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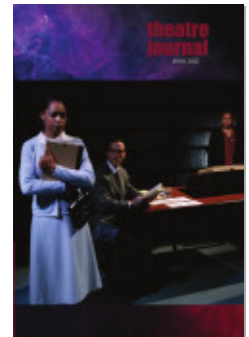
Acht Ungleich Eins by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (review)

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PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Joshua Williams and Patrick Maley, Editors

ACHT UNGLEICH EINS. Adapted from Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Directed by Doris Mirescu. Dangerous Ground, Usine de Pierre Fines, Vaulion, Switzerland. June 27, 2021.

The tiny Swiss village of Vaulion sits in the foothills of the Jura Mountains. About an hour outside of Geneva, the crisp air wells with the tintinnabulation of the bells worn by grazing local dairy cows. The vending machine outside the one corner store in town dispenses fresh Gruyère cheese. This idyllic setting was an ingeniously incongruous one for Doris Mirescu's *Acht ungleich eins*, a sprawling adaptation of filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1972 miniseries *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*. The tranquility and apparent timelessness of the village, a designated Swiss heritage site, clashed productively with the piece's urban milieu and historical materialist themes. Like Fassbinder, at once a great melodramatist and an incisive social critic, director Mirescu thrives on incongruity.

Originally made for German television, Fassbinder's rarely seen *Eight Hours* is, on one level, a primer on labor and care organizing. It follows a group of workers in a Cologne tool-making factory as they band together to collectively bargain for better working conditions, and a grandmother who establishes a kindergarten in defiance of city bureaucrats when she realizes that the neighborhood children have nowhere safe to play. Other plotlines involve Monika, a battered wife and mother struggling to break free from Harald, the husband she relies on for financial support, and a romance between blue-collar Jochen and white-collar Marion that blossoms despite class differences. Fassbinder developed the miniseries with the help of fact-finding meetings with trade unionists.

For her adaptation, Mirescu took over a disused factory where the audience watched from a second-floor screening room as the performers raced around the building and sometimes out onto the street, where they had to play their scenes while dodging

traffic. Mirescu makes what she calls "live films," during which the audience spends most of the performance physically separated from the performers, watching the action unfold via projected live-feed images and hearing the dialogue courtesy of lavalières. The *Acht ungleich eins* factory became a multivalent playground for the couple dozen performers let loose to range through it for the nine hours it took to perform *Acht ungleich eins* in its entirety.

Filled with a gorgeous mélange of scavenged kitsch, each room of the factory told its own silent story. Plastic fish swam through the air on a mobile dangling from the ceiling. Artificial trees and flowers sprouted up in every corner. The walls were crowded with faux taxidermy animal heads, military memorabilia, and political graffiti evoking moments of upheaval from Fassbinder's era to our own. One room featured a reproduction of Dmitri Vrubel's famous Berlin Wall painting of Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honecker locked in an exchange of the socialist fraternal kiss. Elsewhere, spray-painted anarchy symbols vied with calls for an end to war and expletives aimed at disgraced former US president Donald Trump. Often, while two of the three cameras chased nimbly after performers, the third would linger over set pieces, creating a painterly stillness in the midst of the production's churning drama.

Only occasionally did the performers irrupt into the audience's space. Sometimes they did so unobtrusively; a performer wandered in alone, took a seat in the front row, and started reading a book, as though relaxing in the green room, totally indifferent to our presence. Later, a scene began in the hallway outside, then spilled into our space. A performer then seemed to acquire a kind of double awareness, noting the existence of our gaze or even returning it, without ever relinquishing her grip on her role. Although all they required was the simple opening of a door, these liminal interludes had all the enchantment of the moment in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* when the matinee idol steps down from the silver screen into his besotted fan's life. The theatri-



Carlo Brandt (Gregor) and Bérangère Mastrangelo (Oma) in *Acht ungleich eins*. (Photo: Doris Mirescu.)

cal and cinematic planes continually reinvigorated each other through this ongoing interplay.

These interludes could also be violent. The most explosive instance of a performer traversing the boundary between the cinematic cosmos and the theatrical one occurred when Monika (Lisa Vokatch-Boldyreva), long red hair and feather boa cascading over her lithe, shimmering-jumpsuit-clad frame, launched into a defiantly sensual rendition of Janis Joplin's "Summertime." Her petty tyrant of a husband tried to stop her, and their ensuing struggle crashed through into the screening room, where the couple thrashed about on the floor at our feet as the music blared. This sequence encapsulated the sense of political and ontological instability that pervaded the piece. At any moment, it seemed, someone or something being suppressed by the elaborately composed, two-dimensional surface of things could come rising up and roaring through, insisting on recognition.

While the production was in French, English-language music, both diegetic and extradiegetic, was prominent throughout *Acht ungleich eins*, particularly during the many scenes that the characters

spent drowning their sorrows in the local bar. Bruce Springsteen and Madonna were juxtaposed with the darkly satirical lyrics of Rammstein's "Amerika" ("We're all living in America / Coca Cola, sometimes war"). Mirescu also used music to implicate the identities of her international cast, as in an extraordinary scene when South African actor Mavuso Tshabalala's character drunkenly sang along to "Quit It" by Miriam Makeba, the South African anti-apartheid activist. The camera filming Tshabalala lurched and swayed as he bellowed "Brother, don't you know now / That you're killing yourself / And nobody else." Mirescu draws from a rich repository of cinematic references, and her extended sequences of debaucherous abandon recalled the titular scene from Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó*, by turns punishing and exhilarating.

Mirescu connected Fassbinder's text to global liberationist movements by introducing a new character, a kind of everywoman figure played by Isabelle Caillat, whose presence was at once discreet and ubiquitous. She was often seen hovering in the background of a scene as a service worker, but periodically picked up a microphone and directly addressed the camera with, say, a searing feminist



Matteo Divorne (Jochen), Delphine Horst (Marion), and Bérangère Mastrangelo (Oma) in *Acht ungleich eins*. (Photo: Doris Mirescu.)

poem by Audre Lorde or a historical speech about the numbing, everyday cruelty of living in a society that lets children go hungry. Recordings of Angela Davis and other philosopher-activists speaking about the abolition of the prison-industrial complex were threaded through the eclectic soundtrack. These interpolations created a rich additional layer to the performance, a kind of collective subconscious, the world's subaltern speaking.

Mirescu fled her native Romania as a child with her parents to escape the Ceaușescu dictatorship, and *Acht ungleich eins* was no naïve paean to communism. It was, however, a sublime meditation on labor, value, and time, and an enactment of the possibility that we might yet collaboratively build a world fit to live in.

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100% HONG KONG. By Rimini Protokoll and On & On Theatre Workshop. Directed by Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel. Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong. October 29–31, 2021.

100% Hong Kong, the forty-first iteration of Rimini Protokoll's *100% City*, was staged in October 2021 at the Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District's flagship venue for Chinese performing arts, after six years of collaboration between Rimini's Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel, and Hong Kong theatre collective On & On Theatre Workshop. Originally slated to open in December 2019, the show was postponed, twice, due to the 2019 anti-Extradition Bill protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. Against the backdrop of these events, *100% Hong Kong* offered a reassuring display of democracy and served as an apt showcase for the

newly built arts district, which aims to transform Hong Kong into an international cultural metropolis and gateway to China's Greater Bay Area.

Fundamental to *100% City* is the idea and act of assembly—something central to both theatre and democratic practices. The protests brought into view the political force of bodies gathering, while the combination of the pandemic, which provoked bans on public gatherings, and the National Security Law (NSL), which prohibits any form of dissent, made assembly into a dangerous and punishable act. How did a work so clearly about democracy get staged in Hong Kong, where both the word and the practice are subject to legal persecution? Perhaps Rimini's international reputation and *100% City*'s ubiquity overshadowed any possible controversy it could stir. It also may be the case that the piece was largely inscrutable to the government officials tasked with vetting the arts. Or perhaps *100% City* is not, in fact, political at all. In a sense, *100% Hong Kong* is a perfect fit for the city today: it offers a visual politics of "the people" without the agonism of democratic politics. The 300-minute show is less about participation than it is about representation—of identities, beliefs, opinions. It provided an opportunity for Hong Kong to see itself as a city rather than as part of the nation to which it is ambivalently bound. At the same time, *100% Hong Kong* staged a "safe" image of democracy by enacting carefully scripted forms of free expression and an assembly of citizens contained within the proscenium frame.

After Hong Kong University statistician Robert Chung introduced the performance with musings on his lifelong fascination with numbers, the show followed the typical dramaturgical structure of *100% City*, with a hundred ordinary Hong Kong residents representing different ages, genders, socioeconomic classes, neighborhoods, and ethnicities walking to a microphone downstage to introduce themselves. Their stories provoked laughter from the audience, such as when a man fumbled with a large car wheel from his work as a mechanic; others were more earnest, like the queer youth who introduced themselves while brushing their hair with the comb they use to calm their nerves. Apart from a handful of diasporic residents of Filipino, Indonesian, Nepalese, Pakistani, and Australian heritage, the group mainly consisted of Cantonese-speaking people of Chinese ethnicity, who comprise 92 percent of Hong Kong's population.

Afterward, participants dispersed across the stage and regrouped according to regional locations: Hong Kong Island, outlying islands, Kowloon, and New Territories. They then began miming daily routines typical of Hong Kong at each hour of a day, from riding a packed morning MTR train to online gam-