

**On theatercombinat's performance of *the last IDEAL PARADISE* in Düsseldorf and the potential for political theater.**

**by Noah Zeldin**

It is often the case in self-proclaimed political theater that the work's aesthetic dimension, which can be defined as its mode of presentation of materials, is reduced or simplified in order to communicate more plainly a direct political message, which is contained in semantic content that is reliant on more conventional verbal language. When the work's aesthetic dimension is repressed to such an extent that its mode of presentation becomes a mere vehicle or even host for extraneous semantic, political content, one is left with agitprop.

With *the last IDEAL PARADISE*, the Vienna-based group, theatercombinat, and its director, Claudia Bosse, have created a theatrical work that avoids this pitfall and therefore represents a possibility for truly political theater. As the title indicates, the piece is the final of a series of pieces performed in various cities over the past few years. The group gave three performances of *the last IDEAL PARADISE* in november in Düsseldorf; I attended the second.

The artistic decisions that enabled *the last IDEAL PARADISE* to avoid this all too common trap of sacrificing aesthetic innovation for an easier dissemination of political messages include: 1. using a non-conventional space, 2. dismantling the fourth wall, 3. discarding conventional, story-based narrative, and 4. incorporating roles for laypersons.

These first two points, using a non-conventional space and dismantling the fourth wall, are closely connected. theatercombinat took advantage of

the unconventional space of the old postal loading station near Düsseldorf's main train station, opting to highlight the found or "natural" state of the facility: no stage was constructed and each segment of the piece occurred in a different room in the building, many of which contained visual and sound installations that always worked with rather than against the space. The performers moved throughout the facility and the spectators were invited to as well. The freedom of movement granted to the spectator led to a paradoxical sensation, which of course I can only describe from my own perspective: the absence of the fourth wall and therewith isolated viewing quarters for the audience caused me to feel at once more alienated from both the performers and other spectators than in a typical theatrical performance and more a part of the entire community (of both spectators and performers). This paradoxical sensation of simultaneously increased alienation and belonging forced me to become more aware of my presence in the shared space, which in turn made me more engaged with the performance. Given the visible, intense concentration of the other spectators throughout the performance, I can safely assume that they experienced a similar sensation.

Further, the aforementioned spatial progression brilliantly complemented the third point listed above: discarding conventional narrative. The performance made use of what seemed to be like most of the rather large postal loading station. Each segment of the performance took place in a different part of the building, which helped the spectator follow the structure of the piece by associating certain physical, visual, or sonic events with specific spaces. After a couple of these segments, it became clear that rather than abandoning any sort of comprehensible

narrative, *the last IDEAL PARADISE* instead dispensed with a conventional, semantic story line in favor of a concrete-aesthetic progression or structure.

In addition to the spatial progression, there were three other interrelated progressions that reinforced the narrative structure and can be described as the gradual transformation from inhumaneness to full-fledged humaneness: 1. Costumes: The performers first appeared donning contorted ski masks and metallic, plastic jumpsuits. The ski masks were then removed and the jump suits covered with knitted sweaters, which the omnipresent, unmasked – and therefore humane-seeming – layperson chorus had worn since the beginning. 2. Voice and comprehensibility: At first, the performers made no noise. Then, one by one, they began to speak, at first awkward and stammering but then increasingly fluid and comprehensible, ending with the performers reading text aloud together with the layperson chorus. This basic progression from muteness and jolted incomprehensibility to relatively seamless comprehensibility assisted with the conveyance of the piece's various, intentionally open-ended political messages, as its semantic contents progressed from overwhelming abstraction to palpable specificity. 3. Movement: The transformation from slightly incapacitated, non-human gestures and movements to normal, sometimes even athletic movements and postures, which correlated with the previous progression in voice and comprehensibility.

The concrete, transparent structure of *the last IDEAL PARADISE*'s formal-aesthetic (non-semantic) dimension is precisely what allows one to consider this thoroughly artistic work political. Politics deals with concrete issues and assumes free agency. Instead of attempting to tackle abstract topics or offer sweeping

solutions, instead of preaching to or forcing a moral lesson on the spectator, *the last IDEAL PARADISE* delivered a constellation of concrete situations to the spectator in a sober and enlightened manner (but also with great – at times overwhelming – intensity and multiple media), entrusting the autonomous spectator with the task of reflecting critically on it all. Specific issues enacted in the piece included: colonialism and exoticism, territory and national boundaries, immigration and terrorism. Each of these issues was concretized in its enactment, that is, in the properly aesthetic manner of its presentation, rather than being verbally or visually explained, that is, in a non-aesthetic, more traditionally semantic manner.

For example, in one segment, everyone, performers, chorus and spectators, stood or sat in a relatively small fenced-off space situated within a larger hall. The performers then gradually spread out large pieces of tarp across the floor of the increasingly tight space. Consequently, nearly every spectator was at some point forced to change his or her position and move to a different part of the space. In addition, one of the performers was positioned in a monitoring station above the room and stared down menacingly, yet unemotionally at the spectators and pounded on the glass in an unnerving, slightly regular macro-rhythm, thereby shattering any remaining voyeuristic illusion the spectators might have still had and further dismantling the fourth wall. This enactment of the notions of territory and boundaries was complemented by fragmented speech from the performers, video recordings of refugees pouring into Europe, projections of words, e.g. the wordplay between *territory* and *terror*, and maps and other visual materials. In a work of conventional theater that (erroneously) understands itself to be political, the spectator would instead encounter a group of actors who assume the roles of other,

suffering individuals and attempt to portray their drama. Instead, in *the last IDEAL PARADISE*, the spectators were subjected to a highly artificial, i.e. intensely aesthetic, simulation of that experience, such that each spectator was compelled to reflect on the situation of those nameless individuals seen in the projected video recordings – and more to the point, those one had seen on or read about in the news countless times before.

This principle of intensely aesthetic enactment also applies to the final segments of the piece that included more conventional semantic content (corresponding to the aforementioned progression in voice and comprehensibility). For instance, the issue of terrorism was addressed by having the performers and layperson chorus, which until that point had remained silent, unite and recite wildly divergent titles of books on the subject in a unison, yet varying rhythm, accompanied by a painfully gradual, highly disciplined march across an impressively long, narrow loading hall. The manner in which the textual content was delivered was equally as significant as the content itself. Instead of patronizingly explaining to the audience that terrorism comes in all shapes and sizes, this segment of the piece presented the material in a forcefully objective manner that made the spectator reflect for him- or herself on the multitudinous manifestations of terrorism and the causes on behalf of which such acts are committed. The subsequent segment dealt with the issue of immigration. Here, the united mass of performers and layperson chorus dispersed and each performer and chorus member stood alone in the large space and intentionally addressed individual spectators with direct eye contact and a completely dispassionate, factual recitation of a personal narrative of immigration and national identity. Again, the precise manner of the presentation of semantic

content, foremost in its narrative-structural position at the end of the piece, was as important as the content. Instead of passionately acting out scenes of immigration before an audience separated by a fourth wall, the performers and layperson chorus, by finally breaking away from the group to become individual and treating the spectators as individuals present in a common space, forced the spectators to recognize such stories as thoroughly human and therefore potentially as their own.

The transparent structure and concreteness of *the last IDEAL PARADISE* – the work's consummate sobriety, enhanced by the incorporation of non-actors – made it one of the most strenuously anti-Romantic pieces of theater I have experienced. Nothing was described or depicted from an emotional or psychological viewpoint but rather physically enacted or impassively presented, so that it was the spectator and not the performers who made the final judgment about the issues at hand. At the end of the long, consistently intense and engaging performance, the spectator was left with myriad physical, visual and sonic phenomena that together granted him or her a newly gained critical standpoint with which to rethink a set of political issues that for too many have become either normalized or hopelessly unsolvable. One hopes that the sheer resolve and persistence of theatercombinat's performance carries over to the spectators' future actions in the political sphere outside the theatrical space.