Manfred Brauneck and ITI Germany (eds.)
Independent Theatre in Contemporary Europe
Dear readers

The International Balzan Prize Foundation promotes culture and science, and supports initiatives that serve the ideals of humanity, peace and fraternity. In 2010, for the first time, the foundation awarded its prize to a theatre researcher. Professor Manfred Brauneck, of Hamburg, was honoured with the *Premio Balzan* for his life’s work. In accordance with the prize regulations, Professor Brauneck donated half of the prize money to a research project for promising academics. He asked the German Centre of the International Theatre Institute, of which he is a long-standing member, to manage this project; its aim was to complement Brauneck’s own studies in theatre history with an examination of structural changes to European theatre since the beginning of the 1990s. The context is a Europe experiencing change through the creation of the European Union, which has influenced international production, networking, digitalisation, project-based work and hybridisation of forms, as well as leading to the economisation of more and more areas of life and the commercialisation of the public sphere. The research project *The Role of Independent Theatre in European Contemporary Theatre: Studies on Structural and Aesthetic Changes* was developed together with four young researchers and four mentors: Professor Gabriele Brandstetter, Freie Universität Berlin, Dr. Barbara Müller-Wesemann, Zentrum für Theaterforschung der Universität Hamburg, Professor Günther Heeg, Universität Leipzig and Professor Wolfgang Schneider, Universität Hildesheim. A series of symposia and colloquia allowed the collaborators to survey the field of research and undertake an expansive discussion about working methods. The setting of both a regional focus and a limit to the practices to be described was of crucial importance.

The Institute for Theatre Studies at the University of Leipzig then organised a symposium as part of the festival euro-scene Leipzig 2012. The symposium was entitled *Art and Life: Metamorphoses in (Eastern) European Independent Theatre*. Experts from artistic and scientific disciplines and participants discussed questions around current structures and developments in the performing arts in Eastern Europe.
In March 2013, the Post-Migrant Perspectives on European Theatre conference took place at the Goethe Institute in London. Using the starting point of the national scenes in Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden, the conference members contemplated the effects of European migrant societies and the special role of post-migrant theatre artists from the artistic, scientific and cultural/political perspectives. The exchange also served to open up new perspectives and networks for a Post-Migrant Theatre in Europe.

The current volume presents the studies that were completed under the auspices of the research project; each asking their own questions, they approach the various areas of contemporary theatre and dance in field-specific as well as multi-disciplinary ways. The authors investigate the interaction between the changing means of production and distribution as well as the changing dialectics of content versus form; in order to do so, they interview numerous artists.

This expansive research initiative, the first to take on an international approach, is a prominent project for the International Theatre Institute. It assists in understanding the work of theatre professionals and the role of theatre as public benefit, as well as serving to strengthen the preservation of cultural diversity in the face of the increasing global economic pressures of recent decades. We would like to thank Professor Manfred Brauneck for this initiative, for his critical and thoughtful guidance and for his faith in the work of the authors as well as that of the ITI.

Andrea Zagorski, Dr. Thomas Engel
ITI Germany
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Independent theatre takes place outside the established institutions, the repertory theatres or, as Otto Brahm called them, the “permanent stages”. It emerged as an alternative and in opposition to such theatres. In most European countries, it still represents a separate theatre culture, in its beginnings – in the 1960s – a preponderantly politically virulent, and sometimes even a subcultural sphere. Yet it always calls for contemporaneity and explores new paths, even transcending boundaries and conventions.¹

¹ In English-speaking countries, this realm of the theatre is referred to as “independent theatre”. Furthermore, the expression “fringe theatre” also exists in English. It appeared in connection with the Edinburgh Festival of Music and Drama when on the fringe of this festival a large number of small, independent, experimental theatre groups put on a kind of alternative programme: “amusing and anarchistic” (Brian McMaster). This gave rise to the extraordinarily popular Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The term “underground theatre” originated in the 1960s. It refers to a theatre which regards itself as oppositional in a rather diffuse sense, independent and subversive; garish and obscene in its aesthetic means.

Unlike the term “Freies Theater” – Théâtre Libre, Teatro Libero, Teatro Livre – the term “independent theatre” primarily accentuates the distance to the commercially run theatres, to the theatre business as it functioned on the West End stages in London in the 1950s. Later the attribute “independent” was also used by the film industry and referred to a comparable distinction between the production structures of the big Hollywood studios and those of small film companies. Equally important are the American terms “Off-Broadway theatre” and “Off-Off-Broadway theatre”. They are collective names for a trend which distanced itself from the commercialisation of the New York Broadway theatre in favour of more experimental and also political aspirations, above all with new production structures. The term “Freies Theater” includes the broad spectrum of meanings of all these terms, but – owing to the historical context – also refers to the resistance to censorship and other
Since these beginnings, independent theatre has undergone distinct changes: structurally, in its artistic orientation and its social positioning. This transformation had its roots in the changed circumstances of the times – the decades after 1980/90 – not least also in the new generation and life experiences of people currently working in the theatrical field, which are so unlike those of the early years. This is also true of the audience of the independent theatre. Since the upheavals in the former socialist countries in the 1990s, independent theatre has been concerned with reorganising itself in public theatre life after a difficult time characterised by government interference and censorship. Also in those European countries in which, up until the middle of the 1970s, dictatorships were in place, in Portugal, Spain and Greece, independent theatre existed under specific conditions, and its history took its own particular course there. In all European countries, the relationship of the independent theatres to the repertory theatres has changed in recent decades. Even if most of the “permanent stages” reacted to the changed circumstances differently during the same period, some underwent a comparably profound change.

Venues of the independent theatre – inasmuch as it exists as a theatre sphere in its own right – are, for the most part, not typical theatre buildings, but ‘alternative venues’: abandoned factory buildings or something similar, usually buildings rededicated to this purpose yet still showing traces of their original use, and these vestiges of past use characterise the aesthetics of these locations as well as the audience’s sense of space and view to the happenings on stage. Much has been eliminated – even in the ‘production houses’ and ‘culture factories’ which have since emerged – for example, the tiered pricing and with it the seating hierarchy. Thus, the independent theatre responds to the audience’s expectations of a ‘different theatre’ even in its artistic form, which allows the unwieldy, the cumbersome and the imperfect, and which tries out the unusual and experiments, exposing the audience to its experiments and challenging it as it goes along. In the beginnings of the independent theatre movement, the ‘stage’ and the audience shared – even in the socialist countries or in the countries under authoritarian regimes – a largely common political, oppositional attitude. In Spain and Portugal, student theatre groups were the nucleus of an independent, oppositional theatre movement. Today, this connection can be seen in a much more differentiated and open way.

state repression. In the following English translation, the internationally used term “independent theatre” has been adopted. However, all these terms make clear that this realm of the theatre can only be adequately understood in the context of the entirety of the theatre-cultural structures and traditions of the individual countries.