ADDRESSING EXTREMISM: THEATRE AND CRITICAL HUMANITIES

(Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, University of Salzburg)

Abstract

The present paper addresses the humanities' mission to explore the critical potential of the liberal arts by concentrating on theatre. Given its public quality and direct appeal to audiences, theatre (including spoken and music drama, puppet and street performances, contemporary, dance and pantomime) plays an ambivalent role amongst the arts, which is reflected on the one hand in the long history of anti-theatrical bias and, on the other, in the extraordinary variety and dynamics of theatrical play. A case study dealing with one of the darkest chapters in European history – the representation of the Nazi regime in Lillian Garrett-Groag's *The White Rose* –, will serve as an example of how theatre can, and can be made to, raise awareness and engage audiences. To this end, I shall argue, it is crucial that we study theatrical productions, rather than merely scripts and published texts, and offer a research model that goes beyond the drama, plot and characters by taking account of audiences and including the artists and cultural professionals involved in a production.

Keywords:

theatre, production studies, cultural responsibility, extremism, The White Rose, censorship

The relation between art and politics is necessarily one of tension. It is particularly acute in the case of theatre, given its special imbrication with society, its direct emotional appeal to audiences and its potential political impact. Unlike other formats of cultural production, theatre is not consumed individually but by crowds, and, unlike other forms of artistic expression such as sculpture, architecture and painting, theatre is experienced at the moment of its enactment. Thus, performances harbour an element of the unexpected and unforeseeable: surprise, shock, outrage, etc. The implication for theatre is a double bind: having power on the one hand, it is susceptible to external control on the other. The connections between theatre and the public are therefore crucial for both those producing it and those undertaking to analyse

it.

In the following, I shall adopt a critical humanities perspective, addressing the role of theatre in the context of worldwide outbursts of extremism and terror. By studying pertinent recent stage productions, I shall demonstrate how theatrical strategies and modes of production are apt to raise our awareness of civic and cultural responsibility, and how they may be seen as efforts to further justice, tolerance and peace in our time. For the purpose of this paper, theatre is understood to include all forms of language- and music-theatre, opera, street and puppet art, dance and contemporary. Theatre is a complex institution. Far from being identical with spoken, let alone written drama, it involves the multiple authorship of playwrights and composers, stage directors, choreographers, actors and singers, stage- and costume designers, the joint work of artists, technicians, cultural facilitators and communicators as well as the interactions between those producing a theatrical event and those receiving it.

Power and Control

The heritage of theatre goes along with a strong anti-theatrical bias. While other forms of art have enjoyed relative freedom, theatre has been feared throughout history to instil potentially dangerous ideas into audiences and incite them to action. In 1966, Edward Bond's play *Saved* produced at the Royal Court incurred prosecution, and in the same year John Osborne's *A Patriot* was censored and cut. In 1968, censorship was abolished in Britain, but – as in all countries – subtler means of controlling performances, such as funding, have continued to be at work and determine whether and how a play meets an audience.

Throughout world history, bursts of theatrical activity have prompted a backlash of censorship, as during the Roman Catholic Middle Ages and the early modern period, in seventeenth-century Japan, or in China after the outbreak of World War II. To control the apparently uncontrollable in theatre, a range of mechanisms have been put into place by governments or the Church: direct and indirect censorship, licensing practices, bans and restrictions, the requirement that plays be cut or altered, the staying and withdrawal of productions, or the forced use of theatre for patriotic and propagandist purposes. When, at the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642, theatres were closed and public stage-play was forbidden, one of the outstanding cultural, social and language achievements of the English Renaissance was brought to a halt. But the closure of public playhouses did not stop theatre altogether, and one outcome was the first full-length, all-

sung opera in England: William D'Avenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656), set 'in recitative musick' by Matthew Locke, Henry Lawes, Henry Cooke, Charles Coleman, and George Hudson,[1] was composed to overcome the Commonwealth ban on 'serious', i.e. spoken drama. After the Restauration, Charles II granted patents to Thomas Killigrew's King's Men in Drury Lane and William D'Avenant's Duke's Players in Lincoln's Inn Fields and subsequently Dorset Garden Theatre. In 1732, the latter patent was transferred to the Theatre Royal Covent Garden. Walpole's Theatre Licensing Act of 1737 tightened government censorship and required every single play to obtain the Lord Chamberlain's approval. These licensing – and monopolising – practices continued until the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 (censorship of the content of plays by the Lord Chamberlain continued). The result was a bewildering range of hybrid theatrical genres performed on Victorian stages, such as pantomime, melodrama, burlesque and burletta, evolved in order to circumvent the strictures on 'legitimate' drama.

To see the conflict between theatrical activity and political interests, one need not go back so far in time. Among the darkest chapters in the history of European theatre were enforcements against performances during the Nazi regime, shaming and banning writers and composers for producing what was devastatingly labelled 'degenerate art' (*entartete Kunst*), which included "elements of modernism, bolshevism, and internationalism".[2] Consequently the political theatre of Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht and Workers Theatre Groups were suppressed. Theatrical repression in Russia and under Eastern European dictatorships constitutes another dark chapter in the history of antitheatrical bias: Czech playwright Vàclav Havel's plays were banned in 1969, and he served time in jail for his 'seditious' writings. At one of Salzburg's annual conferences on drama translation and theatre practice, Rumanian playwright Petru Iamandi explained the Rumanian idiom "literature for the drawer", i.e. "writing a piece of fiction or nonfiction for oneself and keeping it locked in a drawer because of its strong anti-totalitarian message and for fear the authorities might hear of it and consequently start persecuting the author or, worse, put him/her into prison".[3] The example

1 "Siege of Rhodes, The", in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, eds. Michael Kennedy and Joyce Bourne Kennedy (5 ed.; Oxford: OUP, 2007), n. pag., Oxford Reference (website), accessed August 8, 2018.

2 Stephanie Barron, "Germany: Nazi Germany: Degeneracy: Censorship of Art and Music, 933-45", in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, ed. Derek Jones (4 vols.; London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 938-41, here 938.

3 Petru Iamandi, "Avoiding Topicality in Drama Translation: A Translator's Compromise", in *Drama Translation and Theatre Practice*, eds. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and

Iamandi mentions is a joint translation he produced together with Richard Wright of Victor Clinică's play *Polonius*, a political farce about a ruthless dictator composed and "'kept […] in a drawer'"[4] in the 1980s, a time of unforgiving ideological suppression and despotism in Romania. It was amended after 1989, awarded the first prize in a national competition in 1995, and printed and produced in Galați in 1996. Foregrounding Polonius as a ruthless dictator who syndicates with Fortinbras, this dystopian play, inspired by, and loosely modelled on, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, shows the problematic implications of Elizabethan morality in the twentieth century. Iamandi describes his motivation for translating this piece and the difficulties he encountered. For the play's Romanian quality (he speaks of its 'Romanianness') proved particularly tricky, and Iamandi felt the need to paraphrase and explain several of the coded, ciphered utterances, as for example "The Embalmed", a posthumous reference to dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. Aware of the connotations conveyed by his rendition, Iamandi concludes: "That makes me think there is something *dramatic* about being a translator, wanting to explore and recreate the universe of a literary work and having to make compromises even if the cause is noble. There is also something *bold* about being a translator, about having the courage to 'argue' with the author and, more than that, change his text here and there."[5]

Contrary to strategies of suppressing the performance of plays, theatre has also been used by political activists for freedom to spread ideas, as in present-day Latin America or by the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s. Repression and empowerment are two sides of the same coin. The latter may adopt many guises, such as the 'political tribunal' Piscator developed in Germany prior to his emigration to the Soviet Union, France and the United States. After the war, he returned and produced memorial and documentary theatre. Also in the 1960s, the anti-Vietnam happenings and critical pageants of US "Bread and Puppet Theatre" were evolved as *theatrum mundi* by Peter Schumann. Their ritualistic large-scale performances with masks and up-to-five-metre-high stick puppets and sculptures, often connecting political protest with religious content, were shown in many European capitals in the 1960s and 1970s. Protest is also the tenor of one of Austria's most celebrated contemporary writers: Peter Handke, *enfant terrible* of the 1960s. Playwrights from South Africa and Latin America, such as Kessie Govender, Athol Fugard, Lewis Sowden, Basil

Holger Klein (Salzburg Studies in English Literature and Culture 1; Franfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2004), 171-79, here 171.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 178.

Warner, David Herbert, Enrique Buenaventura, Emilio Carballido, José Triana, Augusto Boal, Griselda Gambaro, or Eduardo Pavlovsky openly attacked governments for oppressing the people and discriminating against ethnic groups. Political and economic stability have become central issues in the light of Britain's vote to leave the EU in 2016. Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris's Brexit-drama *Our Country*, subtitled 'A Work in Progress' and first staged at the National Theatre in 2017, is symptomatic of the penchant for the mimetic in present-day documentary theatre, incorporating excerpts from political speeches and interviews with both the general public and Brexit's political stakeholders. Even where overt critique is absent from plays, the political may lurk underneath faux-naif, experimental or absurdist tones, examples being Austria's Nobel-Prize-winning author Elfriede Jelinek, who quickly reacts to real-life occurrences, whether global catastrophes like Fukushima (*Kein Licht* / "No Light") or national issues like asylum practices. While her texts are ready to provoke and pique audiences, German-Cuban dramatist Roland Schimmelpfennig's plays tend to open up the existential dimensions of topical grievances, depicting issues like forced prostitution and immigrants' harrowing search for asylum without offending audiences. Add to these examples legion of plays commemorating individuals who opposed political terror and keeping alive the memory of innocent victims of dictatorial regimes worldwide.

Memorial, documentary and protest plays, radical street theatre and puppet shows all testify to the critical power of the stage and its corollary liability to be brought to account. To explore theatre's ambivalent status between art and public intervention, the following case study of Lillian Garrett-Groag's play *The White Rose*[6] will serve as an example. Set in Germany during World War II, it exposes the savage terror of the Nazi regime faced by innocent individuals.

The White Rose

The White Rose (premiered in 1991 in San Diego) deals with a group of young men and women who studied in Munich at the time of the Nazi regime and actively fought against it by printing flyers under the name of 'The White Rose'. Hans and Sophie Scholl were leading members. In spring 1942, they were arrested in Munich University when distributing their sixth flyer and, within five days, brutally guillotined. The 'interrogation' was personally conducted by Roland Freisler, president of the so-called *Volksgerichtshof*

6 Lillian Groag, *The White Rose* (Acting Edition for Theater Productions; New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1998).

(the 'people's court') and known as the 'bloodhound'. Groag's play chronicles the last four days of the Scholl siblings and intersects their interrogation by Gestapo 'Kriminalobersekretär' Robert Mohr with flashbacks showing their everyday student life and political activism.

In 2018, the Salzburg State Theatre produced Garrett-Groag's play. Actress Janina Raspe explained in a public conversation I held with the production team[7] how much she had looked forward to playing the lead, because Sophie Scholl was a role model for her – as she has been for many young women – now and in my own student days: an intelligent, courageous and emancipated young woman, who enjoyed life and had her dreams about the future, and who went to university despite the regime's pressure on women not to 'waste' their time studying, but to bear boys to feed Hitler's war machine. Sophie joined her brother Hans' and his friends' battle against a murderous war – with weapons as harmless as flyers. Janina Raspe said this role meant a big challenge for her. How could she do justice to this woman, who had become an icon of resistance and a moral stronghold of political and personal integrity, and yet was a young woman like herself? She read everything she could get hold of and studied photographs and letter. Like a pilgrim, she travelled to Forchtenberg, where Sophie Scholl was born, to Ludwigsburg and Ulm, where she had lived with her family,[8] and to Munich University to see the memorials, a bust and photographs, and the square commemorating her and 'The White Rose'.[9] The actress felt a particular responsibility for this woman's cause.

The White Rose is an obvious choice for a critical-humanities approach to theatre. The shock of the students' death and the unspeakable scale of atrocities shattering Europe and destroying the lives of millions of Europeans pinpoint the question of how theatre can tackle such dimensions of hatred and extremism. Like many committed writers, Groag, who is also an actress and a theatre director, has a multi-national family background marked by restlessness and displacement. Being an American born in Argentina, she herself was an outsider to these events in Europe, but her family shared the fate of millions of displaced Europeans. Her mother was Italian, her father was

7 See Atelier Gespräche online: "Atelier Gespräch: *Die Weiße Rose* (22 January 2018)", Plus Kultur: Empowerment Through Culture (website), accessed February 22, 2019, http://www.sbg-plus-kultur.at/.

8 See "Sophie Scholl: Lebenslauf", Stadt Forchtenberg (website), accessed August 14, 2018, https://www.forchtenberg.de/index.php?id=49.

9 DenkStätte Weiße Rose am Lichthof der LMU, München (website), accessed August 14, 2018, https://www.weisse-rose-stiftung.de/denkstaette-weisse-rose-am-lichthof-der-lmu-muenchen/.

Viennese and fled to Argentina in 1938 when Austria joined Nazi Germany. Persecution and flight were to become part of her own life. When Lillian was only seven years old, her family fled from the military dictatorship in Argentina to Montevideo, Uruguay.

Groag's play was written in 1991, almost half a century after the Scholls' execution. A lot of materials were available then which were not yet disclosed when the highly esteemed German film producer and director Michael Verhoeven produced a touching portrait of these students known as 'The White Rose'. Verhoeven, a medical doctor by education, is a great psychologist of vulnerability and has dedicated much of his creative talent to the lives of those persecuted and harmed.

Verhoeven's film dates from 1982,[10] when Germany was beginning to venerate 'The White Rose' as a group of martyrs and heroes, thereby trying to set them off against common humanity – and ward off possible charges of complicity with the regime or failure to act against it. Based on witness accounts from Sophie's family and friends' families, the film depicts 'The White Rose' as *ordinary* young men and women, individuals who were trapped in the vicissitudes of the Nazi regime and motivated by a common-sense impulse to stand up against injustice. Verhoeven's film was a provocation to those who wished not to be confronted with the legacy of the Nazi era and was promptly banned from the cultural programmes of the Goethe-Institutes outside of Germany. Consequently, Verhoeven and the victims' families fought their own battle for justice. Eventually, the film changed the law and led to a government resolution: on 25 January 1985 the 'Bundestag' declared that the *Volksgerichtshof* ('people's court') was not a court of justice but a brutal instrument in the service of Nazi terror.[11] This declaration was a significant achievement of one of Germany's leading film producers.

Both Verhoeven's film (including his political activism) and Groag's play testify to an undeniable sense of *cultural responsibility*.[12] These productions

---

[10] *Die weiße Rose*, dir. Michael Verhoeven, perf. Lena Stolze, Wulf Kessler, and Werner Stocker (Sentana Filmproduktion GmbH, 1982).

[11] This is the wording in German quoted by Michael Verhoeven in his epilogue to the film, which he dropped once the Resolution was passed: "Der Deutsche Bundestag stellt fest, dass die als 'Volksgerichtshof' bezeichnete Institution kein Gericht im rechtsstaatlichen Sinn, sondern ein Terrorinstrument zur Durchsetzung der nationalsozialistischen Willkürherrschaft war. " Michael Verhoeven, "'Die Weiße Rose': Epilog zur Rezeptionsgeschichte eines deutschen Heimatfilms", 131-146, here 144, retrieved from DocPlayer (website), accessed August 14, 2018, https://docplayer.org/34006925-Die-weisse-rose-epilog-zur-rezeptionsgeschichte-eines-deutschen-heimatfilms.html.

[12] For a definition of this term see Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, "The (Inter)-Cultural Responsibiity of Theatre", paper held at the 8th SELICUP conference on "The Humanities

harbour an obvious peace mission as they pinpoint the disastrous impact of national hostilities on individual lives and on the worth of man and woman in general. But not all plays (and films) deal with political oppression or explicitly voice concerns for justice and human rights, let alone work up the dark chapters in European history and the shameful abysses of human nature. Hence to reduce theatre's responsibility to the explicit pacifism of plays would deny the majority of theatre any claim to cultural responsibility. How then can we account for theatre's role in addressing terror and extremism? What are its peculiar ways of raising awareness and fostering civic responsibility? To answer these questions we need to carry debates about theatre beyond issues of content.

Critical Humanities and the Study of Productions

In her entry on "responsibility" in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*,[13] Martha Klein mainly focuses on the concept's causal, legal and moral meanings. Why the arts are excluded in her discussion might renew debates about the truth content of works of art, which has divided critics ever since Plato and produced defences and tracts as well as heated manifestoes and declarations, from early modern apologists like Sir Philip Sidney via the Romantics to the Surrealists, the New Apocalypse and the neo-Romantics of post-WWII England. Theatre is not exempt from these discussions, because even the most fervidly committed performance evokes the ambivalence of stage-play, which is both mimetic – in the sense that it is material, involving *real* bodies and props in *real* space and meeting *real* audiences – and non-mimetic – in the sense that a performance is precisely not life. Klein's definition, however, is more appropriate to the arts when addressing the notion of 'role responsibility', which is derived from H. L. A. Hart's book *Punishment and Responsibility*[14] and relates to the "duties (often culturally determined) which are attached to particular professional or societal or (as in the case of parents) biological roles. Failure to fulfil such duties can expose the role-holder to censure which may – depending on what the roles and duties are – be of a moral or legal kind." (*The Oxford Companion to*

---

and the Challenges of the New Europe: Culture, Languages, Identities" in October 2018 in Alcudia, Majorca and published in *The Humanities Still Matter: Identity, Gender and Space in 21st-Century Europe*, eds. José Igor Prieto Arranz and Rubén Jarazo-Álvarez (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, forthcoming).

13 Martha Klein, "Responsibility", in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (2nd ed.; Oxford: OUP, 2005), n. pag., Oxford Reference (website), accessed August 8, 2018.

14 H. L. A. Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility: Essays in the Philosophy of Law* (2nd ed.; Oxford: OUP, 2008).

Philosophy) Cultural responsibility, we may argue in accordance with this definition, is predicated on a pact between the stage and the audience. Each production re-negotiates this pact, re-defining theatre's rules and duties, i.e. the role it plays in the respective social, political and economic milieu.

In order to understand theatre's power to address extremism, we need to look beyond the level of plays or works and shift our focus to productions. For the history of theatre as works may suggest political commitment or fanciful entertainment, but the history of *productions* is a different story. Even the most contrived and artificial comedy, opera or puppet play can be made to unleash the subversive potential attributed to theatre when produced and performed before an audience. Recent music theatre has shown a strong tendency towards overtly politicised productions, either adapting the conflicts of early opera to present-day scenarios of violence and transforming the eighteenth-century convention of *lieto fine* (happy-end) into timely messages of tolerance and forgiveness (as Mozart's opera seria *La Clemenza di Tito*, first staged in 1791, suggests)[15] or commissioning contemporary music theatre to tackle contemporary issues, an example being the 2018 Salzburg State Theatre production of Lucio Gregoretti's children's opera *Flüchtling* (''Refugee''), composed in 2009 to the libretto by Daniel Goldenberg. It is about Djamila, a little girl from Syria, whose father dies during the flight to Germany and who is helped by a girl of her age, the latter's teacher and classmates. After many bureaucratic and legal obstacles she is eventually given a permit to stay in Germany. Mainly performed by children (for children), the opera actively involves young audiences, which enhances identification. By placing the fate of one refugee girl centre-stage, the production gives the young audience an opportunity to vicariously experience what a refugee's fate may be like and to consider that injustice needs to be opposed. Their courage is rewarded in the end. In addition to being an opera, this was a model educational project. By making audiences 'forget' the improbabilities of sung drama, most obviously the fact that characters sing all the time, opera actually opposes oblivion and indifference and raises awareness of the injustices and hardships suffered by particular groups in society.

Theatre is the prime site of contact and communication in the liberal arts, instilling compassion, turning audiences into witnesses, and fostering cross-cultural dialogue: notably when different traditions and strategies are

15 Cf. Julian Rushton, "Clemenza di Tito, La ('The Clemency of Titus') ", in *The Grove Book of Operas*, eds. Stanley Sadie and Laura Macy (2 ed.; Oxford: OUP, 2006), n. pag., Oxford Reference (website), accessed July 16, 2018.

combined in individual productions, or when stories and productions travel across cultures and are witnessed by diverse and ever new audiences. Outstanding examples are: French director Ariane Mnouchkine's staging of three of Shakespeare's history plays in Paris, borrowing from Japanese *kabuki* and *nō* theatre, or her staging of four Greek tragedies [*Iphigenia in Aulis; Agamemnon; The Libation Bearers; The Eumenides*], jointly titled *Les Atrides* (The House of Atreus) in Paris in 1990–1993, together with her *Théâtre du Soleil* company; Peter Brooks' adaptation of the *Mahabharata* in 1985; Amal Allana's staging of Eréndira in New Dheli in 2004, an adaptation of Colombian Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981); Ratan Thiyam's staging of Sophocles' *Antigone* at the globally acclaimed Chorus Repertory Theatre in Imphal in 1985, for which he adopted movement techniques from the conventional Manipuri martial art, *thang-ta*; Chinese-American Ping Chong's theatre pieces, such as his robotic adaptation of the Frankenstein-myth *A.M./A.M – the Articulated Man* (New York, 1982), or his interdisciplinary performance piece adaptation of F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (New York, 1985); and Japanese director Ninagawa Yukio's 1985 recasting of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as Japanese samurai warrior from the sixteenth century.[16]

In the light of such cross-cultural adaptations of plays and aesthetic transfers in the real context of venues, props and sets, human bodies, puppets, masks and movements, a critical-humanities take on theatre presupposes a shift of attention from plays to productions. This means taking into account not only the semiophoric levels of a performance (*what happens on stage*), but its genetics (*how it is created and evolved)*, as well as its paratheatrical contexts (*how it is embedded and received in space and time*). Production Studies explore these three interrelated parameters in their multiple interactions.[17] *Semiophoric* refers to the meanings of a performance – i.e. what all components of a performance mean in the amalgamated spectacle. *Paratheatrical* circumscribes the thresholds to the spectacle – the building, the economic, geographic, socio-political and cultural environment, audiences, budgets and funding schemes, advertising, reviews, etc. Both interconnect

16 See Gary Jay Williams, "Chapter 13: Interculturalism, Hybridity, Tourism: The Performing World on New Terms", in *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*, eds. Phillip B. Zarrilli and Gary J. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2010), 551-88.

17 Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, "Das Paratheatrale, das Genetische und das Semiophorische – ein Forschungsprogramm zur wissenschaftlich-künstlerischen Erschließung theatraler Produktionen" / "The Paratheatrical, the Genetic and the Semiophoric – a Research Programme to Analyse Theatrical Productions", in *Theatralisierung*, eds. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Timo Heimerdinger (Wissenschaft und Kunst 30: Kulturelle Dynamiken / Cultural Dynamics, Heidelberg: Winter, 2016), 1-26.

with the *genetic* dimension, which involves all historical processes leading up to or influencing a performance: the history of a show and its story, of all props and materials involved, all creative processes such as artists' decisions, training and background as well as adaptation processes. A production-based approach to theatre is practice-led and brings together researchers, cultural practitioners and artists. Significantly, my case study of *The White Rose* has drawn on comments by the actress, the dramaturg and the stage director, whilst requiring a close reading of the play and a study of the historical and political contexts, taking into account reviews and critical literature, and involving attendance of rehearsals and performances, personal records and discussions with audiences. To round off my case study of Lillian Garrett-Groag's *The White Rose*, I shall therefore revisit its 2018 production by the Salzburg State Theatre.

Groag's play was a success: Janina Raspe's performance as Sophie Scholl was convincing, and there were two particularly powerful moments in the production revealing theatre's unique role responsibility. One was the execution scene, which, like all unspeakable atrocities, is a challenge to stage play. A realistic approach might trivialise the immensity of the act, or even worse, yield a voyeuristic spectacle.

While the State Theatre ran *The White Ro*se, the Schauspielhaus, Salzburg's second major theatre, staged another play about a Nazi victim entitled *Jägerstätter* by Austrian playwright Felix Mitterer. It deals with a young farmer's resistance and his final execution. When facing his death, Jägerstätter recites his final letter to his wife, family and friends as he steps down from the stage and slowly walks up the aisle of the raked auditorium, literally vanishing from the audience's sight, while they still hear his voice. This was a memorable scene, converting stage play into memory and the spoken words into echoes from the past.

In *The White Rose*, the acting space was defined by a horizontal and a vertical swastika, which visualised the power relation between the Gestapo interrogator and his victims in proxemic terms. When Hans and Sophie Scholl await their execution, we see them in their prison cells, which form a third and the lowest level of the stage. They are allowed to smoke a final cigarette, she is led by an officer to the execution chamber, and then comes an unexpected loud thump – not from the off, but real. The façade of the upright swastika got detached and crashed forward onto the stage. Spectators in the front rows shrank back, as one could feel the draught caused by the fall of this huge wooden structure. One was struck with a sense of one's own

inescapability and exposure in the light of the sheer force of the material hitting the ground. It was a truly Todorovian moment of hesitation[18] between real danger and being just a spectator. Besides, it was a powerful way of making the audience *witness and experience* the play's message of something horrible and final happening.

The second moment occurred when Hans and Sophie Scholl threw down the final batch of what was to be their last flyer from the balustrade representing Munich University hall (where they were caught and arrested by the Gestapo on 18 February 1943). It was mounted as a flashback within the interrogation that takes up the majority of the play. Simultaneously, another batch of flyers was thrown from the gallery, and the flyers were sailing down onto the spectators, who grabbed them and began reading, or folded them, some just glanced at them and then gave them to their neighbours. In the play, students surreptitiously pick up the folders and dispose of them, afraid to be caught. In these moments, acting space and audience space became blurred. During the interval, the actors and actresses stood at the exits and handed out more leaflets. This time the text, however, was not from the sixth flyer of 'The White Rose', it was a personal message from these young actors and actresses themselves. They felt a need to communicate their own concern in the light of current political developments and warn theatregoers that the freedoms of speech and opinion must not be taken for granted but actively defended. It was a touching moment, when actress Janina Raspe read out the text during the public conversation I held with the production team.[19] She explained to the audience that playing the role had given her a sense of great joy over the peace in which she and her generation now live, and of duty to help safeguard such peace, because it might end, just as Sophie Scholl's untroubled life had ended abruptly. Michael Verhoeven congratulated the acting team on their initiative.

The flyer intervention was emblematic of theatre's communicative role: it built many bridges – from character to actor, from stage to audience, from art to real life, and from a particular incident in history to a call for responsibility aimed at the general public. This constitutes both a fundamental humanitarian message and a testimony to the unique power of theatre in alerting the public and addressing extremist violence and terror.

---

[18] See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975 [1970]).

[19] See Atelier Gespräche online.