

## What's New?

by Philipp Schulte

Observations on the online season *mit+abstand (with+distance)* of ASSITEJ Germany and the Children's and Youth Theatre Centre in the Federal Republic of Germany (KJTZ).

*mit+abstand* - the epidemiologically advised motto of spring 2020 was transformed into a visionary motto for a virtual theatre season. The organisers awarded 15 mini-grants to freelance artists who were asked to develop small formats for a young audience that were suitable for keeping a distance and online participation or reception. This resulted in new short films and radio plays, minute fairy tales, interactive discussion formats about the future of theatre, unusual literary texts, actions in public space and a choreographic study. These were published as a season on the KJTZ blog (kjtz.co) between 20 April and 12 June 2020. Now it's time for a brief review - in the form of six answers to the question: What's new?

### 1.) Formally often simple...

A place, a time, a main character, a conflict, an enemy, a turning point - Till Wiebel shows in his participatory text project *DIE QUAL / DER WAL (The ordeal / The whale)* that it doesn't take much at all to tell good stories. In his online catalogue, he makes numerous suggestions for all these categories that are as witty as they are absurd; we have to think up the stories (and rules of the game) ourselves, or negotiate them, or throw the dice. Whether a peacock has to deal with unrequited love in a brewery, or an iceberg is kidnapped by a lifeguard on Christmas morning: Wiebel's open-source project offers material for more narratives than a tree can bear in leaves and shows how inviting formal simplicity can be.

### 2.) ...yet complex in content!

Especially in the early days of the shutdown, there was only one media-dominating theme: Corona, Corona, Corona. But monothematic argumentation often oversimplifies our arguments, and it can be a task of art to remind us of the complexity of circumstances. The charming podcast series *Wenn ich aus dem Fenster schaue (When I look outside my window)* by the duo Frida and Leonie does this particularly well. In ten episodes, Leonie, a drama graduate, and Frida, a student suffering from cystic fibrosis, create encounters between theatre-makers and young people with chronic illnesses and talk about how the pandemic has changed their everyday lives. The life-threatening danger of the virus (for some) and the

limiting effects of its control on the professional existence (of others) are not played off against each other in the stimulating conversations, but brought together sensitively and with understanding.

3.) It explores the (virtual) space....

The STERNA | PAU collective invited to chat with Virginia Woolf. *Give me room* is the name of the text performance for everyone over 14, based on Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own". What space - real, virtual - does each of us occupy, and how important is it to have a room of our own? Instead of Virginia Woolf herself, participants engage in a Messenger-dialogue with a chatbot that is well informed about her feminist position. Via posts, GIFs and memes, a punchy correspondence unfolds that connects the living rooms and children's rooms from which it is presumably experienced and operated. The acoustic insight into the real spaces of the others creates brief moments in which the corona-conditioned isolation is virtually overcome.

4.) ...and animates the everyday.

The radical reduction of the individual sphere of action to one's own living space in the first weeks of the corona restrictions has, at least briefly, given birth to a new genre: Living Room Art, if you will. The underlying question of what aesthetic expressions are possible with the simplest means available at home is appealing, because it is highly participatory: when it comes to bringing pepper and salt shakers into a dialogue in front of the mobile phone camera in the dim light of the room lamp, almost anyone can become a director of their own stories. Wanda Reinhardt and Katja Hensel stage the window show *Die stillen Stars der Straße (The silent stars of the street)* with trees, street lamps, cycle racks and rubbish bins as non-human actors, and Ates Yilmaz and Hannah Auer from the justmainz programme of the Staatstheater Mainz give life to their own clarinet, which would like to give a concert again. The clarinet becomes the protagonist in their film *Hier ist es schön (It's beautiful here)*. Objects are brought to life, everyday worlds are reinterpreted - art can also be made with simple means.

5.) It seeks a new audience...

Another insight from *mit+abstand*: Even though there are an estimated 4 billion internet users worldwide, this does not mean that it is always easy to get even fourteen participants for a live stream. The competition for attention on the net - especially in a time when all cultural offerings

have suddenly become online only - is tough. But where it succeeds, the easy accessibility (a few clicks instead of a trip to the nearest theatre) also leads to new audiences. For example, in the series *theater+zukunft* (*theatre + future*), dramaturg Antigone Akgün held lively discussions with young people and experts on Sunday afternoons about the future of youth theatre. And that a new audience can also be found outside the virtual world is shown by the envelopes filled with artistic surprises from the *Kunstlücke* (*art space*) project of Freiburg's Theater im Marienbad, which everyone could pick up for free in public spaces.

6.) ...and finds utopian collaborations!

Finally, a simply developed tandem concept by dramaturg Katrin Maiwald makes clear the potential questioning hierarchies that digital modes of production offer us. In the five-part series *Display*, one young person and one professional director conceive and realise a film or a radio play together. What may seem like a distant utopia in the often rigidly hierarchically structured theatre institutions succeeds with seeming ease: the rediscovery of egalitarian and horizontal artistic processes beyond disciplinary separation.

In retrospect, it becomes clear what a nice feint the organisers Nikola Schellmann and Meike Fechner resorted to with their season motto *mit+abstand*. It is true: physically, the required distance was maintained. On all other levels, however, the project has initiated completely new connections, co-operations, shared ideas and experimental ways of working - a promising basis for further developments.

#### **About the author:**

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The **material** is mostly in German. You can find all the projects here: [Virtuelle Spielzeit „mit+abstand“ – KJTZ – Das Blog](#)