

Abstract

Participatory Formats in Public German Theatre: Symptom of or Answer to an Incremental Legitimation Crisis?

Bianca Michaels
(Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

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About 15 years ago German public theatre started thinking about new ways of understanding theatre and experimenting with new participatory forms. One of the most significant changes is the increasing number of repertoire productions that incorporate non-professional actors in professional public theatre. Several public theatres in Germany have not only been fostering numerous so called ‚city projects‘ but have even been proclaiming a new artistic division, the so called ‚Bürgerbühne‘ that features professional participatory theatre with non-professional performers.

These developments can be interpreted as part of an ongoing institutional change which is currently transforming the way theatre is perceived. Applying the neo-institutional theory of the economist Douglass North the paper seeks to explore how these reformatting processes and their aesthetic and organizational consequences are changing the rules of what is expected from and perceived as professional theatre. The following key questions will be raised: Are these experiments with professional participatory theatre only a temporary fashion or do they mark a bigger institutional change? Can these new formats be regarded as a symptom of an ongoing legitimation crisis? Or rather, do they mark the answer to an incremental legitimation crisis of German public theatre?

Thus, the paper explores the emergence of new aesthetic techniques and production processes that deeply rely on participatory processes with non-professionals. By applying the theoretical framework of neo-institutionalism and recent developments in cultural policy it will illuminate the relation between recent participatory formats and an ongoing process of institutional change in German public theatre.