

PREFACE

On a rainy day in March 2018, I found shelter at the Geffen Contemporary, one of the smaller locations of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. At first, I was merely grateful to have finally entered a dry space after walking the streets of downtown LA for hours in the pouring rain. However, that first feeling of relief suddenly turned into a much stronger impression, as I found myself in the middle of Adrián Villar Rojas's installation *The Theater of Disappearance*. Immersed in this installation, I forgot that I was in one of the largest metropolitan areas of our world, even though, paradoxically, the installation pushed me back into the very streets from which I had just escaped: it recalled the small stores and restaurants of LA's Little Tokyo, in whose neighborhood the museum is located—but not in their present form. I had the feeling I was taking a walk through the ruins of a long-gone metropolis.

Rojas's work consists of numerous refrigerators full of human debris, including old sneakers, plastic wires, nylon jackets, glass

bottles, and artificial limbs. These objects are placed in the middle of meat replicas, fish bones, and dried flowers, so that each individual refrigerator creates a kind of still life that sheds light on the human condition in the twenty-first century. The fridges are surrounded by chunks of stone, wooden boxes containing human skeletons, and columns that reveal layers of stone and glass.

In this eerie landscape, a line by Heiner Müller came to mind: “The landscape might be a dead star where a task force from another age or another space hears a voice and discovers a corpse.”¹ Under the influence of Rojas’s work, I had the feeling of understanding the sentence anew. In this particular space, I felt like the seeker from another time *and* a contemporary of the corpse; life and death began to merge in a peculiar way.

This experience led me to turn to the theater of Müller in order to look for the ruins and contaminated landscapes that can be found there. And that preoccupation eventually made me realize that contemporary theater is deeply interwoven with the experience of destruction and ruin, exploring as it does what it means to live on a destroyed planet. Thus, the ruinous in this theater is connected not only to the mourning for what has been lost but also to the question of how to survive (and yes, even thrive) in the midst of ruins. Ruinousness is far more than just a metaphor in this investigation. Rather, it is linked to a practice that works toward the possibility of a future and asks how the world can be shaped together; a practice that is aware of the complex relationships between the human and the nonhuman, culture and nature, life and death.

Over the past few years, this impression that we are living in the ruins of our technoscientific age has only intensified. Looking back to the summer of 2019, when I had just arrived in Bloomington, Indiana, to take up my new position in the Department of Germanic Studies, I find the following notes I made at the time: “The outline for this book was made on a hot September morning shortly after I moved to my new home, Bloomington. Everyone here told me that this September had been unusually hot. Everyone also added that this was clearly an effect of global warming, which was going to become

1. Müller, *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts*, 126.

the pressing issue of our time. It was the same day that the *New York Times* reported on the international climate strikes. The coverage certainly fueled an understanding of our present as an apocalyptic space that could soon turn into a post-apocalyptic one, if no one does anything.” A few years, a global pandemic, and two devastating wars later, the impression of a world in ruins has not changed for the better but only intensified. The theater to which I have dedicated this book, a theater that is concerned with finding a future in a time when there seems to be no future, therefore seems even more relevant than in 2019. And yet this book does not simply draw bleak pictures of our present; instead, it traces the exciting and sometimes surprisingly light ways in which theater makers experiment to find life and future in the midst of ruins.

This book, which has occupied me for several years, has been shaped by my experiences along the way and the people who have accompanied me on this journey. *Theater of the Void* is the result of my ongoing reflection on contemporary theater, which always seems to defy description. Over the past fifteen years, I have repeatedly tried to grasp and name the theatrical imaginary of our present, which goes beyond drama and representational theater. It has taken me several years and some fortunate, unexpected encounters in order to find words with which I could describe what I had initially only suspected. Such a lengthy, intensive thought process is only possible with the necessary support. I am therefore infinitely grateful for the generous support of the Austrian Science Fund, of the Indiana University Presidential Arts and Humanities Fellows Program, and of IU’s College Arts and Humanities Institute which gave me time to concentrate fully on my research and helped with the production of this book.

However, a book like this never happens in solitude; this book was nourished by all the wonderful constellations in which I found myself as I worked on it. My first thanks go to my home institution, the Department of Germanic Studies at Indiana University. Without the support and trust of my colleagues, I would not have been able to write this book. Fritz Breithaupt, Michel Chaouli, Irit Dekel, Susanne Even, Gergana May, Bill Rasch, Benjamin Robinson,

Johannes Türk, and Marc Weiner have all in their own ways inspired and influenced this book—whether by working with me through specific questions, through their love of words and ideas, or by their dedication to critical thinking. The intellectual life we have cultivated in this department has also played an important role in my work on the book, providing opportunities for exchanges with colleagues, doctoral students, undergraduate students, and visitors such as Wolfram Eilenberger, Arne Höcker, Uwe Wirth, and Burkhardt Wolf. The students in my classes have always inspired me to think further; special thanks go to my students in the courses “Wounded Heroes,” “Literature and Climate Change,” and “Assembling the Precarious.” The discussions in these courses generated many of the sparks that fueled this book. Among the PhD students, my special thanks go to Louise Bassini, Bettina Christner, Maria Fink, David Gould, Helen Gunn, Nina Morais, Lanre Okuseinde, Katherine Pollock, Nicole Rizzo, Katharina Schmid-Schmidsfelden, Ahmed Tahsin Shams, and Cynthia Shin. Their passion for experimental art and all things unconventional has always driven me anew. In addition, in November 2023, we launched a working group for theater and performance in our department, which brings together researchers from different disciplines and has already been an invaluable source of inspiration and energy for me in this short time.

Beyond my own department, I value Indiana University as a lively place for thinking and working together. I am thinking above all of the stimulating group involved in the Cultural Studies Program (special thanks to Tess J. Given, Ray Guins, and Rebekah Sheldon), but also of the many inspiring colleagues and friends who have accompanied me on my journey here in Bloomington, such as Anke Birkenmaier, Alyson Calhoun, Ana Carneiro, Ed Dallis-Comentale, Stephanie DeBoer, Jennifer Goodlander, Joan Hawkins, Kathleen Myers, Roberta Pergher, Mark Roseman, and Sonia Velazquez, as well as my former colleagues Shane Vogel (now at Yale University) and Ilana Gershon (now at Rice University).

And yet—as with all journeys—what has shaped this book cannot be limited to my current home turf. The Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan, where I spent two years as a postdoctoral fellow, spoiled me with

conversations, friendships, and all kinds of support. I would especially like to recognize Kerstin Barndt, Andreas Gailus, Julia Hell, Johannes von Moltke, Helmut Puff, and Scott Spector, as well as, from the Department of Theatre and Drama, Malcolm Tulip and Tzveta Kassabova. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have been able to share an intellectual space with these colleagues and friends, a space that extended far beyond the campus and included all kinds of feasts.

I am also full of gratitude for everything I learned from the group of scholars with whom I had the privilege to work during my time in Vienna. This is the group involved in the Jelinek Research Center, which, in addition to its director, Pia Janke, is enlivened by so many talented and passionate young scholars (a special thanks to Christian Schenkermayer, Konstanze Fladischer, and Peter Clar) and Jelinek experts such as Inge Arteel, Uta Degner, Ulrike Haß, Brigitte Jirku, Monika Meister, Artur Pełka, Katharina Pewny, and Monika Szczepaniak. The members of this group have fueled and supported my passion for discussing and reading the theater in so many ways. There were also many more colleagues from that time in my life and work who grew close to my heart and to whom I am deeply indebted and grateful. Silke Felber deserves a special thanks, as her support goes way beyond this particular context. We shared an office for years and cultivated a form of collaborative thinking that has inspired me ever since. I consider myself lucky that this connection continues to this day.

In addition to these institutional connections, I must thank the wonderful colleagues and friends with whom I have shared my ideas for the book and who have had a significant influence on my thinking and on this book in particular. Colleagues like Emmanuel Béhague, Claudia Breger, Paul Buchholz, Matthew Cornish, Jack Davis, Leonie Ettinger, Megan Ewing, Peter Höyng, Kristopher Imbrigiotta, Olivia Landry, Richard Langston, Klaus Mladek, Tanja Nusser, Benjamin Lewis Robinson, Anna Senuysal, and Marc Silberman have shared my passion for contemporary theater and critically engaged with my book over the years. I am equally grateful for the constant conversation with Elfriede Jelinek, Jürgen Kuttner, and Kevin Rittberger, who have inspired my work and my thinking

in so many ways. In addition, special thanks to Gitta Honegger for her love of words and for providing translations of the passages that I quote from Jelinek's untranslated texts and plays; to Imke Meyer and Regina Kecht, who were crucial in helping me make the move from Europe to the United States; and to Jacqueline Vansant, who read several versions of this book and who believed in me when I was full of doubt—without her, this book would not exist. In addition, I am grateful for the invitations from the Heiner Müller Society (special thanks to Marten Weise who hinted at the explosion), New York University, Rutgers University, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the University of Cincinnati, the Free University of Berlin, the University of Leeds, the University of Strasbourg, and the Sorbonne, which allowed me to develop (early) ideas related to this book and to clarify my own thoughts and arguments.

I would also like to thank Marie Deer for her friendship and the wonderful editing she did on this manuscript. In addition, I am deeply indebted for all that Paul Fleming and Kizer S. Walker of Cornell University Press have done for me along the way. My thanks also go to the reviewers and the board of the *Signale* series, who have supported this book and improved it with their valuable comments and suggestions.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the person who has inspired this book and my thinking more than I could ever have wished for. Andrés Guzmán, not only are you my faithful companion in our shared and sincere love and passion for what we need to find out and put into words, but you also challenge me again and again, inspiring me to keep expanding the limits of my thinking. Without you, some of my most important interlocutors would never have made it into this book. I am infinitely grateful that you surround me with thoughts and ideas every day, some of which I can pick up and make my own. There is nothing better in this world than a thinking partnership with you.

THEATER OF THE VOID

