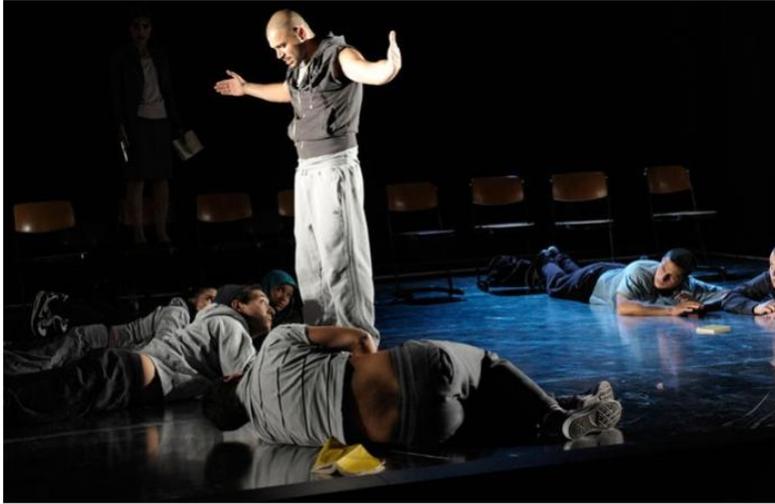


International: Gorki Theater



The Ballhaus Naunynstrasse production of Verrücktes Blut (Mad Blood) was invited to the Berliner Theatertreffen. Photo: Thomas Aurin

Features by Andrew Haydon - May 21, 2015

Set back from Unter der Linden, Berlin's wide tree-lined avenue sweeping east to west from Alexanderplatz to the Brandenburg Gate, the Maxim Gorki Theater is a vision of chocolate-box prettiness with its pristine white neoclassical exterior. It is the smallest of Berlin's 'Big Five' city-funded theatres – including the Volksbühne, Schaubühne, Berliner Ensemble's Theater am Schiffbauerdamm and Deutsches Theater – and stands almost opposite what used to be the Royal Opera House, now more democratically named the Comedy Opera.

The Gorki was built in 1827 as a musical conservatoire and a stage for affordable public recitals for Berliners, later becoming a state theatre in Soviet-controlled East Berlin. Nevertheless, despite its outwardly conservative appearance, it was last year named theatre of the year by Germany's leading industry magazine Theater Heute. And everyone knows why.

In 2013, Shermin Langhoff and Jens Hillje took over as joint artistic directors from the Gorki's successful if more traditional Armin Petras, who moved on to the Schauspiel Stuttgart. Langhoff was the Turkish-German brains behind the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Hillje its frequent dramaturg.

The fringe venue, founded by Langhoff in 2008, is significant for being in the heart of the heavily Turkish immigrant borough of Kreuzberg – think a much more radical version of the Arcola in London, with which it is now twinned – with programming that reflects its community. In recent years Kreuzberg has become a vibrant cultural quarter of the city.

The Gorki's repertoire and ensemble had previously been in line with the neighbouring, larger Deutsches Theater in producing 'regietheater' (director's theatre) versions of classic texts, the staple of German state-subsidised theatre. Langhoff and Hillje have respected this but also set about introducing their vision of 'post-migrant' theatre in a wave of new work and

performance art actions. To support this, they have brought in a new multi-ethnic ensemble and three in-house directors – German Sebastian Nubling, Turkish-German Nurkan Erpulat and Israeli Yael Ronen – with performances adding languages such as Turkish, Russian, Hebrew and English to German.

Langhoff and Hillje came to prominence back in 2011 when their Ballhaus production of *Verrücktes Blut* (Mad Blood) was invited to the Berliner Theatertreffen, Germany's top theatre festival, which showcases the 10 best German-language productions of the year.



Jens Hillje and Shermin Langhoff, artistic directors of the Maxim Gorki Theater. Photo: Esra Rotthoff

Company profile

Artistic directors: Shermin Langhoff, Jens Hillje
No of premieres a year: 14 (2014/15)
No of plays in repertoire: 22 (2014/15)
Spaces: Main stage (423 seats), Studio R (81-110 seats)
No. of performances a year: 443 (2014)
Audience figures: 100,000 (90% houses) (2014)
No of employees: 160
Turnover: €12.5m (2014)
Funding: €10.142m from the city state of Berlin (2014)
Website: www.gorki.de
Key contact: direktion@gorki.de

That a production from a fringe theatre in Kreuzberg was selected is remarkable in itself, but in taking on the piece's subject matter, of Turkish immigration and integration, an increasingly dominant topic in Germany, the Ballhaus was very much a lone voice. Satisfyingly, Ronen's play *Common Ground* was invited to this year's Theatertreffen.

Indeed, it is almost impossible to talk to Langhoff and Hillje without the conversation immediately turning to questions of identity, politics and philosophy, set against a backdrop of a city still struggling to represent diversity despite a quarter of its population having an immigrant background.

When asked how she came to be running the Gorki, Langhoff replies: "By accident. My dream was to publish books." She started in publishing, then became a curator of German-Turkish film festivals, connecting her with Matthias Lilienthal, the then artistic director and founder of Kreuzberg's Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) theatres, which have been pioneering diversity in Berlin – imagine London's Battersea Arts Centre across three nearby venues operating as an international receiving house as well as an experimental fringe epicentre. Lilienthal invited Langhoff to curate *Beyond Belonging*, a Turkish-German festival for HAU in 2004.



Musa Dagh – Days of Resistance was the centrepiece of a festival commemorating the Armenian genocide. Photo: Ute Langkafel

Meanwhile, Hillje was working as Thomas Ostermeier's artistic partner at the Baracke, an independent studio attached to the Deutsches Theater. He started during the 1990s when a wave of Anglo-German exchange fuelled Ostermeier's influential 'in your face' productions of works by Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane.

Explaining the Gorki's position today in Berlin, Langhoff says: "When I came to Berlin it had two sides. On one hand there was the cosmopolitan Haus der Kulturen Die Welt – the national centre for international contemporary arts – with incredible intellectuals coming from all over the world who were not linked to the city at all. On the other hand you had immigrant communities doing community stuff – folklore and so on – for their own communities. And there was really a lack of any connection between the two."

The Gorki, under the new artistic directorship, has become this connecting ground, as Hillje explains: "It has to do with the people who work here – as actors in our ensemble, as directors, as writers. We are able to reflect and criticise in all directions because all the groups in our diverse society are represented here – and not only represented but also producers of their own work.

"It's not only about empowerment and speaking about yourself. We go a step further, where those who represent a community also speak about all of society and not just the community they come from."

This sounds ideal for any theatre, but it is rare in Germany, where theatres with ensembles are standard but diversity is not. By asserting its post-migrant identity, the Gorki is creating waves throughout the country, all the more remarkable when recalling that the Gorki is an official state theatre that receives funding of around €10 million (£7.2 million) annually out of Berlin's total spend of €107 million (£77.5 million) for its theatres, which in turn represents half the city state's cultural spend.

You get a sense of how the theatre's political theories work by looking at two recent Gorki projects. The first is *It Snows* in April, a 40-day festival commemorating the centenary of the Armenian Genocide, which ran earlier this year. A centrepiece was *Musa Dagh – Days of*

Resistance, based on the 1933 novel by Franz Werfel, a Jewish-German writer who wrote about the Armenian genocide through the story of seven villages that fought back for 40 days. There are resonances with Germany's own recent history and the Holocaust, and Musa Dagh was adapted by director Hans-Werner Kroesinger as "a collage with documentary material about Germany's role and the organisation of the mass murder". In fact, says Hillje, "Werfel's book became an important inspiration for the resistance in the Warsaw ghetto. It was published in 1933. Werfel's books were also burnt that year. Just over there." He points beyond the wall of the Gorki's pleasant, sunny garden to nearby Bebelplatz, scene of one of the most infamous Nazi book-burning ceremonies.

Another anniversary was last November's celebration of the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Germany's politicians prepared to commemorate the event with 300 white crosses marking the places where people had been killed crossing the border from East to West Germany, Gorki-based artists Das Zentrum fur Politische Schonheit stole 14 of these crosses and took them to the borders of Europe, where thousands of refugees still die since the wall came down. Langhoff says: "[Das Zentrum] then issued a press release stating that 'the victims of the Wall don't want to stay in Germany, because while we are celebrating the anniversary, more than 30,000 people have died on our borders over the past 25 years'."

And there you have the Gorki in a nutshell: dramatic, radical, bang-up-to-the-minute politics, in a living breathing confrontation between history and the realities of present-day Berlin.