

**Children Born of War – Sharing Knowledge and
Lived Experiences through Performing Arts
– Symposium and Scenic Presentations –**

**A cooperation between the Universities of Leipzig and Birmingham and the
Landesverband der freien Theater in Sachsen e.V.**

READER



4th May 2023

LOFFT – DAS THEATER, Leipzig, Germany



DAHRENDORF PRIZE 2021: CHILDREN BORN OF WAR IN THEATRICAL DISSEMINATION – PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO CREATIVE DISSEMINATION

Throughout the history of armed conflicts children have been conceived by foreign soldiers and were born to local mothers. Among those are children conceived in rapes, and also those conceived in a spectrum of more or less consensual relationships. These Children Born of War (CBOW) often grow up without their fathers in a tension between integration and exclusion, frequently under difficult circumstances. Over decades, CBOW and their lived experiences, like few other themes have been characterised by a comprehensive silence, at the beginning of the 21st century research started emerging that focussed not only on conflict-related sexual exploitation and abuse – the context in which many CBOW of the 20th and 21st century were conceived – but also on the experiences of the children themselves. After this initial research, between 2015 and 2019, 15 doctoral students, supported by an EU-funded research project (Children Born of War – Past, Present, Future; www.chibow.org) engaged in an interdisciplinary, intersectoral and international research and training programme on this theme. In addition to scientific engagement with the topic, new paths were explored in order to raise public awareness of the experiences of CBOW. In 2021, Prof Dr Heide Glaesmer (Universität Leipzig) and Prof Dr Sabine Lee (University of Birmingham) in collaboration with Anne-Cathrin Lessel, artistic director and CEO of LOFFT – DAS THEATER, received the Ralf-Dahrendorf-Prize for the European Research Area for this project and the theatrical dissemination project arising from the doctoral research collaboration.

This E-reader presents some reflections contributed by participants of the symposium that formed the culmination of a year's activities and combined lectures on the dissemination of scientific ideas through theatre-based forms of dissemination, three performance art projects focusing on CBOW and an intersectoral panel discussion exploring challenges and opportunities of such dissemination.

We are grateful to the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung for supporting this dissemination project through the Dahrendorf Preis. We are also appreciative of academic and creative colleagues who engaged with us in a discourse around academic-creative dissemination practice, and above all we are grateful to CBOW themselves who participated in our original research projects as well as in the symposium on 4th May 2023 and in one case also in the performance. A short film in German that gives some audio-visual impressions of the day and captures the energy, engagement and commitment of the participants can be viewed under <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kP8OEL2CP78>. Furthermore, a series of podcasts that explore the topic of CBOW and the different creative projects in particular can be found under <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/chibow>.

Heide Glaesmer, Sabine Lee, and Anne-Cathrin Lessel
December 2023

REFLECTIONS FROM THE ARTISTS

Vendula Ježková (“Shadow of a Hero”)

1)

In the case of the theatre project *Shadow of a Hero*, we worked with listening to recordings of interviews with CBOW, which were provided by Michal Korhel, a scholar and expert on the subject in the context of Czechoslovakia after World War II, who introduced us to the whole issue in depth. We consulted him several times and also asked him about his feelings during the interviews.

During the first phase of rehearsals we tried to play some moments from the recordings of the witnesses in the framework of improvisation and to experience the described situation at least in a represented form. The results were beneficial for us and opened a wide field for discussion and sharing of our own experiences. This enriched and brought our group closer together and we learned to enter into a dialogue and respect each other.

Based on the represented experience and discussions, we consulted with Jana Wichsová, a social worker with Holocaust survivors and a psychotherapist. She explained to us the dangers of evoking sensitive memories and their possible impact on people who have gone through similar experiences.

We spent a lot of time debating the choice between Daddy Liberator – in our WWII context, either a US or USSR soldier. Michal Korhel had conducted one interview with a CBOW born of rape by a USSR soldier. Because of the war in Ukraine, we were concerned about the appearance of a Soviet soldier in the play, that it might stigmatize Russians and reinforce the inflamed antagonistic mood in society toward them. We also discussed aspects of resilience in terms of mental health after the Covid-pandemic, whether we could safely approach the subject of rape in these turbulent times, and the risk of overshadowing the lived experiences of CBOW itself. For this reason rape was not directly addressed in our piece of theater.

Thanks to consultations with Michal Korhel, who informed us about the ethical rules of his research and the rules for the possible inclusion of witnesses from his interviews in the production, I became more aware of the fragility and responsibility in the production itself. The challenges concern the invasion of privacy or intellectual property, and ultimately they also concern aestheticization, which is taking a serious and complex emotional subject and turning it primarily into a suspense story that people can be entertained by, thus taking the seriousness out of it. I would highlight that moment.

2)

We began to perceive our grasp of the topic of CBOW in the Czech context as a social debt to this group of citizens. At the same time, the members of *Just Monkeys* were able to reflect that they, as an amateur theatre group, had limited experience in the field of performing arts, which in a more experimental form of performance could lead to downplaying or unintentional stylization, which would affect the message and possible distortion. Therefore, in the next stage, we resorted to the solution of creating a script that would serve as a statement of the issues in a clear, dignified and ethical way. We are thinking about the

possibility, in collaboration with Michal Korhel, of inviting one of the CBOW to upcoming performances for an audience discussion before or after the performance. We are planning performances for students and parents at the Gymnasium of Memory of the Nation in Prague, at the Centre Živá paměť and Post Bellum, and we are making contact with other schools and institutions concerned with memorialisation where we would like to perform.

3)

The first impression we discussed in our circle was that it was challenging for the audience to watch the subtitles and the performance at the same time and how that affected the actors. The second impression was that in a different country the performance affects the audience in a different way than it does the Czech audience, who are familiar with the history and cultural references.



Photo: Just Monkeys

The third impression, the members of *Just Monkeys* expressed that they would be interested in a discussion directly after the performance.

We were pleased during the audience discussion that one male CBOW reflected on the difficulty of our heroine's situation given the "Iron Curtain" – it was difficult to find her dad from the U.S. So, given the increased difficulty of perceiving the story through subtitles, it was still possible to engage the audience to think.

Another reaction was shared with us by an audience member from the era of former GDR (DDR) who had lived through the era of mandatory “flag flying” – we were pleased to find a simple symbol that we were able to use as a shorthand for the curtailment of civil liberties, and as a positive symbol – the relationship between dad and daughter. An audience member gave us a picture she created as a reflection, which involved the flag as a symbol of the relationship between a father and daughter.

An important reflection for us was the feedback from Dheeraj Akolkar, who said that watching the performance made him understand the contradiction of his Czech friends.

4)

The whole stay in Leipzig was a great experience for all of us and a motivation for our further work together.

The conference inspired us to discover how it is possible to work on topics that relate to historical memory and to current social issues. At the same time, I think it is important, and I will try to do so, to initiate a discussion about the ethics of collaboration when involving people or their specific stories with a given lived experience in an artistic form (docudrama, Verbatim and the like). This kind of artistic expression is on the rise in our country and I believe that unfortunately it is often not given the proper ethical treatment. Thanks to my experience of preparing performances and participating in the Leipzig conference, I believe that the arts could draw on scientific ethical frameworks and collaborate more with experts in the field of psychology on these issues.



Photo: Just Monkeys

REFLECTIONS

Natasha Chanta-Martin (“ARVYLA”)

Thought No1.

As a performer and creative artist, I deeply appreciated the effort that was put into offering me the context of the topic in a dense and detailed way (extended bibliography, access to witnesses & researchers, podcast interview, frequent online check-ins) along with specific structural directions for the content of the final product (enough time for preparation, performance duration, audience involvement, interpretation of the academic material, generous budget). At the same time I felt free to navigate creatively into the CBOW world and explore it as deeply as I wanted to. The overall experience was a perfect balance between guidance and flexibility which shows how important it is for the “client” to know what they want before they commission an artistic project.

Thought No2.

The choice I made on the element of audience participation was to gradually involve them in my performance through the historical tradition of call & response, the phenomenon of synaesthesia (blurring the lines between the visible and the audible) and finally lead them towards fully participating in a concert-like setting. Having worked on these mechanisms for many years, I was prepared more or less for what to expect. The art of body music is a highly social form that reaches audio engagement very easily.*



Natasha Chanta-Martin in her performance “ARVYLA”

However, I decided to try a small variation in my CHIBOW performance. At one point, I asked the audience to close their eyes and requested that they try to visualize my audible movements, while also asking some ethical questions related to a person’s right to be heard and seen as a social being. I was pleasantly

* For example, see vocalist and conductor Bobby McFerrin’s claim after testing the pentatonic scale with audience from a neuroscience conference: <https://youtu.be/ne6tB2KiZuk>

surprised at this specific moment in two ways: although my intention behind asking the questions was rhetorical and intended for internal thoughts and reflections, some members of the audience decided to respond directly to my questions while keeping their eyes closed.

I remember thinking at that exact moment: *Oh, how would I like to be a fly on the wall right now, witnessing a literal dialogue between a performer moving around space and audience reciprocating with their eyes shut!*

Right after this fun experience, I continued my performance with a distinct change of atmosphere which for me signaled a different “chapter” of the performance and therefore hoped that the audience would instinctively open their eyes again. To my surprise some people remained with their eyes shut, as if they felt comfortable in this new condition. Some of them kept them shut until the end of the entire piece! During the Q&A they felt like apologizing as if they had missed part of the performance. Little did they know, that they actually experienced my performance in an entirely innovative way of what was intended and opened up a new creative door for me! That moment was personally transformational and I will cherish this experience as I continue my creative work.

Thought No3.

There is an emerging interest for collaboration between the arts and sciences, or arts and academia. There is a common understanding that one benefits from the other in an agreed realization that each discipline is not as separate as one might think. For example, one might think that dance is a decorative element of an event or ritual, others might assume that dance is a tool for entertainment, fitness, or even seduction. What is not often considered of dance, is that it is also a way of measuring time and space, a canvas for experiential anatomical analysis, an applied way of exploring physics, self-discipline, teamwork and neurological anticipation of corporeal repetition. What the CHIBOW Symposium proved, was not only a best practice of an interdisciplinary approach towards a specific topic, it also acknowledged performing arts as an appropriate tool for reflection and feedback, a channel of dissemination, awareness and education, as well as a medium to showcase academic findings. The symposium grasped the essence of current and contemporary art which is deeply concerned about sociopolitical matters, it transcended interdisciplinarity, and practically acknowledged the asset of these combined forces as an innovative way of fresh and ethical knowledge production.

REFLECTIONS

Abigail Akavia (“Andomache’s Child”)

The project posed a special challenge for me as playwright and director, since it was geared towards representing the particular life experiences of CBOW as defined by the research group. My short play, *Andromache’s Child*, did not represent the life story of an actual child born of war, but a fictive one, while also addressing very real issues CBOW deal with, namely identity crisis, suicidal ideation and inter-generational trauma. For me and my team, then, the challenge was to spin an imaginary tale that is true to life emotionally. In several presentations during the symposium, the question of accurately representing autobiographical material in art (whether drama or documentary film) was raised. Artists repeatedly stated their responsibility to faithfully portray the stories of their ‘sources’, i.e. the survivors of trauma on whose lives the art was based. Our art, though, was based on imagined events.

Within this context, I found the reactions to our play very moving. In particular, it resonated with two adult CBOW present at the symposium. They could identify with *Andromache’s Child* and therefore actively engaged with the character. Through the play – by seeing not their own life onstage, but the life of someone like them, someone inspired by them – they felt *seen* themselves.

The process of bringing *Andromache’s Child* to life not only informed us, the artistic team behind the play, of the experiences of CBOW, their heretofore unseen presence among us and their particular challenges. It also taught us, all those present at LOFFT that night, a visceral lesson about the power of imagination to connect people.



Jamie Grasse, Felix Kerkhoff and Abigail Akavia

REFLECTIONS

Winfried Behlau

Child born of rape from WW II and representative of “Distelblüten”*

Theatre that intends to entertain and amuse the audience has an easy ride. In contrast, when a message is to be conveyed, and a very sensitive one at that, theatre becomes more difficult.

The participants had such a difficult task.

For me, as a contemporary witness, I will focus on my impressions of the dance performance by Natasha Chanta-Martin from Greece.

Natasha had been invited to the symposium and had asked beforehand to speak to someone affected by the theme, CBOW. Some time before the symposium she asked me if I could perform a text from “Thistle Blossoms”*, our support organisation for children whose fathers are Soviet soldiers. The day before the screening we met at the LOFFT. I was given an overview of her performance and my commitment: to a song, that was all, no rehearsal, but with the hint of possible and desired improvisation.

The improvisation then consisted of me joining the dance group towards the end of the performance.

From lectures and talks, I was used to communicating our stories and the issues of Children Born of War. But now, integrated into body percussion, I felt I could reach out to the audience in a deeper and more emotional way.

In the performance by Abigail Akavia, an actor lamented his life as a child born of war. The audience was invited to spontaneously enter into a dialogue. They are often reluctant to do so, especially with sensitive topics. After a confrontational contribution, I felt I could intervene in a reconciliatory way with the understanding of a like-minded, affected person who, however, found a solution to his fears.



*Winfried Behlau on stage
with Andrea Alvergue*

* Distelblüten/Thistle blossoms is a network of German CBOW, who were fathered by soldiers from the Soviet Union after World War II in Germany. Some of the members have written down and published their story in a book. For more information please refer to www.russenkinder-distelblueten.de.

My solution lay in reconciliation with myself and the perpetrator. Later, the actor told me that my contribution had said everything that was essential in his play.

The conclusion for me: in a play the highly emotional experiences of life's journeys can be carefully addressed, precisely because a certain distance is maintained.

As a participant in the panel discussion, I was asked why I work with the researchers as a contemporary witness and try to find other CBOW; how do I benefit from this engagement?

I have experienced myself for over 50 years that "grief that does not speak gnaws at the heart until it breaks" (Macbeth). In meetings with researchers (Mochmann, Glaesmer, Kaiser, Kuwert, Kleinau, Lee, Schwartz and others) I have been listened to and subsequently experienced a liberation from my own fate. There have been only positive reactions throughout; my life has changed. I am not altruistically active now, but almost out of pure egoism: I do good to my soul – and perhaps to others as well.

I used to make my statements verbally in lectures. In the symposium, they were embedded in a theatre performance. This conveys my message on a different level. For me, this was precisely the central insight of this symposium. Of course, the exchange with artists from other countries is also a positive experience.



Panel discussion with Sabine Lee, Felicitas Braun, Dheeraj Akolkar, Winfried Behlau, Marie Kaiser and Eckehart Göritz

REFLECTIONS

Lena Hoffmann
for Vajswerk

So I find myself in front of my keyboard, simultaneously flipping through the notes I took that day, remembering thoughts on the idea of war as an ongoing presence “after the last shot is fired” and the thought on climate and war being intertwined, which stuck with me. Single moments manifest in my memory: The discussion after the third scenic presentation about the choir who “chose to be silent” and the collective experience many people shared about not saying something we might find not helpful or basic and to then realize, you regret not saying at least something after all, because you never know, how you might have positively affected another person with the most obvious things in that moment.

The sound of ripping duct tape. Body percussion.

That day I heard a lot of people’s stories told by themselves and by others. To tell someone else’s story is never easy. As the person working with these stories you have responsibility for the people who gave you their lived experience in their own way, through their words, descriptions, memories and pictures. You also have responsibility for the story itself. You have responsibility for your (future) audience, too. Specifically if the lived experience, that then became a memory, that is about to become a story you are going to tell, was or is a traumatic one. I don’t think to prioritize responsibilities is very helpful. You should ask the people whose lived experience became the story how they want to be represented and talked about. Don’t be rude; rather be respectful with personal memories. That should be the basis of how to be a decent human being. But, I opt to point out: stories and narratives in themselves hold a power and an agency, too. Audiences listening to them can get a sense of belonging, representation, and connection through stories.

Telling a story epistemologically is also a way of generating and distributing knowledge. I didn’t know the term CBOW before I came into contact with the symposium, but I myself find, that having words to describe lived, biographic experience help me understand my own person better to narrate my self for myself. Also having concepts that help me to think or feel about certain experiences in a different way – may they be sociological, philosophical, political ones – for me is a way of empowerment. What I liked about the symposium was, that it specifically addressed people with the shared lived experience of being a CBOW as well as people working with biographic stories as psychologists or artists alike. There were a lot of different ways for generating connection, exchange and knowledge together.

“Playing while the counterpart attends” was the title of our presentation. The counterpart whoever this might be, whatever sort of knowledge they might have. A person, a place, a story, a thing. The way ants live together is knowledge. Body knowledge is knowledge. Dancing is knowledge. Exchange without the counterpart as the other. Where multiple perspectives can coexist equally in a way that thinking together is possible.

Sometimes enduring someone else’s way of thinking about things is incredibly difficult. You can still oppose an opinion, you don’t have to agree at all, but you have to listen. A good framework for listening is a save

space to be in. The LOFFT for me personally was a good space. Maybe because most theatre spaces for me are save spaces. I enjoyed the different ways of talking and sharing a space throughout the day. Every point brought to the discussion was appreciated kindly. Many of the best exchanges for me happened in the seating area made out of Euro pallets in front of the building or in the hallway between scenic presentations or talks. Break conversations and in-between conversations are such an underrated way of communicating, I loved that there was a lot of room for that.

We were constantly cared for with coffee and great food. I like to point this out, because for me working with biographies is linked to an idea of appreciation, respect and mostly: care. Having a space where this is offered to you makes this kind of work possible in the first place.

One of the most impressive picture for both of us was the biggest feedback-circle we´ve ever been into. I enjoyed the different approaches to take notes, to memorize what was seen and heard to find pictures and words for aesthetic qualities that are not easy to put in words because they are not related to the sense of seeing but rather auditive or kinaesthetic. And then to transform those notes again in something else. The different possibilities to reflect and then talk about these reflections throughout the day might have been my favourite part of it.



Audience discussion after the scenic presentations

LETZTE STATION TORGAU. EINE KALTE UMARMUNG

A documentary theatre project by dura/kroesinger

Georg Mellert

The production *Letzte Station Torgau. Eine kalte Umarmung*, conceptualized and directed by dura/kroesinger, was created in March 2023 at *Schauspiel Leipzig*. It is a documentary theatre project dealing with the experiences of victims of the forced education system of the GDR.

In the early years of the GDR a specific system of foster homes for children and adolescents was established, the so-called *Jugendwerkhöfe* (youth detention centers). This system was dedicated to re-education of *schwererziehbare* (hard-to-educate) children and youth, with the objective to transform them into “socialist personalities”. Youth were forcefully interned in these institutions, which exhibit many of the core characteristics of total institutions as described by Erving Goffman: a strict system of rules of conduct, accompanied by sophisticated regulations for punishment and gratification, including degrading punishments like solitary confinement, food deprivation, physical and emotional violence; disciplinary measures like forced sport and forced labour; strict authoritarian hierarchies; sexualized violence, seclusion from the outside world.

While the *Jugendwerkhöfe* in general exhibited these characteristics with varying intensity, the *Geschlossene Jugendwerkhof* (closed Jugendwerkhof) in Torgau near Leipzig represented the most radical approach: youth there were kept in prison-like confinement without any opportunities to leave the premises even for short amounts of time. The *Geschlossene Jugendwerkhof* was a unique institution insofar as only persons already interned in other institutions were sent there for further disciplining if they did not behave according to the regulations.

Needless to say, having been interned in a *Jugendwerkhof* or even more so in Torgau, caused significant traumatization of the victims, most of them being marked for their entire life. Symptoms of trauma include lack of confidence in human contact, severe difficulties in building up and maintaining relationships, claustrophobia, substance use problems.

An important observation which also was the initial spark for the production at *Schauspiel Leipzig*, is that the *Jugendwerkhöfe* were not a hidden phenomenon – there was a widespread awareness of their existence, making them an easy means of threat (“If you don’t behave, you’ll end up in the *Jugendwerkhof*”) and adding up to life-long stigmatization of the victims. This awareness in the public consciousness is paradoxically linked to a tendency of denial, even retrospectively.

All these factors, taken together with the high number of victims, which add up to 135,000, make the existence of *Jugendwerkhöfe* not just a historical phenomenon – they were all shut down at the end of the GDR – but a socio-political structure that continues to have its effects on society to this day. The last generation of victims, interned during the 1980ies, is in their 50s today, so the experience and trauma is still very much present in the Eastern German context.

Research and artistic approach

Given all this, how should one approach the subject at hand for a theatre production? The artistic team Regine Dura and Hans-Werner Kroesinger, with more than twenty years of expertise in documentary theatre, work with textual material that is based on mainly two kinds of sources: interviews with witnesses and archive documents, which are then assembled into a dramatic text. This material is taken to stage by professional actors who in the case of “Torgau” all were members of the ensemble of *Schauspiel Leipzig*, namely Paulina Bittner, Ronja Rath, Teresa Schergaut, Denis Grafe, Christoph Müller and Leonard Wilhelm.

The exploration of first-hand material was accompanied by meetings with experts on the subject, who in this case included not only the staff of the memorial site, but also researchers from the TESTIMONY project at the universities of Leipzig and Düsseldorf, and individuals like Dr Christian Sachse and Manfred May, individuals who have dedicated a significant part of their professional life to the rehabilitation of *Jugendwerkhof* survivors.

After the first encounters with survivors of the *Jugendwerkhof* Torgau and other *Jugendwerkhöfe*, it quickly became clear that the vivid memory of the victims, their stories of suffering and resilience, should and would be the centre of the narrative. Their spoken word, the experience they shared in the interviews, should be made heard on stage, with as little alteration as possible. This, of course, also called for a raised sensitivity vis-a-vis the persons we met.

Role of witnesses

The interviews took place in the memorial site, located on the premises of the former *Geschlossene Jugendwerkhof* in Torgau. This was crucial, as, paradoxically, this place today is regarded as a safe space by some survivors – thanks to the intensive work that is done by the memorial site’s staff. Some of the interviews were conducted in a small group, including the directors, dramaturg and stage designer, others included the whole production team – directors, actors, assistants. When it came to the discussion of very intimate experiences, also one-on-one interviews were conducted to guarantee a safe space for the survivor.

The team of the memorial site also served as an intermediary in communicating with the witnesses, which was important for the witnesses in order to build up trust towards the production team.

Although the witnesses themselves were not part of the performances on stage, both the encounters with them and the negotiations about the conditions under which the textual material from the interviews was to be used in the performance, very much contributed to the dramaturgy of the evening. Two demands from witnesses were crucial for the development of the dramatic text and the way of staging. First, the witnesses asked to keep their memories intact – that is, not to arrange elements of the stories into an anonymous narration that would have given a more structural account of the subject matter. This included having each witness impersonated by one actor, instead of distributing text between different performers.

The second important input from one witness was the demand: “Make it humorous!” For him, as he stated, taking things with humour had been his most important strategy of resilience. This coincided very much with our desire not to emphasize the suffering, not to do *Betroffenheitstheater*. So the theatrical impulse

to entertain was not at all opposed to the interest of the witnesses. Needless to say, “entertainment” here could not mean to add superficial material, fictional storylines or to make fun of the suffering. It rather meant to include material that had a touch of bitter humour in itself, be it voluntary or involuntary, and to take humour seriously as a means of alienation and resilience on the part of the witnesses.

Methodology

The material collected was intensely read and evaluated during the rehearsal process. A significant amount of time was dedicated to this phase of the process – not only to get acquainted intellectually with the subject and its vast ramifications, but also to reflect on our own relationship to the historical facts, be it our own experiences with the political system of the GDR, be it connections via family members. This part of the process, even if it did not explicitly enter the dramatic text and the performance, proved valuable for the outcome, as it allowed the team and above all the actors, to put themselves in relation to the subject. At the same time, it was clear from the beginning that the way of performing should and could not be a classical acting approach, that is, representing psychological characters with emotional expressiveness – this would have been regarded as appropriation of an experience we could not claim to impersonate in a traditional, realistic approach.

Thus, the attitude towards the witnesses and their experience was to put ourselves at the disposal of the individual stories they had shared with us – to give them room on stage, to lend our voices and bodies to the need of expression of the victims.

It needs to be added that the deep interest of the actors, both in the artistic approach and in the subject of *Jugendwerkhöfe* and forced education, was one of the most important factors in making the production a success.

On-going performances

When we went on stage with the performance, the artistic decisions we had taken proved right: From the day of the premiere on 11th March 2023, the performance was widely accepted both by the broader audience and by our contact persons – both the witnesses and the experts we had consulted – as a fruitful contribution to the process of raising awareness about and empathy towards the experience of the victims of the GDR education system. The production will remain to be seen at *Schauspiel Leipzig* for the foreseeable future, accompanied by frequent audience talks.

Impacts from symposium

Dissemination of the project also included a presentation at the Symposium “Children Born of War – Sharing Knowledge and Lived Experiences through Performing Arts”, held at LOFFT Leipzig, on 4th May 2023. The fruitful discussions and deep questions from the symposium’s audience further opened a perspective on the many layers of shared trauma we had explored with the production. The very different approaches to theatrical intervention in real-world contexts and biographical theatre presented to me at the symposium added up to a broad picture of how theatrical means can have an impact on society.

REFLECTIONS

Dheeraj Akolkar

Writer, Director, Producer, Vardo Films

Reflecting on the artistic tension present in biographical theatre between the interests (and potential vulnerabilities) of subjects of the performance on the one hand and the intention to entertain the audience on the other, this issue gives rise to tremendous dichotomies. One wonders if it is about balance or being unapologetically polemic. What matters when a biography is turned into a performance, how subjective and honest one needs to be and yet mindful of the form, the space and the moment in which it comes alive.

During the presentations on the day in Leipzig, the performance that was most effective was the one where the biography met the engagement (and entertainment) value in the middle. The performances that were overwhelmingly attached to the biography felt a bit manipulative in 'extracting a sympathetic reaction' from me by overdramatizing the available elements in the story and that pushed me away from it.

In contrast, the performance that used the biography as a starting point and kept it as a strong under-current throughout but brought it to the moment of being present together with the audience respected the audience more, in my opinion.

Integrating the witnesses into the performance comes from a very old theatrical tradition by breaking the fourth wall. We experienced artists pushing those boundaries in Leipzig during their performances.

In one case, it was fun and truly interactive whilst in another it felt almost exploitative and gimmicky.

I felt that it depends on the attitude of the performance itself, and whether the creators respect their audience or look down at them or 'frame them' so as to speak.

The performances were the tip of the iceberg but they gave insights into the intentions and backgrounds of those who created them.

I came out of the day thinking that it is always about balance and respect.



Dheeraj Akolkar at the audience discussion

The audience were deeply engaged and the discussions were extremely moving, reflective and intense. I felt that his form of theatre needs to be supported more and more with larger opportunities for the masses to experience them.

The most heart wrenching facts, histories and biographies can turn into present day realities as bridge-building devices.

It was a hugely effective day and I came out of it feeling richer and more alive.

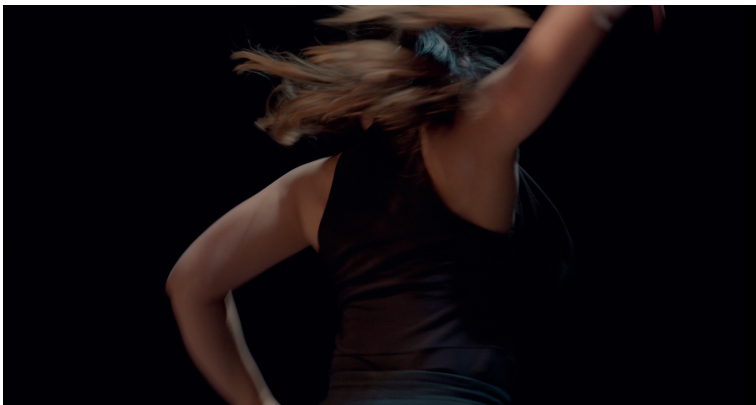
The most important insight which the symposium gave me was that the performances will stay with you longer and in a more effective way if there is time after the performance for interactions and exchanges.

Usually, we watch a play or a film and go away rather quickly. But the time after is far more essential – this was something the symposium achieved most beautifully. And it created an immersive experience. This was the biggest takeaway for me.

*Tania Shelepko from
ProEnglish Theater, Kyiv,
Ukraine*



*Lena Hoffmann,
Vajswerk*



Andrea Alvergue

*Natasha Chanta-Martin,
Winfried Behlau and
Andrea Alvergue*



PROGRAMME // 4th May 2023

SYMPOSIUM

- 11:00 am – 11:30 am** **Welcome and Introduction**
Heide Glaesmer (Universität Leipzig), Sabine Lee (University of Birmingham) and Anne-Cathrin Lessel (LOFFT)
- 11:30 am – 12:15 pm** **Theatre Shelters amidst War**
Tania Shelepko (ProEnglish Theatre, Kyiv, Ukraine / Cambridge, UK)
- 12:15 pm – 1:00 pm** **Last Stop Torgau. Theatre and Trauma**
Georg Mellert (Leipzig)
- 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm** // Lunch Break
- 2:00 pm – 2:45 pm** **Playing while the Counterpart Attends**
Felicitas Braun and Lena Hoffmann (Vajswerk, Berlin)
- 2:45 pm – 3:30 pm** **Uncertain Certainties – the Art/Science Interface from an Aesthetic Perspective**
Frank Raddatz (Theater des Anthropozän, Berlin)
- 3:30 pm – 4:00 pm** // Coffee Break
- 4:00 pm – 5:00 pm** **Panel Discussion with Children Born of War, Performance Artists and Researchers**
Winfried Behlau, Eckehart Göritz, Felicitas Braun, Dheeraj Akolkar, Marie Kaiser and Sabine Lee
- 5:00 pm – 6:00 pm** // Break

SCENIC PRESENTATIONS

- 6:00 pm** **Presentation 1: “Shadow of a Hero”** by Just Monkeys (Prague, Czech Republic)
Performers: Věra Horáková, Angelika Kartous Sbouli, Tomáš Hanf, Mária Miličevićová, Petr Švarc, Kirill Danilin, Štěpán Wichs; Author: Štěpán Smolík; Consultants: Michal Korhel and Vendula Ježková; Visual Concept – Costume Designer: Lucie Špalková
- Presentation 2: “ARVYLA”** by Natasha Chanta-Martin (Athens, Greece)
Choreography and Concept: Natasha Chanta-Martin; Movement consultant: Yiota Peklari
- Presentation 3: “Andromache’s Child”** by Abigail Akavia (Leipzig, Germany)
Directed by Abigail Akavia and Hannes Flo; Performed by Felix Kerkhoff with Abigail Akavia; Text: Abigail Akavia (narration by Jamie Grass); Dramaturgy, Videography, Sound: Hannes Flo
- 8:15 pm – 8:45 pm** **Audience Discussion** moderated by Tessa Theisen
(with translation ENG–D)

SPEAKERS

Tania Shelepko

Tania Shelepko is Director of the ProEnglish Theatre in Kyiv, Press ELT Consultant at Cambridge University and news producer. She started as an actress in 2008, being a student of the Ukrainian Philology department, and switched to directing in 2015 starting to work in a studio with teenagers. In 2016, she joined ProEnglish Theatre Company as a drama teacher. By the end of 2022, she got her Master's Degree in Culture Studies and Theatre Directing at the Ostroh Academy (Ukraine). Her most recent work "The New World Order" was performed in March 2022 in the basement of the ProEnglish Theatre in Kyiv as a part of the Theatre Festival Berlin. It also takes part in the Scena 9 project "HERE.NOW" in Bucharest and Timisoara. Another wartime performance, "L_UKR_ECE", was developed between trips to the frontline with a team of the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten while documenting war crimes. The performance became a part of the Shakespeare Festival laboratory in Craiova (Romania) in May 2022 and in Gdansk (Poland) in July 2022.

Felicitas Braun

Felicitas Braun studied directing at the Max Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna and subsequently took up an assignment as assistant director at the Burgtheater Wien. Since 2013, she has been working as theatre director focusing on new texts and cross-disciplinary linkages among others in Wiesbaden, Osnabrück, Oldenburg, Graz and Vienna. Since 2018, she has also been involved in audio productions.

Lena Hoffmann

Lena Hoffmann has been involved with theatre from childhood and has been active, both in theory and practice, in independent theatre for many years. In 2012, she moved to Berlin for university studies. Currently, she is completing a Master's degree in Theatre Studies at the Free University Berlin and is working on her final thesis. In 2015, she co-founded the research collective Vajswerk and is member of the organisation's executive board. Among her main foci are dramaturgy, biographical research and game studies.

Lena Hoffmann and Felicitas Braun are both members of the executive board of Vajswerk e.V., a Berlin-based research collective established in 2015. In a dialogue between scholarship and art, it forms ensembles to conduct biographical research and present it on stage. They produce stage presentations incorporating multiple perspectives, illuminating historical and political contexts and generating new subject matters and forms for the theatre. Vajswerk will have staged 31 productions by 2023, mostly with biographical testimonies as a basis for the representation.

Frank M. Raddatz

Together with Sabine Kunst, a geomicrobiologist biologist, director of the Alfred-Wegener-Institute and former President of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Frank M. Raddatz founded the Theater des Anthropozän (www.theaterdesanthropozaen.de) in 2019. He has published widely with and about Heiner Müller, for instance on aesthetics, politics and literature of theatre and, more recently, on questions of the anthropocene stage. He has worked as dramaturg in numerous theatres, recently at the Berliner Ensemble, the Volksbühne Berlin and the RambaZamba Theater.

Georg Mellert

Georg Mellert studied philosophy and German at the Free University Berlin and at Université Paris X. Since 2006, he has been working as dramaturg and assistant director in numerous productions of the independent theatre scene; among others at the Sophiensälen and the Theaterdiscounter. Internships took him to the Deutsches Theater Berlin as well as the Oper Frankfurt. Between 2008 and 2020, he studied dramaturgy at the Goethe University Frankfurt. Between 2010 and 2014, Georg Mellert was dramaturg at the Landestheater Coburg. Subsequently, he took up engagements at the Schlosstheater Moers and was leading dramaturg at the Luisenburg-Festspielen Wunsiedel. Since 2018/19, he has been working as dramaturg at the Schauspiel Leipzig.

Heide Glaesmer

Heide Glaesmer is a psychologist/psychotherapist working at the Department of Medical Psychology and Medical Sociology at University of Leipzig. She has done research on CBOW for more than 10 years, especially on CBOW of WWII in Germany, Austria and Norway and was the Director of Training in the CHIBOW network.

Sabine Lee

Sabine Lee is Professor of Modern history based at University of Birmingham, UK. She has done interdisciplinary research on conflict and security with particular emphasis on conflict-related sexual violence and Children Born of War. She was the Coordinator of the CHIBOW network.

Anne-Cathrin Lessel

Anne-Cathrin Lessel ist the artistic and managing director of the LOFFT as well as board member of the Association of Independent Theaters in Saxony.

PARTICIPANTS OF THE PANEL DISCUSSION

Winfried Behlau is a Child Born of Occupation from WW II and he is one of the funders of the network of children fathered by soldiers from the Russian Army (www.russenkinder-distelblueten.de).

Eckehart Göritz is a Child Born of Occupation from WWII.

Dheeraj Akolkar is a filmmaker who has made, among others, a documentary about Norwegian CBOW fathered by Wehrmacht soldiers ("Wars don't end") and another documentary about a dance theater project with CBOW in Northern Uganda ("The wound is where the light enters").

Marie Kaiser is a Postdoc researcher at University of Leipzig who was involved in the CHIBOW network. Her scientific work deals with CBOW from WWII in Germany and Austria.

ARTISTS AND PERFORMANCES

Just Monkeys / “Shadow of a Hero”

We tell a story based on the lives of our fellow citizens, people who are descendants of Czechoslovak mothers and foreign soldiers who arrived in the country at the end of World War II. From childhood, these Children Born of War reminded people around them of the war by their very existence, a forbidden act of extra-marital love, embodying the imperialist enemy. What is it like to be a token of taboos, a projection screen for society’s shadows and dreams? Are we different today? Would we treat Children Born of War differently today? Just Monkeys z. s. is a theatrical democratic group that aims to freely develop the creative potential of each member according to their individual talents. They developed out of the Just Monkeys performing arts courses. These courses, under the guidance of MgA. Vendula Ježková, Ph.D., have been running since January 2018 at the Pod Palmovkou Theatre (Prague). They staged the play “The Monumentkeeper” by contemporary Slovak author Peter Lomnický (2019), the play “Hamlet, or Lehrstück” (2021), the play “The Principle of Uncertainty” (2022) and the street performance Blind Spots (2021). The performance Blind Spots is based on the book of the same name by sociologist Daniel Prokop, who looks at the problems and challenges of the contemporary Czech Republic and the world. Just Monkeys have compiled authentic stories of their members on topics such as insolvency, domestic violence, alcohol and presented them in the streets of Prague.

Natasha Chanta-Martin / “ARVYLA”

“ARVYLA” (meaning army boot in Greek) is the link between two Children Born of War stories and the main musical instrument of a percussive dancer: the stomping boot. Stemming from the common need for everyone to be heard, “ARVYLA” plays with this concept metaphorically and literally in the form of an inspiring fusion of true testimonies, research material and historical facts from two distinct situations experienced by Children Born of War and body percussion styles from around the world. Natasha Chanta-Martin is a percussive dance artist and dance anthropologist whose main interest is in blending research with performance and vice versa. She has dedicated the past decade to teaching and performing with and for vulnerable communities, such as unaccompanied minors who have often fled from war zones, senior citizens, people with disabilities, and others. Natasha collaborates with dance and music festivals, with international organisations and institutions while putting great effort into making her workplaces intercultural and intergenerational. Fascinated by how humans move to rhythm, or what kind of rhythm makes them move, she investigates new ways to communicate non-verbally and to tell stories through sounding movement. Her artistic work touches upon cross-cultural coexistence, historical moments of oppression, the sense of feeling good with your own music and the interplay between geometries of space and time.

Abigail Akavia / “Andromache’s Child”

What keeps a person alive when their identity is made up of fragmented memories? “Andromache’s Child” tells a fictional tale of a Child Born of War, inspired by an ancient Greek account of the aftermath of Troy. The play weaves together old and contemporary myths to build a world shaped by intergenerational trauma. Abigail Akavia is a writer, translator, and theater practitioner, who has worked both on stage and behind the scenes in Tel Aviv, Chicago, and Leipzig. Her recent stage-piece “A Song that Can’t Be Sung”, a collaboration with musician and poet Hilà Lahav, premiered at the Schaubühne Lindenfels in March 2023. Her book “Dancing with Philoctetes: Reactions on Pain and Remembrance”, forthcoming from Punctum Books, includes her new English translation of Sophocles’ “Philoctetes” and an essay on loss, empathy, embodiment and music. Abigail holds a PhD in Classics from the University of Chicago.

CREDITS

The event is accompanied by a podcast series produced by **Eva Morlang** and **Julia Rasp**. The podcasts are available at <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/chibow>.

A film documentation of the event was produced by **Toni Gräfe**. It is available via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kP8OEL2CP78>.

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The graphic design of the program and reader was realized by **Barbara Brendel**.

Project leads: **Prof Dr Heide Glaesmer, Prof Dr Sabine Lee**

Artistic lead: **Anne-Cathrin Lessel**

Project coordinator: **Julia Rasp**

LINKS

<https://www.chibow.org>

<https://www.uniklinikum-leipzig.de/einrichtungen/medizinische-psychologie/Seiten/psychotraumatologie-theaterprojekt.aspx>

<https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/chibow>

The project has been funded by the BMBF through the Ralf-Dahrendorf Award for the European Research Area 2021.

GEFÖRDERT VOM



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