

RIFS-Blogpost

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A step into uncharted territory: actor Kristin Muthwill performs in "eure paläste sind leer" against a backdrop of recycled fabrics and plants sourced from Potsdam's Biosphere Centre.

"Wandel verhandeln – nachhaltig in Brandenburg"

("Negotiating change - sustainability in Brandenburg") is a podcast about Brandenburg's transformation into a sustainable and fairer society. In the podcast, we cast a spotlight on various conflicts around this transformation – but also at the positive impacts and new ideas – and invite changemakers and people from affected communities to have

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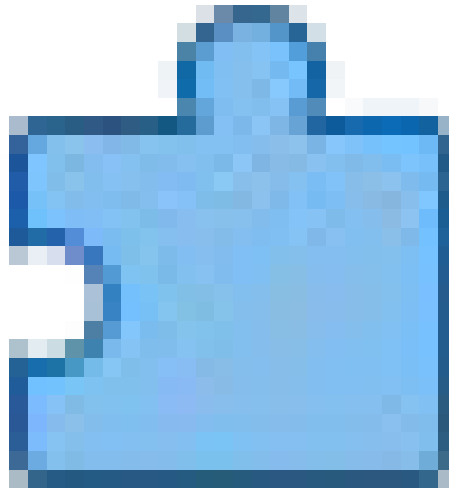
their say. A recent episode on climate-friendly theatre-making explores efforts to improve the sustainability of cultural events in Brandenburg.

In spring, I spent several mornings and afternoons in the so-called Reithalle B, a heritage building from the Prussian era in Potsdam's Schiffbauergasse cultural district, just a stone's throw from our institute. The location has long served as a rehearsal stage for the Hans Otto Theatre (HOT). I was there to watch rehearsals of the play "eure paläste sind leer (all we ever wanted)", written by Thomas Köck and directed by Moritz Peters. Köck's climate trilogy, published roughly a decade ago, made him one of the first German-language playwrights to tackle planetary socio-ecological issues - no easy task given the global nature, complexity and temporal scope of the subject. When HOT's current director, Bettina Jahnke, took office in 2018, she opened the season with the trilogy's third instalment – "paradies spielen" – which was also staged by Peters at the time. Now, six years later, Jahnke has added another piece by Köck to the theatre's repertoire – this time focussing on globalisation – underscoring her ambition to keep global and planetary themes on the agenda.

What is especially remarkable about this production is that it demonstrates both the possibilities and viability of climate-friendly theatre-making. It was this aspect that led me to interview its makers. HOT is among 22 cultural institutions to receive funding through the German Federal Cultural Foundation's (KSB) "Zero Fund" to explore options to drastically reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of a theatre production in the 2023/24 season. From the outset it was obvious that venues would be unable to bring their greenhouse gas emissions down to zero. The KSB has accordingly allowed venues to allocate up to one per cent of grants to carbon

offsets and focussed the programme on achieving “climate neutrality”. This wording has proved unpopular with theatre-makers trying to reduce their emissions, as my research reveals. Many found the concept meaningless or misleading; there was even talk of "fraudulent labelling".

During production, rehearsal stage sets and costumes generally only hint at what audiences will later see on stage. Usually, a theatre’s stock of requisites is sufficient for production rehearsals, while the set for final rehearsals and performances is made from scratch. In the case of "eure paläste", however, most of the material used in the performances was reused. HOT had specified that at least 50 per cent of the props and set materials should be reused rather than new – nearly all of the costume items were reused, significantly exceeding the 50 per cent threshold. Frugality was also the watchword on stage, which was furnished with a row of prayer stools made from wood – a renewable, low-carbon material. The scenery includes a large plant that contributes to the work’s dreamy post-apocalyptic atmosphere. The plant was not artificially produced, but cultivated in co-operation with the Biosphäre Potsdam – just one of many low-carbon solutions embraced by the theatre-makers.



Research Institute for Sustainability · Wandel verhandeln #4: Klimagerecht Theater machen

The approach taken in Potsdam seems more modest than that of other theatre-makers. Unlike the experiment with mycelium fungus at Braunschweig's State Theatre or the decision to source tables from nearby households for a production at Leipzig Opera, the production in Potsdam does not draw the audience's attention to the particular aesthetics that would go hand in hand with more climate-friendly methods of theatre-making. Instead, the props and set are intended to look "just as good" as they would in a conventional production. The "Zero Fund" is fundamentally indifferent to the question of whether and to what degree climate-friendly approaches should be blended with artistic experimentation – instead, producers are free to do as they wish. In Potsdam, at least, the initiative was not perceived as an opportunity for experiment. However, my interview partners were also not especially concerned that their artistic creativity or indeed their 'licence to waste' was restricted by efforts to minimize the production's carbon footprint. Although this concern is often raised in cultural policy debates in Germany, it was not of great concern for theatre-makers in Potsdam.

On the other hand, my interviews revealed a widespread desire to break with established routines, for instance by experimenting with virtual technical rehearsals (to save electricity), changing rehearsal schedules in order to minimize commuting (which is why I didn't have to attend a single evening rehearsal), increasing opportunities for participation (across all aspects of production), transporting larger props by cargo bike, and overcoming aesthetic prejudices around the quality of LED lighting. It seemed at times that my interview partners found a sort of pleasure in overcoming resistance to new ideas and practices.

However, this delight in testing new waters and new ideas with the aim of making the production more sustainable has its limits and proved insufficient in some aspects, which would have benefited from a steering mechanism of some kind. I anticipate that the theatre will soon adopt its own guidelines for climate-friendly theatre-making (an “ecological rider”, so to speak) with brief instructions such as "Avoid composite materials" or "Buy locally". While such a bare bones approach does not provide a solution for every issue that is likely to arise, it will provide further encouragement and moral support for those employees who want to break with established routines – sourcing props from Amazon, for example – in favour of more sustainable alternatives.

But there are limits to what can be achieved through internal guidelines and even through stricter regulatory measures such as applying a carbon budget to the stage design (as mentioned in our podcast by a theatre-maker with Berlin's Schaubühne). Carbon footprinting studies undertaken in Germany have repeatedly shown that as much as a third of all greenhouse gas emissions from cultural venues can be attributed to operational building use. In the case of the Hans-Otto-Theater, which uses (largely) emission-free

green electricity, building use accounts for “just” 23.4 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. But at the Reithalle, heat seems to slip away through every crack in the former stables and riding hall. If “eure paläste” had not premiered in late spring, its carbon footprint would probably have looked very different. Like most theatres, the Hans Otto Theatre lacks the financial resources necessary to make the building more energy efficient. In practical terms, only the building’s owners – the City of Potsdam – can address this issue. The same applies to the thorny issue of audience travel emissions. Anyone who has ever tried to get away from Schiffbauergasse late at night by tram or night bus will know what I am talking about.... Venues that operate in the evening are particularly affected by a lack of public transport.

During the rehearsals for "eure paläste" – which counts violence and the denial of responsibility for historical developments among its central themes – the very real opportunities and challenges of sustainable theatre-making were seldom discussed – and often merely as witty observations on the use of paper coffee cups or the savings that might be achieved by using fewer spotlights during rehearsals. With little time available for rehearsals, it is understandable that efforts to reduce the production’s carbon footprint (referred to by the play’s director as “our second project”) took a back seat in discussions. Nevertheless, as an observer, I asked myself whether, alongside any actual reduction in emissions, the most interesting thing about this attempt at climate-friendly theatre-making was that it offered an opportunity to frame the issue differently than would occur at a screw factory, for example.

In the case of "eure paläste", the dialogue between the concepts of "climate" (a technical-organisational project) and "(global) justice" (an artistic project), two key aspects of sustainable development,

was rarely fruitful. The declaration by the Spanish conquistadors on the stage that they were the ones "clearing the forests, pistols in hand", not only sounded implausible to more informed members of the audience (the horrific extermination of American indigenous peoples initially led to the massive reforestation of areas previously used for agriculture), it failed to engage with or even resonate with efforts behind the scenes to conserve resources. At a subsequent Q&A that I attended, the "Zero" project was only mentioned once; by a member of the audience who deplored the "squanderous" use of heads of lettuce in a symbolic depiction of the conquistadors' wanton violence. The accusation was quickly dispelled by pointing out the minimal impact of the lettuces on the theatre's carbon footprint – but by then it had already obscured more interesting issues, such as narratives of climate justice in Western societies or conflicts around environmental responsibility and its denial.

Despite this, the question of our individual responsibility for the climate crisis, as posed by the Hans Otto Theatre, feels like a new departure – one that would no doubt benefit from more attention, encouragement and support from those responsible for cultural policy and from Potsdam's cultural public sphere.

