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Über die Linie
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On Der Sonne entgegen
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Der Sonne entgegen is a scenic *cahier d'esquisse et d'inquietudes*. It is the result of an extensive debate between composer, writer and director about creating a music theatre piece that focuses on the urgent issues to which today's political and geographical borders give rise in the context of the economically fuelled tendency to the delocalisation and de-territorialisation of political power. This is not the dilemma of an individual, so we have chosen to play with the idea of a heterogeneous group of non-protagonists: various characters from various areas of the world, and even from various times.

Our initial inspiration was the disenchanted view of Paul Virilio, as expressed in his book *Cybermonde. La politique du pire* (1996): "When one does away with a frontier, it's because it will be put up again somewhere else. When one says that the frontier doesn't exist anymore, it means that the frontier is concealed. The frontier is somewhere. *La frontière est quelque part.*"

The frontier is the *limes*, the line whereby each of us is defined and classified as part of a group, to a great extent by the limitations imposed by the presence of others beyond that line. This kind of reciprocity of border zones, this sharing of an outer limit, side by side, is inevitable and impossible to get over: it is a need and yet a wound. The suspicion that a border may be unfair to us or to the others is inseparable from our need to separate ourselves from the others and be defined and recognised as insiders. Our end is their beginning. Steffi Hensel ended up writing a text that rejects linearity: it creates different layers and plays with multiple simultaneous perspectives. There is not one voice but many. There is not one reality but an extended idea of it, a mixture of fiction and fact, a tableau of internal fears, dreams and hopes as well as external facts and real power games.

The radical Körper-Theater approach of Michael v. zur Mühlen tends instead to potentiate the impact of gestures imported from the reality outside us. He represented our imaginary *limes* as a set in the form of a giant wooden cube, which also functioned as an enormous percussion instrument, in our first production of *Der Sonne entgegen* in Gelsenkirchen (2007). Now, for the Sophiensäle, the scenic space is reminiscent of an eternal camp in which people are indefinitely confined. The Line is there, in front of them. They wait anxiously, or else they are perhaps determined to transform their existence into a state of frozen expectation. But how and why do you make yourself comfortable in an unbearable situation? One way to escape, to get across the boundary, is to be dead or appear to be dead, as at the end of our second scene. Here we find a group of zombies, elegantly led by the tenor Florian Just, intoning the expressionist rhythms of a *chanson* by Clément Janequin, with the help of Hensel's nonsensical text:

Wind Wind himmlisches Kind/Knick knack knirscht Knochen/ Kräftig blasen die Jahrhunderte/Der Zahn der Zeit zerlegt selbst den Zement/Stetes Wasser höhlt den Stein/Risse Rost Ruinen/Die Gebirge wandern, die Wolken stehen still/Einen Schutzwall gegen den Sturm gibt es nicht.

There they stay, the 14 performers, unable to return to where they came from, and unable to proceed with the complicated process of integration. They are perennially confined to the *Grenzland*, a cramped ambiguous space that forces them to be reciprocally defined, acquiring meaning only through the presence of all the others. The composition resembles this space in the virtuoso counterpoint of the declarations sung by the characters, who, although squeezed into a limited area, are nevertheless autonomous, and full of resonating dreams created by the refined engineering of Thomas Seelig with his live electronics program, which supports and elaborates on the theme of the peculiar alternation of night and day in border zones.

Every frontier bears within itself the concept of its violation, every border is potentially penetrable and corrupt. The border as hell suspended, the first sight of a personal precipice, and that endless ebb and flow of day and night: the violence of diurnal inspections followed by suspended disbelief during the night.

Der Sonne entgegen, the oneiric title suggested by Steffi Hensel, was chosen for its utopian resonance. It cannot be limited to just one interpretation, but flaunts a visionary openness. It is somehow enchanted, too. It's a title with a "past" as a slogan, used and misused by a variety of artistic and political movements. For me *Der Sonne entgegen* is a nocturnal title.

In the border zone every dream begins with "trans", and all "trans" words acquire a new potential. *Transport, transparent, transit, transistor, transfusion, transfer, transvestite, transplantation*. The woman enjoying her holidays in the first scene, the intense soprano Katja Guedes, in a situation of apparent freedom, mechanically repeats this series of words, preparing the group for the accumulation of people near the border and the bitterness of being known to be left behind.

Ich will mich treiben lassen, says one of the unidentified but eternal characters. The ensemble of anonymous figures is a group of people from different times and places, suggestive of an inchoate heterogeneous community, evolving from migration to integration. But here the evolution is incomplete, the characters are instead part of an endless loop, repeating itself time after time, as in Jules Verne's *L'éternel Adam*.

This cyclic variation, whose changing shapes inform all five scenes, is meant to last for years, indeed for generations.

To accentuate group cohesion, we created, in contrasting juxtaposition to the group, an *Ego Alter* of the group, the character of a female figure skater gliding through the polished space and, just as easily, over the frontier. She, the sensible and hieratic soprano Ruth Rosenfeld, engages an imaginary iceberg in speculation about its borderless Antarctic home and, in the end, refuses to join the process of integration that the group would impose on her. Her artificial voice (realised by bass tuba solo and live electronics) and her stability and balance in the midst of group metamorphosis, underscore the difference between the realistic scenes in which, although present, she is violently cast aside, and the dream scene, featuring her alone.

She evokes the idea of the *foreign* as described by Georg Simmel in his *Exkurs über den Fremden* (Soziologie, 1908):

"Es ist hier also der Fremde nicht in dem bisher vielfach berührten Sinn gemeint, als der Wandernde, der heute kommt und morgen geht, sondern als der, der heute kommt und morgen bleibt - sozusagen der potentiell

Wandernde, der, obgleich er nicht weitergezogen ist, die Gelöstheit des Kommens und Gehens nicht ganz überwunden hat. Er ist innerhalb eines bestimmten räumlichen Umkreises - oder eines, dessen Grenzbestimmtheit der räumlichen analog ist - fixiert, aber seine Position in diesem ist dadurch wesentlich bestimmt, dass er nicht von vornherein in ihn gehört, dass er Qualitäten, die aus ihm nicht stammen und stammen können, in ihn hineinträgt. Die Einheit von Nähe und Entferntheit, die jegliches Verhältnis zwischen Menschen enthält, ist hier zu einer, am kürzesten so zu formulierenden Konstellation gelangt: die Distanz innerhalb des Verhältnisses bedeutet, dass der Nahe fern ist, das Fremdsein aber, dass der Ferne nah ist."

This was also an influence on the compositional treatment of the many choral sections of the work, where the subdivided ensemble of 14 voices is not primarily employed in order to create masses of sound: each performer sings as if it were a solo, and, as a whole, they are asked to create a sort of overlapping of 14 solitudes. This is also why the overall choreographic tension sought by Michael v. zur Mühlen, with his virtuoso continuum of motion, engages all the performers at once. The tension of their trembling-acting represents their painful presence in each phase: each one and all of them together are holiday-makers, migrants, outsiders, insiders or critical voices.

The brass ensemble, like the figure skater, represents fluidity, the possibility of changing status and assuming new social positions. The brass ensemble does not make its first appearance until the end of the third scene, where it represents the flow of information that influences and transforms the emigrants, and it turns into an explosive and emotionally powerful storm in the last scene. It is our negative *deus ex machina*, progressively affecting the performers, the music, the narration and the audience, breaking the rules of the theatre and opening the magic box.

The video artist Elisabetta Benassi is prominent in our central section, called *Weltall* in which she smoothes ruffled feathers with a video sequence in which accumulations of superfluous and abandoned techno-products are transmogrified into images of a lunar landscape. She offers a possible future challenge to the performers on stage, as the video camera probes mountains of trash hidden by the First World in previously unexplored locations. Benassi's characters, *moto-men* – dramatic hybrids of people and machines – are immobilised, paralysed by the heaps of spare parts. They are the same *déracinés* who are represented by the vocal ensemble in the following scene: people who are integrated but not yet insiders – without roots, as Simone Weil describes them in her *L'enracinement* (1949).

Migrants actually live in a situation of "double consciousness", which is also a "double absence" since they abandon their community of reference for another community, with its specific – and, for them, quite alien – territorial *nomos*, its rules and customs; for most of the time, they are estranged from both communities.

The newly arrived do not yet participate fully in the new political community, and their "right to have rights" in the old community exists primarily in theory.

At various points in the course of the work the performers seem to abandon their roles and become involved, in a heated debate about borders and the complex identity of migrants, which also reflects v. zur Mühlen's attempt to do away with the traditional border between the stage and 'real life'. They try to analyse the *jus excludendi alios* that increasingly informs our concept of freedom: the new combinations of *Ordnung* and *Ortung*, and the new economic praxis which subjects remote places to a new form of delocated occupation.

This haunting theme of borders, offered in interrogative form, is the unifying code of the open dramaturgical language of our work, in which we have sought to form a multiplicity of ghosts (migrants and insiders) from the same living ensemble, always on the sensitive border of our fictional *Linie*.
“Über die Linie”: across the line or on the line, the question is still open.