
from July 1, 2022 to Dec. 31, 2024

What we are so far

The KiTZ Theaterkumpanei produces outstanding plays for children and young people.

The ensemble around the theater makers Bärbel Maier and Peer Damminger has existed since 1989, when they founded the Theater Montage together with René Pollesch and other graduates of the Giessen Drama, Theater, Medien program in Frankenthal, which has been operating since 1995, first as KiTZ - Mobiles Kinder- und Jugendtheaterzentrum (Mobile Children's and Youth Theater Center), and since 2005 as KiTZ Theaterkumpanei.

During this time, the ensemble put on 75 plays with a changing cast.

Today, the Theaterkumpanei is a free, professional ensemble that receives regular funding from the city of Ludwigshafen, the Palatinate District and the State of Rhineland-Palatinate. Its creative home is the Theaterladen in Ludwigshafen. Annually, about 150 performances are staged there, throughout Germany and internationally.

What kind of theater does Kumpanei stand for? First of all: We create theater for children and young people. Not with children and young people. In doing so, we profess, no, we invented the aesthetic of the poetic didactic play.

A didactic play in the Brechtian sense is a play that teaches something to others. Kumpanei is always concerned with conveying socially relevant content. Racism, exclusion, social interaction are topics of Kumpanei.

We state what is - in a very poetic way. Sometimes these are bitter pills in beautiful packaging.

After 33 years of successful theater work, we know how to bring our stories to the stage in a touching and effective way. We have achieved a special quality with our work that has created a respectable and recognizable position for us in the market. We could certainly continue like this: Taking few risks, marketing well despite or precisely because of social, ethical and economic crises, while always maintaining our aesthetic level.

But that is not enough for us.

Who we are

Peer Damminger

Born in Kirchheimbolanden, grew up in Frankenthal.

After studying theater in Erlangen and Gießen, co-founder of the theater together with Bärbel Maier, René Pollesch.

Guest performances in Iran, activities as a docent for institutes in Tehran, Esfahan and Qom.

He is the initiator of the foundation of the Landesverband professioneller Freier Theater RLP (laprofth) and currently one of the spokespersons of the AK Südwest of the ASSITEJ.

1996: Foundation Prize for the Promotion of the Arts in the Palatinate

2007: Theatre Award 14th Isfahan International Festival, Best Play

2008: "Children's Theater of the Month" in NRW

2010: Theatre Award 17th Hamedan International Festival, Best Direction, Stage Design, Actors

2014: Special Award, Penguin's Day Festival Moers

Bärbel Maier

Born and raised in Ludwigshafen am Rhein.

Studied at the Institute for Applied Theater Studies in Giessen with George Tabori, Heiner Müller, Hans Thieß-Lehmann and Adolf Dresen. Graduated in 1989.

Founded the theater in 1989 with Peer Damminger, René Pollesch.

Engagements at TAT, Frankfurt, SCHNAWWL, Mannheim, ZDF - Das kleine Fernsehspiel.

2001: Paul Maar Scholarship

2004: Heidelberg Theater Prize for "Nepal" (director)

2007: Theatre Award 14th Isfahan International Festival, Best Play

2009: Theater Award 16th Isfahan International Festival, Best Music

2010: Theater Award 17th Hamedan International Festival, Best Play

2014: Establishment and opening of own venue

The other stories

In March 2021, a scandal broke out at the ASSITEJ's virtual World Congress. The event, "Making Use of Fine Differences in Multicultural Settings," led by "white"¹ theater makers* from Switzerland, was to explore how to turn prejudice into a brand and how to use prejudice as a unique selling point on stage to create a sense of community.

Brazilian theater expert Viviane Juguero, the only People of Color (POC)² participant in the format, blasted the event by saying that she no longer accepts "white" artists explaining to the world how theater works. The official part of the World Congress failed in dealing with this criticism.

Through my mediation, the participants and others met the following day in a specially arranged Zoom to give space to the intervention of the Brazilian colleague. During this discussion, the position of the POCs who intervened culminated in the statement:

"Europe no longer lives in a "white" society - but "whites" can only take "white" perspectives, tell "white" stories, and thus no longer validly describe and reflect their own diverse society - they consequently lose the right to make theater for society!"

A radical position, but one that should not be immediately dismissed for its mercilessness.

Of course, all cultural institutions must ask themselves whether and how they reflect the diversity of society in their creative personnel.

¹ "White" and "whiteness," like "blackness," do not denote a biological characteristic or a real skin color, but a political and social construction. Whiteness refers to the dominant and privileged position within the power relationship of racism, which otherwise remains mostly unspoken and unnamed. Whiteness encompasses an unconscious concept of self and identity that shapes white people's self-views and behaviors and relegates them to a privileged place in society in terms of, for example, access to resources. A critical reflection on whiteness consists of reversing the focus on those structures and subjects that cause and benefit from racism and established itself as a paradigm shift in English-language racism studies in the 1980s. The impetus for this was the political struggles and critiques of People of Color. (<https://www.amnesty.de/2017/3/1/glossar-fuer-diskriminierungssensible-sprache>)

² People of Color / Menschen of Color is an international self-designation of/for people with experiences of racism. The term marks a political social position and sees itself as emancipatory and in solidarity. It positions itself against attempts at division through racism and culturalization as well as against discriminatory foreign designations by the white majority society." (<https://www.amnesty.de/2017/3/1/glossar-fuer-diskriminierungssensible-sprache>)

Diverse perspectives are indispensable for an appropriate examination of our reality. After all, with our theater, with our narratives, we not only describe our societies, we create them!

Back in 2009, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explained this power of storytelling in a TED Talk³. She describes the danger that lies in the "one" story. "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

But what if the creative core of a production unit consists of only one or two "pixels" - two artists who are "white"!

If we do not want to accept a ban on activity and at the same time acknowledge Viviane Juguero's truth, we MUST as a creative team go in search of "other" - more diverse perspectives.

In 140-160 performances annually, we EXPERIENCE that our audience is not "white" - and we want and need to go in search of those other stories. We are looking for these perspectives, the stories, the storytellers and creatives who tell these stories for us and with us. This journey takes us abroad so that we can come back and better understand and explain our world at home.

We are looking for a new theater for our audience - new in FORM and in CONTENT. Both are to be explored - pursuing the good, safe, still valid theater, while finding strength and time to set out to research - to search, while being allowed to bear not knowing what the theater we will discover will look like

³ TED Talk: The Danger of the Single Story - Our lives, our cultures, are made up of many overlapping stories. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found the authentic voice of her culture - and warns us that when we hear just one story about another person or country, we risk a worrisome misunderstanding.
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=de

Other FORMS

Working on the FORM we want to take up the latest findings of Attention Research of children and adolescents⁴. Media consumption behavior changes the span of attention, the persistence, but at the same time the ability to understand complex contexts in a shorter time.

Corona has accelerated this development. The special demands of a collective visit to the theater are no longer trained. The children become restless, want to participate, become more demanding. Many theater makers* feel disturbed.

But it is more exciting to develop a theater form that accepts these altered reception habits as qualities. Theater with children has to be understood in a new way - not by bringing the children on stage - but by making their contemplative reflection part of the performance.

Right at the beginning of the Corona pandemic, in June 2020, we evolved our table drama "Piccolo Suicidio - Bittersweet End" and set out on the track of this dialogic performance practice. Following the dictates of the pandemic, we found a smallest form in which to play, discuss and conclude a performance step by step with the children. The resulting dialogue was intense and surprising for all involved. A teacher's feedback on the experience is included in the material.

We will continue to work on short, quick narrative forms and on a dialogic performance practice that notices and creatively uses audience feedback in the further development of the theater.

⁴ SWR2 Knowledge: Distracted, distracted, inattentive - Are we losing the ability to concentrate?
<https://www.swr.de/swr2/wissen/zerstreut-abgelenkt-unaufmerksam-verlieren-wir-die-faehigkeit-zur-konzentration-100.html>

OTHER CONTENT

We would like to take Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's call for the "other" stories and link them to other current insights and discussions. Connecting Yuval Noah Harari's explanation of intersubjective fiction as the constituent essence of Homo Sapiens to Adichie, finding the truly commonsensical narratives will be of vital importance in saving our model of democratic society from demise (and not surrendering entirely to Harari's predictions).

The other story is THE artistic cure for the growing sense of irrelevance.

Other stories don't have to be fiction. In a post-factual society, the invention of a new documentary theater may be the key to new insights - finding previously unperceived human life worlds and a new evaluation of reality by looking at the way things are.

Finding other stories also means finding other artists who share their stories with us. It is not enough to simply go to the library and find collections of African fairy tales.

There is a fine line between artistic devotion and cultural appropriation. One's own "whiteness" must be constantly questioned. Dealing with colonial history, restitution, and the idea of cultural dialogue as a means of development policy will generate insights for dealing with racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and classism.

These are enormous approaches - we are aware of the dimensions of the venture.

Following are thoughts on an initial exploration along four paths. .

Exploration paths

First Path - Southeast: Iran

In 2007 we toured Iran for the first time with a theater play. Over 15 years, depending on the political constellations, we have maintained very intensive cooperations that come very close to an exploration. Fifteen journeys, which took us to many places in stays of up to one month and in interaction with many people, have sustainably changed our understanding of our own society and inspired various theater pieces.

We have built up a network there over time and thus important access points that we can use for our new research. Mehdi Farshidi Sepehr, Sarah Zabri, Omid Niaz and Hamid Pourazari are successful theater makers* who have a large repertoire and have explored different theater forms and theatrical venues in very exciting works.

Puppeteer Sharareh Tayyar, who herself has won national awards with one of our plays translated into Farsi, will accompany us on the research as a competent interpreter and organizer. Thanks to her, we will quickly find other artists who will share their views and stories with us.

Iran is also the eastern extension of our research. The focus there is on the perspective of an Islamic society, which stands with its own cultural history in the field of tension of the Arabic-influenced Islam. Over a thousand years, events have had an impact on our society. The fall of Jerusalem and the spread of Islam to Spain and Portugal are the impulse for the later discovery, division and exploitation of the world by old Europe. The rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire, the "German Jihad" of the late colonial period continue to impact perceptions of religious minorities today. Discover history, understand tensions and see connections to the other paths of exploration.

Second path - South: Rwanda

We would like to link to the collaborative relationship between Rwanda and Rhineland-Palatinate to follow the trail of German colonial occupation. In the field of theater, such explorations - unlike in the field of music - do not yet exist. It is not only German history that needs to be discovered and understood. The distinction between Hutu and Tutsi, arbitrarily brought about by the German and Belgian colonial rulers, led to the genocide of the Hutu against the Tutsi in 1994. Dealing with this trauma was mainly in the hands of women - who seem to be of central importance in Rwandan society today. Is this really the case or just the illusion of Western societies? Can we speak of a healed society?

What is the significance of shared stories in this social healing process, what role does art and culture play in this process, does it play any role at all? What forms of theater are there - what narrative traditions? Is there Rwandan theater for children and young people and where does it take place?

We would like to build up this completely new access for us not only through the existing relationships of the country. Through the ASSITEJ we establish contact with the theater maker Hope Azeda and also through 'Soroptimist International' there are connections that we can use for a first exploration.

Third Path - Southwest: Portugal

A few years ago we had the opportunity to discover the artists' collective "LAC - Laboratório de Actividades Criativas" in the southwestern corner of Portugal, in the city of Lagos. In the city's former prison, international guests of various artistic genres have been working in the cells, corridors, halls and courtyards of the building complex since 1995. In an initially subversive initiative, the artists* worked their way into the public space of the port city. Artworks on ruins, in window niches, on electricity boxes, and now entire walls of buildings lead out into the region and curious people back to the creative center in the LAC on the traces of the works.

Many of the works deal with urban areas of tension and create a dialogue with a public that is in part initially dismissive, changing its perception of art and its effect on society.

At the beginning of each year, the entire building is painted in white to create space for new works. This spring, we discovered the work of Portuguese artist Sofia Fortunato there, who critically examines Portugal's own colonial history and its significant role in the development of the slave trade. In Portuguese society, too, the critical reappraisal of colonial history is only just beginning. Pride in Henry the Navigator, the founder of Portugal's maritime and colonial power, weighs too heavily. Engaging with and sitting down with the work and the artist is a step towards our own approach to our work in Rwanda.

Having our own residency at LAC with the interdisciplinary exchange practiced there is a goal at the end of the first exploration in 2024.

In Aljezur we got to know and appreciate the artist collective "Lavar o mar" around Giacomo Scalisi and Madalena Victorino. They work in exciting projects with agricultural workers from India and Sri Lanka, who work in the southwest of Portugal as the cheapest and most exploited labor force in agriculture, and in groups of several people crammed into the simplest apartments compete with the Portuguese rural population for cheap housing and work. They work with international colleagues in dance performances, offer workshops, perform in public spaces in villages and thus take the population with them.

In the tiny village of Bordeira on the west coast of the Algarve, a former elementary school is to be transformed into a cultural center under their direction. It will be a space for meetings, rehearsals and performances for local and international artists and a starting point for international networking. As part of the exploration, we want to get involved as a theater in this emerging creative space.

The German street theater artist Thorsten Grütjen lives and works in Aljezur, performs with his plays all over the country and will be our guide and translator as a friend, colleague and occasional contributor to "Lavrar o mar".

Fourth Path – North-east-south-west: Festivals

Many colleagues are already searching, developing new exciting forms of theater, finding new stories to tell. With 150 performances a year, we rarely have the time as producing theater-makers to get an insight into the work of others - to be stimulated and inspired.

Collaboration, artistic exchange and friendship with colleagues from Russia, the Czech Republic, Iran, Nigeria, Tanzania, India and Lebanon have enriched and shaped our work.

The fourth path is to take us to important international festivals, where we have the opportunity to see and measure ourselves with the current state of theater for young people, to make contacts and to have the chance to learn. That's where the important discussions take place about ways, forms and content of theater - where you can participate and broaden your horizons.

There are important festivals in Oslo, Nuremberg, St. Gallen, Amsterdam, The Hague and Edinburgh. All of them are visited by the "major" German children's and youth theaters and functionaries. We will also visit some of them, always in exchange with our German colleagues, most of whom we already know from the ASSITEJ networks.