

Excursions to the Stage

Works for the Theatre by Günter Brus

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An invitation to take an excursion in a world of fantasy filled with highly varied figures, complex layered narratives and attractions much like those of the funfair is extended to the public by the BRUSEUM in the exhibition *Excursions to the Stage*. Designs for costumes and stage sets, original stage props and also plays written in the unmistakable style of Günter Brus are all presented and they give an insight into a rich and multi-faceted world of ideas. The figures on stage and the scenes we encounter on this journey, have had life—and an independent one of their own—breathed into them by the creative energy of Günter Brus. Brus once said about his work for the theatre: 'A GREAT DEAL of illusion must come to the stage! A great deal of MUSIC must accompany the events on the stage. The actor must be caught in the net of the stage's colouring—MORE, MORE ILLUSION! NO LECTURING!'

Memories of Mankind

Erinnerungen an die Menschheit ['Memories of Mankind'] was staged in September 1985 as part of the steirischer herbst festival at the Schauspielhaus Graz. It confronts the audience with 28 short and scurrilous scenes, none of them connected as a coherent narrative in the strict sense, but which open up their broad spectrum of meanings through associations in the mind. They are 'memories of mankind' which appear to emerge from the remembrance of things past in the depths of our subconscious and do so with an irrational structure that can leave us totally perplexed. When a giant blind frog for example, plagues a lonely man with its croaking until he finally attacks the creature with an axe; or when the food and utensils on a table set for breakfast somehow become involved in a ferocious argument; and when a mental institution patient provides us with a succinct analysis human self-delusion: 'The essence of humanity is not knowledge, but error', the man says before taking off his straightjacket, sprouting wings and flying away. What we

are witnessing in these scenes is everyday human life (in terms of perceptions, locations or conventions) and all of it in a deformed state that is capable of shaking our standard patterns of thought to the foundations. The message of this drama is not to be found in coherent narrative, but in the powerful impression left by what to all appearances is a loosely arranged series of scenes.

Luna Luna

André Heller presented his fair-ground of the arts at the Moorweide in Hamburg in summer 1987. *Luna Luna* consisted of numerous pavilions housing artist personalities active in painting, sculpture, music and literature. Günter Brus was one of this group which also included Salvador Dalí, Joseph Beuys, Manfred Deix, Sonia Delaunay, Keith Haring, Christian Ludwig Attersee, Hermann Nitsch, Wolfgang Herzig, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Roy Lichtenstein, Peter Pongratz, Daniel Spoerri, Jean Tinguely and many other prominent artists. The event was not theatre in the strictest sense, but the ghost

trains, shooting ranges, merry-go-rounds and many other typical or newly invented funfair attractions were presented here so that there was no mistaking the onstage character of the presentation. The intention was to cast a spell on people of all ages and educational groups and to entertain them; the merry-go-rounds became mobile sculptures, the ghost train a place where pictures were explained and interpreted. Günter Brus designed for his hexagonal pavilion 'De Lyrium'—which he had dubbed 'Bruseum' in his first draft—a series of showcases, where the amazing world of coloured pencils could be witnessed. The dominant motif in the pavilion architecture was the pencil as a tool of artistic creativity, and a tool moreover that appears to have an independent life of its own. The music played in the pavilion was composed by Hermann Nitsch.

Expectation

Arnold Schönberg's *Erwartung* ['Expectation'], is a one act monodrama in four scenes composed in 1909: There is no interaction of

any kind between the various players onstage, and the plot unfolds instead through the experiences of a single actress or singer. A woman is seeking her lover in the terrifying environment of a dark forest, and her emotions fluctuate between terror and joyful expectation. Ultimately the woman stumbles over a dead body—it is the corpse of her lover. She watches over him until dawn. In this piece the forest is an image of darkness, danger, threat, loneliness or also horror and it mirrors the emotional life of the main character. The woman's monologue consists of disorganised and fragmentary utterances and can be regarded as a spontaneous expression of her inner life. The libretto by Marie Pappenheim is to some extent free of syntax analogous to the music Schönberg composed that is not tied to tonality. Günter Brus produced the stage set for this 1988 production, an oversized and constantly beating heart was the dominant motif onstage through each of the scenes.

The Cunning Little Vixen

This opera by Czech composer Leoš Janáček transports us to a world of animals and fable, which Janáček developed for his libretto based on a story by Rudolf Těsnohládek: The vixen was caught as a cub in the woods and kept by the forester. One day she succeeds in escaping to the forest where she drives a badger from his set and takes over his home. She very soon meets the fox with whom she establishes a happy fox family. But the happiness comes to an abrupt end: The vixen is shot by an angry tramp. This fable tells a story with analogies to human life. The animal characters (such as the fox, the hens, the badger and the woodpecker) all give deep insights into the human sphere. Günter Brus designed the costumes for a new production of the opera in 1994. The vixen is presented as a sly and erotic figure in a foxy lady figure-hugging costume and a teaser eye mask. The forester on the other hand wears a giant hazelnut on his head and has leaves sown into his clothes, stressing his close link to the forest. The fox appears as a fashionably dressed man of the

world. The personal traits of all the figures onstage are brought to the fore and developed by the costumes they wear and we witness a moving tale of the comings and goings of life and its emotional background.

The Countess of Cythera

The first drama by the Austrian cult author Fritz von Herzmanovsky-Orlando, *Die Fürstin von Cythera* [‘The Countess of Cythera’] is a Venetian masked comedy using numerous commedia dell’arte characters: The Venetian Republic is in uproar because a ship with a Turkish crew has been sighted and an attack on the city state is now expected. The influential merchant Pantalone also has some private problems of his own: men are flooding in as suitors to his niece Zerbinetta, and he is not only the girl’s guardian, but he has a marriage match of his own lined up for her in the intellectual Don Tiburzio. This situation reaches a crisis point when Zerbinetta takes matters in her own hands, she dresses as a man and successfully fights a duel

with Tiburzio forcing him to step down from the intended marriage. Finally the ship everyone so fears docks in Venice and the whole city is in uproar. It soon becomes apparent, however, that it is only the arrival of the countess of the Island Cythera who finds it fun to dress the crew on her vessel in Turkish costumes and has no war-like intentions whatsoever. She falls in love with Zerbinetta who is still wearing a man’s clothes. When the Princess learns about this deception she promptly appoints Zerbinetta her minister of war, and her sly hidden agenda here is that her sole weapon of war is her beauty and she declares Venice to be a city of love. Günter Brus designed the costumes for the production in 1995: He stresses the comic character of many of the people who appear onstage—the imaginary Turkish crew the Princess brings with her for example, with their colourful oriental clothes and Zerbinetta in her male costume and a horribly angry male mask. The Princess by contrast presents herself as a noblewoman in a robe of gold and black and crowned with a dramatic headdress.

Unrealised Works

By no means all of the texts, concepts and plans created for the theatre are presented onstage in a three dimensional implementation. Günter Brus made his first venture as a dramatist in 1976 with *Der Frackzwang* [‘Tailcoats Only’], a 4 act play with musical accompaniment. The text was brought out in book form by the publisher ‘Das Hohe Gebrechen’ but it has never been performed. The action takes us into the surreal world of two rivals (alderman and idler), the adorable Metze and Unruhe, a figure who leaves the audience completely puzzled. A series of drawings exists for a possible production. Günter Brus created designs for a production of *Der einsame Weg* [‘The Lonely Way’] by the classic Viennese author Arthur Schnitzler, illustrating the story of the painter Julian Fichtner who is rejected by his own son and left to age alone, as a consequence of his inhumanity and for having abandoned the mother of his son. The magnificent sets Brus created appear as a contrast to the desolate atmosphere of the play. Work on the costumes and sets for Fritz von

Herzmanovsky-Orlando's *Kaiser Joseph II und die Bahnwärters-tochter* ['Emperor Joseph II and the Signalman's Daughter'] stopped after the first concepts Brus produced. The play tells of the meeting of the Austrian Emperor Joseph II with Notzerl, the pretty daughter of the signalman Zwölfaxinger, at an isolated signal station and also of a frustrated assassination attempt on the Emperor. *Endlich Schluss* ['It's Over, Finally'] based on a play by Peter Turrini for which Günter Brus designed the sets, was actually staged, but not with all the detail Brus had hoped for: Many of the ideas Brus had for the set to this monologue of a suicide who suddenly awakens to an awareness of his own happiness, were either not used or only inadequately implemented.

Burlesque Malpractise

Burleske Kunstfehler ['Burlesque Malpractise'] is the first play for the theatre written by Günter Brus that was actually produced. The premiere was at the Kunsthalle Weiz in 2007. It is a fierce, but humorous criticism of art theory:

an arrogant art theorist fights to gain control of a group of cheeky children, while at the same time bossing an orchestra around. This person, who also has an intimate chat from time to time with God or Satan, is convinced that art would not be in existence at all if it wasn't for him: 'The geniuses of art are incapable of grasping that they would not exist as anything more than dead child geniuses or drunken talents without the theory of art behind them.' But instead of generating enthusiasm from his audience for his high-sounding monologues, the art theorist succeeds only in creating boredom where there should be enthusiasm; while trying to provide people with access to art he only succeeds in scaring them away. The art critic finally meets a number of art geniuses, whose costumes Günter Brus devised as allegories: Günter Brus himself, Hermann Nitsch, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock and Pablo Picasso can be recognised in these costumes through the typical stylistic features of their art. Günter Brus presents himself for example in a white suit with a black stripe, reminiscent of his first public

appearances as an actionist, in the *Wiener Spaziergang* ['Vienna Walk'] of 1965. In this action he walked through the streets of Vienna painted white, but seemingly divided into two halves by a black brush stroke. It would seem that the geniuses are also unimpressed by the explanations of an art theorist who interprets them.

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