German Theatres – Flemish Landscapes: Contextualizing Milo Rau's NTGent Period[1]

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Swiss-German theatre-maker Milo Rau is one of contemporary Western European theatre's most controversial and influential directors. Rau's political, documentary-inspired theatre has been celebrated since 2008 – the founding of his independent production company, the International Institute of Political Murder – for its fearless political engagement, using different performative lenses to explore the intersection of local and transnational issues such as social justice, migrant rights, diversity, visibility, post- and decoloniality, and better integrating the theatre into the city. While Rau is often looked at as an international director, it is important to remember that he began and has spent most of his career within Germany's theatre scene.

Germany's theatre scene is comprised of two separately funded parts, the more project-based, unaffiliated independent scene (*die freie Szene*) and the publicly subsidized sector. While the publicly subsidized sector is also complex in the different theatre houses within it, this article is specifically interested in the highly stratified *Stadt-* and *Staatstheater*, city- and state-theatres. This article employs

the term "public theatre" to reference these German institutions as well as what is in Flemish called *stadstheater*, or city-theatre. The terms *Stadttheater*, *Staatstheater*, and *stadstheater* are used to identify the different funding sources within both scenes, with the German subsidized landscape coming from city or provincial governments, while in Flanders, these institutions are funded by Flanders' government's department of culture, youth, and media under the Arts Decree. The Arts Decree, different than Germany's cultural funding, is responsible for both unaffiliated or independent artists and groups as well as both producing and non-producing institutions. These institutions in Germany and Flanders hold certain historical and cultural statuses. They are stratified institutions were historical statuses and memories intricately connect to the expectations of their audiences, critiques, funding bodies, and government. It is worth noting that Germany's independent scene – discussed in-depth in Manfred Brauneck's *Independent Theatre in Contemporary Europe: Structures – Aesthetics – Cultural Policy* (2017) – is extremely diverse both in terms of the theatre and performances produced, the venues that house these performances, as well as the artists working within it. This article is concerned specifically with Germany's public theatres. Ttherefore, the diversity it engages with is not based on the German theatre scene as a whole, but on a specific sector of public theatres (*Stadt-* and *Staatstheater*). These institutions operate under pre-determined power structures centered around the hierarchies of the director and, on the highest level, the artistic director and have been historically exclusionary spaces for non-German and German BIPOC artists (Portmann 2023).

It is important to note that Rau began his career on the German festival circuit and smaller performance houses before becoming in-house director at larger public theatres in Zurich and Berlin. However, Rau's work is firmly rooted in the hierarchies visible in German public theatres and he spent much of his career working to become an artistic director within the subsidized sector. Rau's production company, the International Institute of Political murder (officially founded in 2008) was born out of a failed application in late 2006 for the position of artistic director of Dresden's Festspielhaus Hellerau (Climenhaga 2021, 5). While working in the German-speaking realm's independent theatre scene (because these structures are visible in the cultural landscapes of Austria and Switzerland's German-speaking cities like Zurich), Rau's pro-

duction company operated under the same hierarchical structure as public theatres with Rau as artistic director and his name and political/artistic profile synonymous with that of the production company. By 2018, it was largely public knowledge that Rau was vying to be head of a public theatre (Tobler 2017). However, later that year, much to the surprise of those who expected him to succeed Barbara Frey as artistic director at Schauspielhaus Zurich, Rau was named artistic director of the Flemish city-theatre Nederlands Toneel Gent (NTGent). With this appointment, two interconnected questions emerged: "How would the Swiss-German director adapt to his new cultural and institutional context?" and "How would this new, Flemish context adapt to him?"

The City-Theatre of the Future: Of Manifestos and Futurality

Rau opened NTGent's 2018/19 season under the moniker "*The City Theatre of the Future / Het stadstheater van de toekomst*". For this alleged new form of public theatre, Rau and his artistic team published the highly celebrated "Ghent Manifesto" (GM), consisting of ten rules of creation for in-house artists. GM builds on a long historical tradition set into motion at the birth of the German public theatre with Gotthold Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1769) in its concern for the "role and function of the theatre in the city and in society" (Bleeker 2023, 112; Giralt 2003, 2; Bagaskara et al. 2022, 197-8). Such a theatre manifesto taps into the manifesto tradition of avant-garde movements in the early twentieth century, what Martin Puchner refers to as manifesto-driven modernism where various groups imported their political desire for revolution and historical rupture into the sphere of art (Puchner 2022, 451). *Ghent Manifesto* itself is heavily influenced by the Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg's "Dogme 95 Manifesto," itself a reaction against excessive editing in film, a reaction against mainstream films that "counteracted Hollywood's illusion" (Duplat 2018; Hendrickx, Yakoub & Rau 2018). GM also taps into Flanders' longstanding manifesto tradition: namely, Hugo Claus, Alex Van Royen, and Carlos Tindemans' 1968 manifesto, *T68: De toekomst van het theater in Zuid-Nederland* [*T68: The Future of the Theatre in South Holland*]. *T68* also reacts against the then-contemporary non-state of public theatres, calling for the creation of a national, state-subsidized theatre with a

cohesive ensemble, an adaptation-heavy repertoire, and for theatre to regain its connection with "the problems and challenges of our time" (Vanhaesebrouck 2014, 257-60; Tindemans 1995).

For Rau, GM marks a "break with the normal way of doing things," it identifies a very specific problem with public theatres, while situating himself as an innovator in the tradition of the authors of "Dogme 95" and *T68* (Awde 2018; Gyenge 2009, 69-70). In an article about Rau and NTGent, theatre scholars Peter Boenisch and Lise Sofie Houe (2021) explain, "the Ghent Manifesto did not prescribe a certain aesthetics, but instead sought to challenge institutional infrastructures and engrained modes of how theater is produced" (85). Janine Hauthal (2023) connects GM's central tenants – "the casting of actors and non-actors (rule seven), collaborative modes of production, and the democratizations of authorship (rules three and four)" – with Rau "step[ping] away from the Western European tradition of working with a fixed local ensemble to realize what he calls 'global realism' and a 'global ensemble'" (744). Looking at GM within a larger history of European theatre manifestos – even in the limited scope provided here – helps us understand Rau's intentions. Martin Puchner (2022) describes the manifesto as an act of *futurist performativity* "geared towards successfully accomplishing the act that is to create a zero point in history […] the present act of revolt is the beginning of a new future" (452). The manifesto as a form of response, while a gesture to the future, is rooted in the past. It looks back at both the establishment it responds against and the past manifestos it draws upon, engaging in a process of simultaneous replacement and repetition (Puchner 2006, 258-62). Although GM is significant in its articulation of an institutional critique concerning the exclusionary nature of public theatres (but here we must also question how much Rau really opened NTGent during his tenure), the manifesto does not stand at a "zero point" in Flemish, Belgian, or German theatre history. Instead, it builds on over twenty years of changes and innovations in both countries' subsidized institutions. Rau uses GM to situate NTGent as a contemporary alternative to the institutional dramaturgy of the European city-theatre model, directly responding and incorporating the socio-political and socio-cultural transformations of globalized existence to both the city and global supply chain. Cultural journalist Matt Trueman (2018) described Rau's intentions in 2018 as "want[ing] to completely reshape the way his theatre works – if not European theatre as a

whole." He paraphrases Rau's description of European *Stadttheater* as "lavishly funded organisations with in-house acting companies playing productions in repertory," which systemically fail to reflect the multicultural realities of globalized European cities. Again, we see the director positioning both manifesto and theatre as a reaction to a broader, monolithic European city-theatre. However, Rau is not responding to the specific politics and problems of Belgian, French, or Dutch city-theatres, nor those further afield in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, or the United Kingdom – all institutional structures and funding models with their own systemic problems. Looking at the rules of the manifesto in detail reveals that, more than any other, Rau is responding to the German system: a system with a long, distinct history and significantly more funding (and arguably more cultural status) than other European theatres.

Rau explicitly critiqued his predecessor Johan Simons for running NTGent like a German public theatre and references the German system (and his experiences within it) in GM's preamble (Hendrickx, Yakoub & Rau 2018; Irmer 2019, 16):

> it is an unspoken rule at almost all German city theatres that productions (if at all) are not toured across language borders [...] This also applies to content: The classics of the bourgeois era are always the same [...] Newly developed or even non-European plays, such as non-professional or foreign-language actors, activists or free groups, only appear in side programmes and on studio stages. [...] even if you choose the local model: The city itself is consistently excluded from the work of the "Stadttheater" by a set of implicit rules. (Rau & NTGent 2018)

In contrast, Rau's ten rules propose that the theatre move away from repertoires of classic texts (rules 3 and 4) and fixed, primarily white ensembles (rules 2, 6, 7) to instead engage with real world conflicts both globally and locally (rules 1, 5, 9) by integrating the community into its productions (rules 2, 6, 7). However, the public theatre is not a monolith. While Rau paints national and city theatres across Europe with the same brush, the concept of a monolithic *Stadttheater*, visible in the GM's preamble, is a strawman. Vastly different funding and subsidy structures (and massively different

access to funding) across Europe means subsidized theatres look drastically different depending on national and cultural contexts. Rau responds to the highly stratified and established structures and norms of German public theatres, which are for various historical, linguistic, and financial reasons drastically different than Belgian – more specifically Flemish – city-theatres.

City-Theatres and Public Dramaturgies: The Tale of Two Systems

German public theatres have a specific and stratified institutional setting unique to the German-speaking realm. These institutions are recognizable for their large ensembles, repertoires, and charismatic artistic directors, which, when we look at Flemish institutions, are largely absent (Balme 2023, 16; Heskia 2021, 32). Jonas Tinius (2023) notes that German public theatres are symbolic and cultural spaces where the complex relations "between institution, state, and professional artists become visible" (16). These institutions are spaces that bring contemporary social interactions together with ideological and cultural traces of the past in what is still in Germany described in the cultural-historical concept of *Bildung*, which is often translated as cultural education but is more precisely described by Tinius (2024) as a "tradition of critique and self-formation through artistic practice and thought," or self-cultivation through arts. In a 1998 assessment of German public theatres, Jürgen Hofmann describes German public theatres as such:

> The German theatre is a bourgeois and petty bourgeois institution. The support of, care for, subversion of, visits to and the appreciation of theatre have an extraordinary amount to do with image, prestige and cultural status – but also with higher values, humanity, the search for meaning and religion [...] In the German tradition, theatre is a site of poetry more than of spectacle, of literature, rather than performance or theatricality. [...] The programming of contemporary drama is insignificant. Of the ten plays in repertoire only one on average will be a living German-speaking author. (240-1)

While these institutions through their subsidies can produce "outside of commercial market logics and state influence," this does not mean they are totally free or unregulated in their output. Instead, as Tinius (2015) points out, they are "dependent both on municipal politics and the cultural bourgeoisie" (71-2). While Germany in comparison to many other European nations has what appears to be a comparatively stable funding model, German public theatres exist in a state of perpetual crisis. Institutions across the country continue to be run primarily by middle-aged, male, and white artistic directors "whose leadership can be defined more by artistic performance and charisma than by management skills and entrepreneurial thinking" (Canyürek 2019, 401; Heskia 2021, 33; see Zimmer & Mandel 2021). As of 2019, only 22% of German artistic directors were female, although this is now (as of December 2024) starting to change (Karabulut 2021; Sharifi 2019). Already in 2014, German playwright Ulf Schmidt predicted that, should things remain as they are, public theatres in Germany would die out within the next decade. While in 2024 – looking back on the last decade of crises – of which the 2024 cuts to Berlin's cultural subsidies is, at the time of writing, just the most recent – public theatres are not dead, they are again in danger. For over thirty years, a debate has raged within the German-speaking realm about these institutions' structure (Tinius 2015, 71; see Woolf 2021). With the rise of initiatives and organizations such as Die Vielen, Theater.Frauen, Bühnenwatch, and Staub zu Glitzer in recent years, there is a call coming from inside the house to transform the hierarchical system and leadership model, making these public theatres more transparent – which is also reflected in rule 2 of GM (Sharifi 2019).

Because of existing linguistic divisions in Belgium, the concept of a national theatre never really came to fruition. Only after World War II were the theatre groups in Flanders that would become city-theatres given theatres, ensembles, and (politicized) structures (Tindemans 2011). Like German public theatres, Flemish theatres – which are historically, economically, and structurally different from those of French-speaking Wallonia – survive not commercially, but through the support of the Flemish government's Arts Decree (Van den Dries 1998, 76; Leenknegt 2020). However, in comparison to Germany's 153 public theatres, Flanders has only three: Brussels's KVS (Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg), Ghent's NTGent, and Antwerp's Toneelhuis. These three institutions have traditionally stood at the

top of Flanders's cultural subsidy pyramid. Although even this can be complicated, bureaucratic, and with its own social and political agenda (Caron 2022; Dewinter, Rutten & Bradt 2020, 96-111; Loots 2019, 274-90). Nowhere is the complicated nature of Flemish subsidization of cultural institutions clearer than Toneelhuis nearly losing its subsidies in 2022 amid governmental cuts and a change in artistic management. The allocation of subsidies for 2023-2027 period was, despite an increase of €25.3 million, fraught, and in spring 2022, one in four Flemish culture houses were in danger of losing their subsidies (Huyghebaert 2022; Van den Broek 2022; Vergeyle 2022). In May 2022, it was announced that Toneelhuis, Flanders' largest city theatre, had received a negative evaluation, placing the theatre in serious jeopardy of losing its government funding with the city of Antwerp unable to provide financial assistance to help the theatre (Verstuyft & Marien 2022; Vergeyle 2022). Ultimately, despite the negative evaluation, it was announced that Toneelhuis would receive €2.6 million annually, still significantly less than either KVS or NTGent's €3.4 million annual subsidy (Tielens 2022; Marien 2022; Paelinck 2022; Van Schoor 2007). Part of the complicated and political nature of Flanders' subsidy model is that the Arts Decree, which is responsible for all of Flanders' cultural funding, has a more open framework than funding for German public theatres[2], including both short-term and multi-year subsidies – effectively combining what in Germany would be bookmarked for public theatre funding with that of the independent scene (Leenknegt 2021). This matter is further complicated by the uncertain role city-theatres have held in Flanders since the foundation of the first Nationaal Toneel in Antwerp in 1853, bound to a concept of repertoire in a linguistic community without an established canon (Opsomer 1988; Vanhaesebrouck 2010, 466).

German public theatres historically served as *Bildung* institutions linked with language, national identity, and cultural heritage, and continue to be regarded as "structurally immobile, less innovative, and more committed to the preservation of cultural heritage" (Slevogt 2018, 13). Considering the troubled history that links the birth of Flanders' national theatres with nationalist movements and wartime collaboration with National Socialism, Flemish city-theatres – while part of a cultural landscape internationally renowned for artistic diversity – sit tenuously with the social, political, and cultural expectations placed upon such institutions.[3] In *Theater der Zeit*'s 2012

retrospective on Dutch and Flemish theatre, Karel Vanhaesebrouck (2012) notes Flemish city-theatres "have ceased to be the bourgeois, inaccessible and fixed bastions they once were" (12-13). Ingrid Vranken and Sylvia Botella further explain that Flemish city-theatres "have transformed into open houses with very diverse artistic approaches, organizing themselves in different ways and taking on a unique position towards the changing urban societies in which they are embedded" (Vranken & Botella 2017, 10).[4] Toneelhuis has opened itself as a producer for a diverse selection of artists. KVS supports an open ensemble of theatre-makers, performers, directors, choreographers, and authors in long-term partnerships with the house. Prior to Rau's arrival, under the direction of Johan Simons and Wim Opbrouck, NTGent was a house of actors, the "only theatre in Flanders to have an elaborate ensemble of Flemish and Dutch [actors] that is steadfastly used in in-house productions" (10-13).

Rau's major change to NTGent was the elimination of this ensemble, replacing it with project-based contracts for actors rather than full-time employment (Awde 2018). Rau's elimination of the ensemble, considering the cultural landscape and Flanders's other city-theatres is not particularly radical. From 2001 to 2005, KVS under Jan Goossen gradually downsized its former ensemble to free financial and artistic space for collaborations with artists and independent companies (Goossens 2016, 32). In 2006, Toneelhuis, under artistic director of Guy Cassiers also eliminated its actor ensemble in favour of one of in-house creators (Jans 2023, 20). Kristof van Baarle (2022) notes that dissolving ensembles in favor of a short-term, project-based model – the *flexibilization* of the arts – makes actors vulnerable to the precarity, individualism, and competition of neoliberalism, frequently described more positively as creativity, flexibility, and self-organization. Rau's response to critiques mirrors this positive language, stating: "We are convinced that our model of an open, diverse ensemble gives many more opportunities and freedom to the makers, and the space to actors, than the small and exclusive ensemble we had until 2018" (Ceulemans 2022). Actors and artists are in this process transformed into *culturpreneurs*, which further marginalizes actors from already marginalized communities (Van Baarle 2022, 3; see Loacker 2013). More positively, the elimination of the ensemble can be connected to actionable changes within the system to increase diversity and better represent the demographics of the cities that house these institutions, to become representative

of the heterogeneity of the migratory European city (Boenisch 2022, 72; Boenisch & Houe 2021, 86-7). Considering the concept of a global ensemble, an ensemble representative of the cultural makeup of contemporary cities, Boenisch explains that under Goossens, KVS "turned the city itself into the principal starting point for developing a new mission that would help to reassert the legitimacy of his theatre institution within the culturally, ethnically, and linguistically mixed reality where 'as a population in this city we share no common past but have to develop a common future'" (Boenisch 2022, 75). Hauthal (2023) suggests that the success of Rau's multilingual, intermedial, and intercultural NTGent productions is not "altogether unexpected in the Belgian context," tracing Flemish interest in *migratory aesthetics* back to the multilingual productions of independent theatre and dance groups in the 1990s (e.g., Dito'Dito and Les Ballets du Grand Maghreb, Victoria, Hush Hush Hush, Needcompany) and the subsequent generation of artists and collectives (e.g., Thomas Bellinck and Action Zoo Humain). She highlights how post-millennial artists shifted multilingualism from the mark of a trilingual state to an acknowledgement of Belgium's complicated historical and colonial intertwinement with Central Africa, as well as a globalized present marked by "(forced) mobility and (post-)migration" (741-48).

Looking at these two systems, we find a theatrical landscape in Flanders more prepared for Rau's reformatting of NTGent, with changes to the institutional dramaturgies of the region's city-theatres preceding the Swiss director's arrival, than German public theatres were for Matthias Lilienthal's reforms at Münchner Kammerspiele (see Michaels 2021) or Chris Dercon at Berlin's Volksbühne (see Boenisch 2021) prior to Rau's arrival in Ghent. However, Rau likes to speak in absolutes, stating in GM's preamble: "All attempts to open up the model of the city theatre, to combine, national and international modes of production, a continuously cooperating ensemble with openness to guests, have failed because of the implicit limits of the 'city theatre' system" (Rau & NTGent 2018). Boenisch and Houe (2021) similarly note Rau "regularly polemicizes [...] against [the] elitist 'bourgeois theatre'" he works within (86). In his rhetoric, Rau does not consider the history of the Flemish theatrical institution or the differences between it and its German counterpart. His relatively straightforward critique of German public theatres and his institutional response is part of a larger history. Rau entered NTGent at a moment of reformatting within German public theatres,

when, because of the innovations of numerous artists working within them (frequently artists from or connected with migrant and postmigrant communities) spent decades fighting for. The following section explores four of these innovators, whose hard-won successes Rau (and others) builds upon. Often, these institutional changes and innovations are inseparably intertwined with a localized engagement with themes of diversity, inclusion, and migration.

Institutional Agitation: A Postmigrant Theatre of the Future

According to Theater an der Ruhr's (TadR) quasi-manifesto, "Konzeption" on the theatre's website, by artistic director Roberto Ciulli and his German dramaturg Helmut Schäfer the debate surrounding German public theatres' structure has been ongoing for over thirty years (Tinius 2015, 71). TadR (founded 1988) participated in this debate by instituting a theatre that responded to the public theatres' alienation and bureaucracy (Tinius 2023, 88-9). Under Ciulli – who migrated from Italy in the 1960s – TadR offers an early example of an instituting response to the public theatres' set structures, an alternative flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the work it produced and the artists it housed (Sharifi 2017, 337). Like Rau and NTGent nearly four decades later, TadR can be connected to what would be called *post*migrant and migratory aesthetics. TadR housed the exiled Roma theatre *Pralipe* and, after the group's dissolution, many of its actors joined Ciulli's ensemble (Tinius 2023, 3). Unlike Rau, Ciulli emphasized a stable ensemble, while similarly encouraging process-based work, touring shows, extra-performance community engagement, transnational exchange, and portraying "other views" (125-7).

TadR is indicative of the institutional shifts and reformatting German public theatres are undergoing, particularly with the ever-increasing place of representing, reflecting, and responding to the immediate crises of the real world in their programming – what Christopher Balme (2023) calls the *postfictional* (16). With this shift, public theatres increasingly incorporate additional, alternative programming, frequently in dialogic formats – lectures, conferences, workshops, interactive installations, and online forums – aimed at knowledge acquisition (25). This alternative programming, which

Ulf Schmidt named "die fünfte Sparte", makes up around 20% of annual programming and is nearly inseparable from discussions of (post)migration, diversity, and inclusion (Petersen & Nielsen 2021, 2; Balme 2023, 16; Schmidt 2014). However, inviting the outside world into the German theatre is destabilizing for such an established institution and has received significant pushback and criticism from audiences and decision-making bodies (Balme 2023, 28). It is important to understand that this shift to *postfictional* programming fits within a larger history of the institutionalization of socially engaged art within the public theatre's curatorial turn, transforming theatres into agents of exchange and mediums of communication for larger societal discussions (Orel 2017, 221, 227; Petersen & Nielsen 2021). This history is perhaps most visible in the non-theatrical programming of dramaturg turned artistic director Matthias Lilienthal at the Volksbühne (1992 -1999), Hebbel am Ufer and Theater der Welt Festival (2002-2014), and Münchner Kammerspiele (2015- 2020). Through their non-theatrical programming, Lilienthal and his successors sought to connect theatrical programming to the city by engaging and adding to societal debates (Sellar & Lilienthal 2014, 73).

German public theatres (like Flanders's three city-theatres) still operate under a *white norm*: (mostly) white actors performing a white, Western canon for (mostly) white audiences (Sharifi 2018, 337; Truman 2018; see Sharifi 2019, Bergmann 2016, Perumal 2013). Although artists of colour and migrant artists have been active in Germany since (at least) the 1960s, until relatively recently they were frequently relegated to the margins of both theatres and theatre studies as irrelevant or amateur (lacking "quality"). Even in 2023, BIPOC artists and actors are underrepresented in public theatre ensembles and internal structures (Sharifi 2023, 79-81) . As Azadeh Sharifi (2023) points out, we cannot separate this historical and contemporary underrepresentation and the phenomenon of postmigrant theatre from the "historical, political, and cultural circumstances of Germany in the twenty-first century" (79-90). Specifically, German citizenship law did not change from right of blood to right of soil until 2001. This means that it wasn't until 2001 that the descendants of the so-called guest workers who re-built the country after WWII were granted citizenship (79). Likewise, it is only in the last two decades – thanks to the efforts of Jewish, Black, migrant, and PoC scholars, artists, and activists – that the conversation around race, racism, and cultural diversity shifted to

consider structural racism as an analytical frame (81; see El-Tayeb 2016, Steyerl & Rodríguez 2003, Alexopoulou 2018).

It is thus no surprise that accompanying the noughties' socio-political shifts, "promoting cultural diversity has been one of the primary focuses of the cultural policy discourse in Germany" (Canyürek 2019, 399). Migration researcher Mark Terkessidis (2008) has pointed to the need for a comprehensive reform of the public theatre system, which includes diversifying the staff, audience, repertoire, and programming (49-50; see Terkessidis 2010, Canyürek 2019). Since the 2010s, one in five Germans fall under the bureaucratic category of migration background (more in cities like Cologne). So when we talk about the transcultural and postmigrant in an institutional frame, we find an explicit, top-down interest in connecting the theatre with the city beyond the white norm (Canyürek 399). The most famous historical example is that of Schauspiel Köln from 2007 to 2013 (see Sharifi 2011). In a heavily publicized project (in retrospect considered a failure), the institution's then-artistic director Karin Beier sought to have the theatre's onstage reality reflect Cologne's social reality, where approximately one third of the population has a migration background. The theatre recruited actors of *Migrationshintergrund* to make up 30 percent of the ensemble and commissioned several plays from *Migrationshingtergrund* directors and playwrights (Stewart 2021, 98). However, this initiative was dissolved after a single season (2007/8), and many of the diverse members of the previous season's ensemble saw their contracts terminated. When asked about the de-diversification of the ensemble, Beier responded they would hire those BIPOC actors who were good, but there weren't many who were, which she labelled a "social problem."[5] Beier is emblematic of an institutional interest in representing heterogeneity in public theatres that can be quickly abandoned when the work proves more difficult that simply placing BIPOC employees into white structures. However, this interest also marks a transitional moment for BIPOC artists, who use such institutional opening to move from the short-term engagements of the independent scene into the long-term commitments of public theatres (Sharifi 2017, 372-374).

Beier's project in Cologne was not unprecedented, building off Turkish-German director Shermin Langhoff's earlier success at Ballhaus Naunynstraße. Langhoff, having previously worked in film and television, began her theatre career in 2006 when she was

commissioned by Matthias Lilienthal at HAU to curate "Beyond Belonging: Migration", a festival for young Turkish-German artists. Following the festival's second iteration in 2007 and the founding of Kultursprünge e.V. in 2008, Berlin funded the private performance venue Ballhaus Naunynstraße under Langhoff's artistic direction. Ballhaus Naunynstraße differs from the public theatres discussed throughout this section, because – while receiving modest government subsidies from the city of Berlin – the theatre acts as a production house and touring venue, without an in-house ensemble (one of the key features of German public theatres). The theatre encouraged young and Turkish-German productions, marking the opening of a space envisioned to operate in "contrast with already established theatres as an exploratory concept with respect to the artists involved and their narratives and aesthetical aspirations" (Sharifi 2018, 495-7; Wilmer 2018, 195). Coining the term postmigrant theatre – a moniker Langhoff brought with her to her next appointment but also remains firmly entrenched in Ballhaus Naunynstraße's foundational narrative – Ballhaus Naunynstraße became a space to dramatize experiences of migration, displacement, and life in diaspora while critically examining past and present German society (Sharifi 2018, 498-9). This postmigrant project became even more pronounced in 2015 when Langhoff was named artistic director of the Berlin public theatre Maxim Gorki Theater – Germany's first PoC artistic director (501).

Langhoff's arrival at Gorki marked a transition for postmigrant theatre in Germany: a move from the *freie Szene* to public theatres, from experimental spaces to one of "high culture" (a placeholder of accepted cultural values), and ultimately to a more permanent home with a less precarious budget (Landry 2021, 10). With Gorki, more marginalized groups became engaged both onstage and on an institutional level. These collaborations – including the founding of an Exile Ensemble in 2016 – brought more BIPOC voices onto the stage, to create their own stories, to define themselves, and to shift the institution away from the hegemony of a white, European canon of texts and representations, and the regulation of BIPOC actors to the roles of refugees, pimps, sex workers, trash collectors, cleaning staff (Thiele 2010, 80). With their *fünfte Sparte*, Gorki also staged activistic interventions and engaged in societal debates (Sharifi 2018, 335; Wilmer 2018, 195-6). Like Beier, Langhoff's theatre directly references the city. The theatre's "About Us" section of their

website (which reads like a manifesto) proclaims: "Gorki is for the whole city, and that includes everyone who has arrived in the city in the last few decades, whether in search of asylum, whether in exile, whether they be immigrants or simply people who grew up in Berlin" (Gade & Rotondi 2020, 521; Wilmer 2018, 195; Maxim Gorki Theater 2024). This mission includes producing new works, reimagining classics in the globalized present, and furthering the *fünfte Sparte* to better integrate the theatre into the city's debates. However, major cuts to the budget of Berlin's vibrant cultural sector announced in late 2024 endangers the progress made by postmigrant artists and institutions, with diversity initiatives often the first to fall victim to cuts as the city cuts 130 million euros from the cultural sector. As Maxim Gorki Theater loses €1,000,000 from an €18,987,000 annual budget, the cover offered by the public theatre has become notably less stable (Nachtkritik 2024).

Spurred on by the Refugee Crisis, since 2015, German public theatres increasingly found themselves engaged with the city's socio-political shifts. Such shifts and discussions within and around German public theatres are indicative of an interest in representing a migratory and diverse reality. Within this environment, once-acceptable theatre practices were called into question: In 2011, the group Bühnenwatch staged a public protest against the use of blackface (a long-standing and slow to die practice in German theatre) in Michael Thalheimer's *Unschuld* (Dea Loher) at Deutsches Theater Berlin. This protest ultimately led to a public debate hosted by the theatre about the practice (see Sharifi 2018). With the 2015 Refugee Crisis, public theatres across Germany took a political stand, opening their doors to incoming migrants and founding "Refugees Welcome" projects (see Nachtkritik 2015). However, this momentary opening did not lead to significant changes to the institutions or their policies and these forced migrant actors remain largely limited to documentary performance or modern dance (see Micossé-Aikins & Sharifi 2016, Marschall 2023). Here German stages continue to reproduce an Othering image of the migrant that places "the responsibility to arrive, integrate and assimilate on refugees", only allows migrant artists to participate in "refugee" projects without the possibility of stable employment, while fundamentally failing to understand racism as a structural issue that transcends political affiliations (Marschall 2023, 565-6). At this historical moment – for better or for worse – Rau was named artistic director of NTGent.

We cannot talk about Rau's NTGent without discussing Lilienthal's 2015 to 2020 tenure at Münchner Kammerspiele. Lilienthal is an influential figure in Rau's theatrical career, attending premieres of early projects such as *City of Change* (2009), participating in talks and talkbacks, and contributing to Rau's 2020 *Why Theatre?*. Lilienthal has also been linked to postmigrant theatre (bringing Langhoff into theatre), the diversification of theatre houses, and connecting the theatre with the city. As Hebbel am Ufer's (HAU) artistic director, Lilienthal placed "an emphasis on bringing the local neighbourhood and the sum of diverse cultures into the theatre. For the HAU, this meant first of all the residents of Berlin and/or Kreuzberg with a Turkish or Arabic background" (Stewart 2021, 155). HAU, like Ballhaus Naunynstraße, is not a public theatre in the same stringent and stratified sense as the Kammerspiele. This venue has a much looser structure and, under Lilienthal, operated without a fixed ensemble (156).

At the time of GM's composition, MK's board of directors and city government had turned on Lilienthal and his radical reimagining of the theatre. Lilienthal's Kammerspiele was a stark departure for Munich's audience from the era of his and Rau's common predecessor, Johan Simons. Critics and season ticketholders were immediately dubious of the appointment of someone who was neither a director (rather a dramaturg) nor had ever led an ensemble theatre. Lilienthal moved away from a repertoire of classic texts, brought in actors from Munich's (and Berlin's) *freie Szene* aesthetics into the public theatre, and discounted tickets for younger audience members (Tholl 2015). The controversy around Lilienthal's focused on his apparent relegation of MK's beloved ensemble to a marginal role while featuring new performance rather than text-based works frequently staged by outside groups (Balme 2023, 27). Alongside these new works and artists, Lilienthal – whose *Wohnungen X* interrogated Berlin's changing urban demographics by facilitating audience encounters – curated a series of nonfictional discussions (lectures, artist talks, conferences) and political actions, even tapping into current events with an Open Border Ensemble (Goldmann 2018; see Garde & Mumford 2016).

Conclusion: Migratory Interests and New City-Theatres

In theatres across Germany and Flanders, we see a clear interest in finding theatrical and non-theatrical ways to connect and respond to current events while involving the local community. We again hear traces of this vision in Rau's opening speech for NTGent's 2022/23 season, where the director describes a diverse city-theatre that "brings together names, that are part of the pantheon of Flemish and World theatre with others that are seen for the first time on a stage. [...] creates debates, campaigns, festivals, together with our local and international partners. [... A] city theatre is [...] the blueprint for an ideal republic in the making – with all its conflicts, its diverse opinions, its dreams and hopes" (Rau 2022, 172-3). The rhetoric of innovation imbued in NTGent's supposed status of a *city-theatre of the future* implies a *city-theatre of the past*. Yet, as Thomas Fabian Eder and James Rowson point out, "innovation in the arts is by no means a new phenomenon," which is not to say that the relationship between institutions and innovations –changes to established ways of doing things within subsidized institutions – is easy (Eder & Rowson 2023, 334-6).

Attempts to innovate the institutional dramaturgy of German public and Flemish city-theatres occur extensively in response to societal conversations concerning issues of migration and mobility as they intertwine with politicized questions of diversity, integration, and inclusion within the institution. Through a variety of – albeit often public-facing – changes to programming, casting, employment, and creation processes, we see subsidized institutions in both places seeking to actively participate in their own political and social agenda (Boenisch 2022, 73). With the implementation of GM, Rau – on an institutional level – applied the socio-political agenda of his previous ten years of work as an independent theatre-maker to NTGent. It is significant that beyond the elimination of the ensemble, GM's other rules – new works over classic texts, collective/collaborative working processes, community engagement, and a touring model – were accepted with little, if any pushback. Both Michael De Cock, artistic director of KVS, and Alexander Devriendt, artistic director of Ontroerend Goed, even voiced that GM (accompanied by Rau's continuous breaking of it) and NTGent's city-theatre model under Rau (one that merges the house's profile with that of its artistic di-

rector) were old-fashioned. De Cock even went so far as to say that Rau's is a *postdramatic repertoire* theatre, with the term repertoire linking Rau to the Flemish conception of German public theatre, a repertoire system, *Repertoirebetrieb* (Ceulemans 2022; Zimmer & Mandel 2021, 2; Mandel 2021, 246). The repertoire is connected to comparatively secure funding that allows for long-term contracts and long creation processes, not to mention notions of a shared national culture, identity, and language. This funding has historically allowed the public theatre to remain outside the precarity of the *freie Szene*'s "post-Fordist working modalities and project-based temporalities", which is increasingly present in Flanders' neoliberal city-theatre model of short-term contracts (Tinius 2023, 129-30). The risk that accompanies a shift towards a city-theatre with a contract-based model like at KVS, Toneelhuis, and now NTGent – which does also allow for more diverse and flexible onstage representation – is an exacerbation of neoliberal precarity among actors and artists that mirrors that of Germany's *freie Szene* that can be summarized as *diverse but insecure*. In both Flanders and Germany, we see this danger of compounding precarity where precarious cultural work meets the systemic marginalization of cultural workers.

Public theatres, city-theatres, and many Western European subsidized theatres find themselves taking part in the same discussions of migration and diversity as cities in which migration – in various manifestations – is increasingly the norm. Rau envisioned NTGent as accessing both the security of the repertoire system (drawing in season ticketholders) as well as the freedom and flexibility of the *freie Szene*, mirroring Belgium's diversity by placing an older generation of familiar white, Belgian actors alongside an emergent generation of BIPOC actors.[6] Looking at the artistic directors named throughout this article, we see an interest in creating space for a more diverse group of actors and better representing the society the theatre finds itself within. However, we also see the difficulties of sustainably institutionalizing these changes, particularly for the white, European directors working within these institutions. In Flanders, Rau did not face the same structural resistance as his predecessors in Germany, artistic directors Rau is certainly aware of, if not inspired by. However, when looked at in context – of which this article only offers a brief snapshot – the institutional changes proposed by *The Ghent Manifesto* and the theatre's moniker of *city-theatre of the future* are, in truth, not radical within the already

structurally diverse Flemish city-theatre landscape. Public theatres in both landscapes find themselves in a paradigm shift, albeit at drastically different paces. As they are, these structures struggle to negotiate their historical mandates of preserving a cultural legacy and their contemporary role of representing their public. So, when we arrive at the elusive question of the city-theatre of the future, the possibilities are diverse, endless, and plural.

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Notes

1 This article is based on research for the article "Globalized Theatre | Tokenized Performance: Milo Rau's German Intercultural Theatre in Belgium" published in December 2024 in volume 60, number 4, of *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*.

2 According to a 2018 German cultural financial support, in 2015, state and local authorities in Germany earmarked 3.7 billion euros of general budgetary resources for theatre and music, with 35.7% of total public expenditure going towards culture (Berghausen 2019)

3 For more information on the link between the history of Flemish nationalism, National Socialism, and Flemish theatre see Cleen 2013 and Vanhaesebrouck 2010.

4 Although it is not the focus of this article, as of 2023, the Flemish cultural sector continues to have significant problems with racism, diversity, and inclusion within its institutions, which it frequently fails to recognize or make meaningful change to address (Joye 2020). There is a more nuanced conversation taking place within the Flemish performance landscape about the interaction between "independent artists" and larger performance houses, and how subsidy distribution often favors larger institutions over smaller companies and artists (see Van Baarle 2022).

5 The direct quote from Karin Beier is as follows: "Wir würden jeden [Schauspieler*innen mit Mitgrationshintergrund] engagieren, den wir gut finden! Aber es gibt da nicht so viele. Das ist ein soziales Problem!" (qtd. in Sharifi 2016, 337).

6 Eberhard Spreng, "Milo Rau am NTGent. Das 'Stadttheater der Zukunft' im Praxistest," *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 29.06.2019, *https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/milo-rau-am-ntgent-das-stadttheater-der-zukunft-im-100.html*.