

BRANDON WOOLF. *Institutional Theatrics: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021. Pp. 268, illustrated. \$99.95 (Hb); \$34.95 (Pb).

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Brandon Woolf frames his timely study of the Berlin theatre scene with the contemporary fiasco surrounding the Volksbühne, one of the major “state-stage” theaters that receive funding from the federal government. Traditionally home to radical-left theater and historically featuring work by the likes of Benno Besson, Heiner Müller, and Frank Castorf, the Volksbühne was to be transformed under the neoliberal vision of a new *Intendant*, Chris Dercon, brought in from Belgium via London in 2017. But Dercon’s stint at the Volksbühne did not last long. Facing sustained massive protest against his appointment and the changes imposed under his direction, Dercon was fired after only seven months in the position. As Woolf demonstrates in his analysis of what he calls the “Dercon debacle,” this event was just one in a series of institutional controversies throughout the history of Berlin theatre since unification in 1990. *Institutional Theatrics* offers a sophisticated and deeply researched narrative of the volatile history of postunification theatre. This is a history of policy, politics, and protest that Woolf proposes we approach through an Adornian dialectic of “disavowal” – or, as Woolf terms it, “institutional dis/avowal” – which accounts for artists, theatre-makers, and their supporters unsettling institutions from within rather than rejecting them wholesale.

Following the analysis of the Dercon debacle in the introduction, the four chapters composing the book provide discrete studies of previous events and performances that shape the trajectory of postunification theatre and the practice of institutional dis/avowal. Chapter one shows how the Dercon debacle is simply the latest chapter in the so-called theatre crisis resulting from explosive neoliberal urban development. As early as 1993, a similar controversy was sparked by the proposed closing of the State-Stage Complex, a collection of state-funded theatres including the flagship Schiller Theater, the Schiller Werkstatt (Studio) Theater, and the Schlosspark Theater, under a new cultural policy that put neoliberal economics first. This proposal, like Dercon’s assumption of the *Intendanz* of the Volksbühne, met with extensive public debate and resistance. The State-Stage Complex event ushered in what has become an ongoing crisis in the arts and theater scene in Berlin, as well as the beginning of an engaged countermovement of solidarity and dissent. Chapter two returns to the Volksbühne, exploring Castorf’s protracted *Intendanz* there (1992–2015) and in particular his 2010 staging of *Lehrstück*, a production

inspired by the radical dramatic form of early Brecht. According to Woolf, Castorf's return to Brecht offered the paradigmatic theatrical apparatus of dis/avowal, "battling *for* the institution by battling both with and within it" (86). Castorf, that is, worked within the infrastructural space of the state-stage and from this central position, critiqued it.

A greater focus on place and memory comes into play in the third chapter, which takes as its object the East German Palast der Republik – built on the former site of the German Imperial Palace, which had been heavily damaged in the Second World War – and the partisan politics governing its destruction to make way for the controversial resurrection of the Imperial Palace, completed anew in 2020. Woolf draws on Jacques Derrida's notion of "hauntology," a theory of political and historical spectres out of joint or at odds with the grand narratives of history, to propose a more specific "structural hauntology," which he defines as "an architectural practice and mode of city planning that stages a different method of doing history" unbound from linear, state-sanctioned narratives (113). Accordingly, Woolf shows how between 2006 and 2008, before the razing of the Palast der Republik, this structure raised spectres of the past, becoming an ephemeral space of performance and memory in large part through the work of "free-scene" (independent) theatre artists.

The work of Berlin's free-scene theatre carries over to the final chapter of *Institutional Theatrics*, in which Woolf analyses the free-scene group andcompany&Co.'s production (*Coming*) *Insurrection*, which premiered in 2012. A postdramatic reimagining of Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos*, this performance implicitly questions the possibility of political theatre within the precarity of the free scene, which is independent from but also unfunded by the state. Woolf asks, "Does the free scene – in its quest for 'freedom' and 'autonomy' – also enmesh itself in the very practices and structures from which it is trying to acquire distance?" (140). Yet, as Woolf contends, (*Coming*) *Insurrection* performs dis/avowal from within its own contextual precarity. Invoking Judith Butler's theory of assembly, Woolf shows that this performance creates new space in the alliance "between" bodies, not unlike the performative alliances created among bodies assembled on the street in protest (141).

Institutional Theatrics closes with a brief epilogue that addresses a gap in its own purview, as none of the chapters' central examples address the ongoing issues of racism and antifeminism in the Berlin theatre scene. The tremendous efforts of the movement known as "postmigrant theatre" and its antecedents to bring these institutional problems to light are mostly absent from this study. Woolf recognizes this: "[T]he many avowals and disavowals analyzed throughout this book have been made from exclusively white and,

most often, male subject positions – a striking feature of Berlin’s theatrical establishment” (181). With this acknowledgment, Woolf attests to the inescapable whiteness and maleness of Berlin theater. A return to the Dercon debacle in this context occasions the opportunity to consider other elements of the polemic thematized at the book’s outset. Specifically, some viewed the polarity between Castorf, the earlier *Intendant* of the Volksbühne, and Dercon, his short-lived successor, as representative of the division between the anti-imperial, Marxist Left, on the one hand, and antiracist, feminist, and postcolonial liberalism on the other. Dercon, despite his privileged identity, was openly committed to working with more women and artists of colour; meanwhile Castorf shunned political correctness and could be openly sexist and racist, such as when, following the firestorm of controversy surrounding the use of blackface in German theatres in 2011–2012, he declared his right to use the n-word on stage. What does it mean, then, that Dercon’s tenure as director of the Volksbühne lasted under a year and that he was replaced first by the interim *Intendant* Klaus Dörr, who was publicly accused of sexual harassment in 2021, and then by the more permanent successor René Pollesch, an older, white male champion of the old Left who is close to Castorf? It is difficult not to see this history as politically regressive. However, Woolf closes on a note of possibility; at the very least, scholars and artists are now equipped for the future with powerful strategies of dis/avowal so expertly put forth in this book. Woolf’s work serves as an injunction to neither abandon theatrical institutions nor cease to critique them.