FUTURES

IETM
Plenary Meeting
2025
Berlin

Performing Arts
Programm
Berlin

An Interactive Reader II

REHEARSING

15.—
17.5.2025

This Interactive Reader consists of two parts:

Reader I

offers an overview of the IETM Plenary Meeting and its programme. It includes links to artists, reports, contributing organisations, as well as relevant articles and videos.

Reader II

highlights the contributions of five artists and cultural workers who led sessions during the IETM plenary. We kindly asked them to share their scripts so that more people could benefit from and engage with their contributions. You can read the full texts, additionally you can listen to Sivan Ben Yishai reading her essay or watch Jakub Depczyński presenting his text in a video and get to know Caspar Weimann's and Enzenwa Okoro's work better in their videos.

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REHEARSING FUTURES

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Sebastián Squella

My name is Sebastián Squella, I'm from Chile.

I'm here in Berlin with a theater play, participating in Theatertreffen. The play is called "Beyond Democracy," and I've also received the invitation to speak in this space. I'm truly grateful to be here with you and to be able to share this story.

> When I was invited, I said yes immediately, because every time I get the chance to share a bit of my experience —especially this experience—I feel I must take it.

I owe it to my colleagues and friends with whom we've built this story.

> When I was 23 years old, I entered a prison for the first time —just to watch a rehearsal of a theater company. That day, one actor was missing, and they needed a replacement. They were premiering in 10 days, so I stayed. And after that premiere, I continued working in that theater company for 13 years.

I had never been in a prison before. What I knew about prison came from television—a highly sensationalized space, filled with morbid curiosity and completely marginalized.

> It is a place that is constantly instrumentalized, where supposedly the worst of our society is found.

It's a space where many human rights violations occur, where some companies profit and clean their image under the label of 'reintegration' while practicing something very close to slavery.

> In prison, you find everything imaginable: violence, pain, suffering, competition, danger, lack of empathy.

But there is also a lot of tenderness, love, commitment, discipline, laughter —and sometimes, in certain moments, even freedom.

> During those 13 years, we tried to create a space of freedom through theater.

I made friends in prison, and I lost friends in prison—some were released, others died, and some were transferred without us ever knowing where to.

> In prison, I learned the true meaning of "see you next session" —because it's a wish, not a certainty. It might not happen. Seeing each other again is never guaranteed.

And in that instability, we had to make theater.

Sometimes a play had 15 actors. We rehearsed with 15,
but on opening day, only 10 were available to perform.

So, what do we do? How do we work?
How do we prepare for these conditions?

If we need 12 and there are only eight, or even four
—under these circumstances, traditional theater wasn't enough.

We had to go beyond the idea of theater, beyond the
concept of 'character,' beyond the notion of a 'script.'
We had to invent our own dramaturgical style,
our own way of rehearsing, our own method of creating
dialogue—our own idea of theater.

So, we developed a new methodology. A new concept of theater.
And sometimes I think that was the easy part:
finding artistic alternatives.
The hard part was the political methodology.
The ethical methodology.
And here's where the idea of democracy emerges.
Democracy is felt strongly in prison—because of its absence.
It constantly shows up as what is missing.

And if this democracy doesn't serve us, just like traditional theater didn't,
we must find a new one—a new democracy, our own democracy.
A new way of existing and participating politically.
The ideas of theater and democracy cease to be these perfect concepts
that we must strive to reach.

So, in our political-ethical work,
we made the following decisions:

We don't talk about prison.
We don't tell prison stories or stories about crime.
The men in prison are much more
than 'inmates' or 'prisoners.'

The theater space excludes no one.
This was a decision made by the actors themselves:
They said, "we live in a place where every door is closed to us.
No one helps us. We can't be the ones to shut people out."
Theater is for anyone who wants to come and care for the space.

Caring for the space is another essential part of this ethical work
—caring for the people, for the process.
No one can come to the theater workshop just to take advantage.
Everyone who joins must have a serious conversation with the
group and commit to participating and caring for it.

It's a space that has helped many people. No one is allowed to harm it. Any problems we have must be resolved among us. Never through the prison guards. Everything is resolved within the group. Collectivity is the most important thing.

In a space that is full of individualism, collectivity is the only thing that can save us.
If we are alone, the prison consumes us.
Only together can we survive.

The *barretín* * stays outside.
That's the prison code.
In prison, there are rules—certain things can't be done, there are ranks, status, people you don't talk to.
But in theater, all of that stays outside.

No one asks what crime someone committed.
They're in prison—we know they did something.
But we don't want to sentence them a second time.
We don't want to judge based on that information.
We don't want to know.
We reject morbid curiosity.

Everything is decided as a group. Everything is discussed. Nothing is imposed.

With these rules, our group became a very important one.
We managed to leave prison over 60 times throughout the years —to perform in theater festivals, other prisons, schools, youth detention centers.
It was a major effort, requiring heavy police presence each time.
But we never had a single incident.
No one ever did anything that put the group—or this experience—at risk.

Sadly, the group no longer exists.
The prison administration shut it down.
They didn't let us enter anymore. They gave us no explanation.
We were never violent. No escape attempts. No issues.

Maybe the very idea of incarcerated men having a space of 'freedom' was too revolutionary.

Some very important things happened in this group:
There were men who learned how to read because they wanted to participate in the theater.
Men who changed their lives.
Once, after a play, an actor told me:
"No one has ever applauded me before in my life."

That kind of thing changes you.

*prison codes and hierarchies among inmates

Once, we lost a friend—he was murdered in prison.
At that moment, I thought theater made no sense.
I thought it was meaningless to teach theater to someone
who could be killed at any moment.
I thought of giving it all up.

But the following week, the group said:
"Our friend Cristian loved theater. It was what made him happiest.
We must do this play even better, and dedicate it to him.
We must do it for our friend.
And invite his family to come watch."

That moment broke my heart—and healed it at the same time.
I understood a lot. And I still don't understand so much.
Even after 13 years, I never fully understood what it means to be in prison.
And I probably will never understand death the way they do—as something almost part of daily life.

So I return...

Theater and democracy.

In prison, neither worked for us.
We didn't have the bodies, the voices, the memories, or the consistency to reach that idea of what theater is 'supposed to be.'
But we used theater as a path—a means to reach freedom.

And this idea made me wonder:

Can we apply this to democracy?

Can we start thinking of democracy not as a final goal,
but as a means?
Democracy is fragile—and without a doubt, the best we have.
But we cannot let it be the last thing we have.

The play I made asks: What comes after democracy?
I don't know.
And the play doesn't aim to give an answer.
It tries to make democracy real, and to say:
It exists, and it's flawed.
And someone should invent something better.

But why would someone
invent something
better if there's no need?
Well, in prison, need made us ask
what comes beyond theater.
And so, we invented a new theater.

Democracy has become hollow. Representation is in crisis.
And when that happens, history tells us that violence often follows.
Because power must constitute itself—with or without representation.
And when democracies do business with corporations
and sell out their people…
When elected leaders become puppets of corporations…
When democracies hunt and deport immigrants…
When democracies fund genocides…
When democracies open the door to fascism…
When, in the name of tolerance, we tolerate intolerance…

When we believe everyone can say whatever they want, and some say:
"Persecute them."
Some say: "Kill them."
Some say: "Sell them."
"Close the borders."

Then it might be too late.

And maybe our mistake was to turn democracy into a destination
—into something already achieved, something we no longer question.
"We're democratic—we've made it."

But I think we need to see democracy
as a work in progress, as a means to an end.

In Chile, we still live under the constitution written
by Pinochet's dictatorship.
After one of the largest social uprisings in recent decades,
we held two constitutional conventions.
We wrote a leftist constitution—the first in the world
to be written half by women and including indigenous peoples—
and we rejected it.
Then we wrote an ultra-right constitution that stripped away
20 years of women's and workers' rights—and we rejected it, too.

We couldn't organize ourselves.

I don't think it was wasted time.
But the experience of practicing democracy and getting nowhere
has created disappointment.
And people must now ask themselves:

The question of the future.
The question our nations
will soon face:

If democracy has failed, does it mean we must give space to totalitarianism?
That fascism is right?

Or is it finally time to realize we need to ask:
What comes after democracy?
How do we move forward?
How do we improve democracy—with more democracy?
How do we understand that the result of a conversation
is not necessarily a failure?

We must stay alert.

Because in places where there is no democracy—like prison—life is horrible. Life is violent. Life is ruled by the law of the strongest.

We must defend democracy.
And at the same time—and with this I'll close—
we must consider the idea that maybe one day
a child hears the question:
"What comes after democracy?"
And maybe they invent something.

My mission here is to plant that seed—that there might be something better.

I refuse to look at the world and say, "This is the best we could do."

I have faith that we can do better.

Thank you very much.

Sebastián Squella Chavez
is a writer, theater director (teatrista comunitario) and actor trained at Arcis University. He is a professor in the Acting School at the University of Valparaíso. From 2010 to 2021, he was part of the executive team of the ENTEPOLA Festival. For five years, he taught at the Latin American School of Popular Theater (ELATEP), an open and free community theater program. For the past twelve years, he has also led theater workshops at the Colina 1 Penitentiary Center with the company Fénix e Ilusiones.
He currently works as a director with the theater companies Teatro Perro Muerto, Zudamerikan Theater, and Teatro Conjunto. His artistic practice focuses on exploring new languages within political theater, with democracy as a recurring theme, a pursuit closely tied to his commitment to community-based work and the idea of self-representation on stage.

Sivan Ben Yishai
Solidarity or the High Art of Getting Dirty

Listen to the essay read by the author

1 When I was asked if I would be interested in delivering a keynote about 'Solidarity and Empathy as a Radical Means of Resistance' at the IETM Berlin Plenary Meeting this past May, I immediately had an idea of what I could write about. I scribbled down a few points, found them somehow fitting, and sent an email to the programmers, Anne Schneider and Franziska Pierwoss, confirming my participation. I thought about opening the keynote with a dialectical 'thank you' paragraph that would address the conference audience and would express the gratitude I feel for the privilege of speaking to—and being heard by—so many people. In one text, I thought of saying: we artists often share, in front of hundreds and thousands, more than most people express in front of one person in an entire lifetime. I called this act of gratitude 'dialectical' because it began with a clear celebration of the room – namely: the public, the stage, the act of storytelling, the moment in time. Simultaneously, or at least so I thought, it was also hinting at the weaker point of this statement: the gap between the writer/ speaker and what she, slightly paternalistically, just called: 'most people'. I thought this gap was inherent in the words and would provide a solid foundation for the continuation of the speech.

The privilege of telling a story at a particular time and place, I planned to say, is like directing a spotlight onto something, onto someone. Public figures, I was willing to argue, have one or two metaphorical spotlights in their hands, which they can use to cast light on emerging or existing public discourses that they think should be emphasized. The idea I wanted to propose, while alluding to local and international occurrences and debates, is the idea of a chain, an empathetic chain. I wanted to speak about an ecosystem of storytellers, an architecture of connections, in which one illuminates another under the aspiration of creating a system with a minimum of dark corners and untold stories. In political debates, different groups tend to emphasize different positions. We cannot all tell the same story or reveal the same perspective. And so, what if instead of fighting it, we would acknowledge that these differences shape a smarter system which eventually spotlights a multitude of angles? If a perspective is missing today, it will probably appear tomorrow. And if not tomorrow, then the day after.

In the second part of the speech, I wanted to speak about the unspoken about, the silently spoken about, about the stillness. About Gaza. I wanted to try to illustrate the spotlight idea with a personal example. Something like: when I, Sivan Ben Yishai – a daughter of a family of Holocaust survivors, an Israeli Jew, born on the right side of the separation wall and an immigrant in Germany – use my 'spotlight' to speak out against what I would define as media violence directed at Palestinian and Arab intellectuals, for example, I am using the politics of my immigrant body to address issues that a native German might avoid raising, or won't feel entitled to raise. I use my background and biography to broaden the scope of German discourse, demonstrating that positions like mine are legitimate and are necessary for an informed debate.

To the skeptical audience in the room who might germansplain to me that as a Jew in Germany I am experiencing anti-Semitism on a daily basis and it is about this anti-Semitism I should now be speaking: I planned to say that while it's probably true, this is still no justification for the anti-solidarity nightmare of having a spotlight shone only on one's own face. That would never be a good explanation for the dark shadows cast from below by a society that fights only its own battles, shouts only its own stories, cares only for its own interests.

2

Being asked to handle charged words such as 'solidarity', 'empathy' and 'radical resistance', I must admit that I didn't consider speaking about the disappointment and the loss of trust in front of art institutions – I will call them 'the room' now – that stood silent, passive and intellectually weak in the heat of a debate of enormous political, actual, and historical relevance to the world and to German society in particular. When instead of discussions, talks were cancelled; instead of being given space, artists were silenced; and instead of commissioning, exposing and learning, words were censored and positions were blurred. I didn't consider speaking about the distance that had grown within me when art institutions that I had trusted morally and politically, (hashtag) stood with nation states, (hashtag) stood with a nation's army, while the Israeli bombardments on Gaza started in the late afternoon of 7 October, and haven't stopped ever since. Why didn't I consider speaking about it? I guess that I liked the simplicity of the original spotlights idea. It had a poetic, friendly tone, it was clear and easy to write, and the truth is that I really didn't feel like messing around with this keynote, I allocated a limited amount of time for writing it, wanted to do it and finish it off, read it, get some nods, do the Q&A and go back to my stuff.

The problem was – well, you get it already. Really, Sivan? Really really? Ok, so question: would you dare speak about the 'empathetic chain of storytellers' if, just as an example, a survivor from Gaza would be sitting in the room? Would you speak about 'spotlights' to, just as an example, a German Jew who lived his whole life as a minority in German society and was attacked, physically and verbally, next to his home? Would you? Do you count them amongst 'most people', and why do you assume they are not sitting here? And if 'most people' are not present, are not in the room, are not in this room – to whom are you actually speaking? The room. The room of reflection, the room of (so-called) non-production. The room of stories that is a story in itself. Telling, describing and thus becoming a text. Belonging to people, to 'most people', belonging to memory – but even more than that, maybe, to poetics and historiography. There is something addictive about the discussion "about". Something reassuring about the idea of an artistic reaction being conceived as a political action. Nevertheless, and as artists we are all familiar with that, questions can't help but arise. The concrete suffering of humans has no 'ars poetics', neither does cruelty and murderousness. Dishonored human lives aren't assisted or supported by 'meta levels', the other way around: in the face of blood, of discrimination, of hunger and systematic abuse, our ars-poetic monologues tend to stand limp, ridiculous, almost comical. Their ecstatic attempts to innovate and give a 'poetic' language to the inconceivable feels almost Thanatos-driven, trapped in a deadly loop, devoid of faith. At some point one has to get out.

Picture: 22 February 2025, The Unkürzbar Demonstration takes place in Berlin. Protestors are marching in blocs, under which the Social Bloc, the Kultur Bloc, the Educational Bloc, the Climate Bloc and more. “Germany is a rich country”, they write in their website. “We demand a solidarity-based funding for our cultural and social institutions”. So yes, Germany, and yes, one year and four months into the Genocide in Gaza, the debate is heated, and the skilled reader can already see where it’s going, right? A group of Palestinian solidarity activists joins the planning for the demonstration.

Picture: At the demo-organizing meeting, the different blocs could not reach a consensus, and so, they’re holding a vote. Which symbols are allowed (raised fist, the Unkürzbar hashtag for example), which symbols are not allowed (national symbols of any kind for example). The Palestinian solidarity activists are also not permitted to form a bloc, and are asked, therefore, to call themselves 'Anti-Racists Against Cuts'.

Picture: The demonstration assembles at the Neptunbrunnen in Berlin and starts marching. Dozens of police officers are accompanying the protestors, their majority concentrate on both sides of the pro-Palestinian Bloc, I mean: the Anti-racists Against Cuts Bloc. Next to Humboldt University, the cops penetrate the march, surround the Palestinian solidarity activists, and prevent them from moving further.

With this image we’ll remain. In the middle of a street. The Anti-Racists Bloc is cordoned off and surrounded by police, who instruct the other protesters to change their route, move to the opposite lane, evade the besieged bloc and go on with their demonstration. Thousands of protesters obey the instruction, pass their comrades, and continue with the march. “Unifying struggles is one thing,” said several protesters I have spoken to afterwards “but in this demonstration, the issue is not Israel–Palestine. The issue is Germany's cultural and educational budget cuts. They can’t come and shout whatever they like. Demonstrations have rules, too.”

3

There are multiple different versions of the preliminary events, I won’t dwell on them now, as it is a picture that I’m trying to discuss here: not a reportage, not a courtroom, not an investigation, not who said what. So yes, they saw – no, they didn't see. Yes, they noticed – no, they haven’t noticed. Yes, the Anti-Racist Bloc followed the rules – no, the Palestinian solidarity activists violated the rules, I won’t dwell on it now, I won’t. Instead, I want us to go back to the picture, I want us to linger on it, I want us to stay with it a little bit longer. Picture: the demonstration goes on and is now out of sight. Next to Humboldt University, surrounded by cops, the Palestinian solidarity activists can still hear the distant chanting: “A Berlin For Everyone!” to the rhythm of drums and applause. Or, you know what? Let me be nasty, okay? Let me sting a bit: the demonstration goes on and is now out of sight, and, surrounded by cops, the Palestinian solidarity activists can still hear the artists who protest for artists’ budgets; no, the artists who protest for artists; no, the artists who only know to protest when they protest for their own rights, chanting: “A Berlin For Everyone!” to the rhythm of drums and applause. In the middle of an empty street, the bloc – and with your

permission, from now on I will refrain from calling it the 'Palestinian Solidarity Bloc' or the 'Anti-Racist Bloc Against Cuts' because for us now this bloc is simply the fellow bloc – will be given permission to hurry up and join the demonstration, this time at its tail end, and join their fellow protestors with whom they have originally aligned with what I believe they called: 'radical solidarity'.

The writer Lisa G. Materson defines radical solidarity as the willingness to act outside one's comfort zone amidst opposing and separate opinions, as well as challenging situations. But in "Berlin For Everyone!", one bloc was blocked, yet the march went on. How come? "Well, I guess that if there are police there, something has probably happened, right?" Or maybe we take it one step further? "If the bloc is surrounded, they probably did something, right?" Maybe another step? "I guess someone rioted", continue: "Shouted a forbidden slogan", forbidden slogan? What the hell does that mean? "I meant a problematic slogan", go on, "A racist slogan", are we ready for the inevitable outro? "An anti-Semitic slogan."

Picture: In the middle of a street full of artists and cultural workers who have come out to protest against the budget cuts of the neoliberal, right-wing government that is corrupting their city – no one sees fit to stop the march, not to speak about create a protective ring around the fellow bloc that was barricaded and isolated. "We will not let ourselves be divided, and we will carry on protesting!" But the demonstration? It embodied the second part of the slogan ("we will carry on protesting"), after discarding, crushing and abandoning its promising beginning ("we will not be divided").

4

I wasn't present at the demo. I was nearby, in the Deutsches Theater, who made its front courtyard available for anti-Fascist demonstrators to stop by and get shelter and support, if needed. As I wasn't present at the demonstration, hadn't heard the speeches myself and only got impressions about them from different protestors, I will try, with your permission, to picture them now. I imagine a writer or a director. She is asked if she would be interested in delivering a speech for the demonstration. An artist, an artistic director maybe – it doesn't matter actually, she is fictitious, invented, and the truth is that she could have easily been any of you, the faithful reader of the renowned theater magazine, it could have easily been myself. She immediately has an idea of what she could write about, scribbled down a few points and confirmed her participation; something nice, poetic, a friendly tone, not something to mess around with, a short speech. And so I stand, I mean she, she stands, a moment before ascending to the stage, squeezing and folding the page with my, with her moist fingers. She trusts the text she has written will go well. People will feel it, people will like it. "We, as public figures, have the privilege and responsibility to hold this spotlight, to continue telling the stories we hear. Solidarity is storytelling, Storytelling is solidarity". It will work well, everyone will like it, everyone will agree, it's a speech about solidarity, what is there not to agree with.

But under the soles of the artist's metaphorical and concrete shoes, under her empathetic, solidary words, police are pushing fellow protesters now,

isolating and surrounding them, and the room of spotlights and metaphors—the room that speaks of empathy and alliances in theoretical stoicism—the room, her room, the room of meta was invaded, penetrated by violence, confronted by reality. On to the next unavoidable Picture? The artist continues her speech. She ignores the scene that occurs under her feet in the same automatism that led her to bypass the surrounded and blocked fellow protesters, that led her to continue marching – exactly like the policeman has told her to. She goes on with her speech, goes on with her script, but the speech – whose ideological walls probably read something between 'Fck AfD' and 'ACAB' – suddenly seems out of tune somehow, broken, and to say that the artist is confused about the limits of her solidarity, to say that she's having second thoughts about the fellow bloc that was left behind, might be a compassionate interpretation.

Because now, facing a besieged bloc, those who gathered here in an alliance of different groups to fight against budget cuts and future damage to the breadth and depth of the art and cultural scene, insist on a quiet murmur that there "was no choice", and "this banner they brought", and "the slogans they chanted", and "to tell you the truth", and "to be very honest" with all due respect to 'being many', their statements don't suit my positions, and their slogans don't represent my perspective, my politics, my identity, my identity's politics, and the times are difficult, and in the democratic Bundesrepublik the hermeticism of the self must not break, in the democratic Bundesrepublik a picture of my body behind a banner of "Kultur statt Genozid" is out of question, there's a brand to maintain, as Naomi Klein writes, the brand called me, and my views, and my opinions, and therefore my words and my actions should be chosen carefully – my solidarities and the alliances I create, too. Because in February 2025 showing solidarity with the so-called wrong group would – let's just say it? – put you in danger. We all know this fear by now. We see it demonstrated daily in political speeches that declare empathy and stink of feigned neutrality, we see it in art institutions and artistic programs that speak about solidarity and freedom and are anxious of saying the "wrong thing", or even worse, of standing with someone who says the "wrong thing". The room that was always in charge of speaking truth, of revealing and exposing – finds itself in the constant action of blurring, obscuring and hiding.

And so, with 'spotlights', 'ecosystems', 'solidarity' or whatsoever – the ars poetic room finds itself now standing at the heart of another room; a room that was constructed through force, through police, through cumulative restrictions on freedom of speech that we have seen in Germany over the last 20 months. What is the meeting point between the room of poetry and reflection and the room controlled by politics, capital, weapons and power? Maybe it is here, in the heart of a street, with a bloc isolated by policemen to the echoing background-sound of a speech about solidarity.

5 In a way, solidarity is the conscious rejection of the neoliberal 'I' and its insistent demand for hermeticism, simply because it is formed with people who are not me, myself and I, and is based on standing together with the Other despite conflicts that might – no, they will – arise. Perhaps solidarity is not only about ideological proximity, but about the willingness to absorb the violence that is addressed to another, to the Other, by systems that all groups oppose. Perhaps

solidarity is based on the readiness to be stained sometimes by the areas that my ally misses and oversees. Perhaps solidarity is based on the agreement that, at its very essence, it must deal with built-in ideological differences. For example, a banner by one bloc with the word "Genozid" on it. For example, the silence of another bloc for months and months of annihilation and killings.

In 2025, solidarity means withstanding an ever-growing multitude of opinions, perspectives, subgroups and identities within polarized debates while maintaining unity. Why? Because the distance between the current moment and our goals is too big – all look pretty far from accomplishment at the moment, to say the least – and because the urgent need for resistance is much greater than our disagreements; and anyway, if we can't handle our differences and multiplicities in a demonstration and stay there for and with each other, how will our protest ever reach decision-making rooms, how will our messages ever enter the real centers of power? Uniting forces in solidarity always incurs the risk of disagreement, but by that, maybe, we learn something way bigger about the society in which we live, we learn way more about 'Die Vielen', 'the many', about struggle and compassion, about difference and consistency, and we learn that solidarity simply can't be neat.

Who defines the boundaries of solidarity and empathy? Are they defined by our intentions and decisions or by the violent reality that penetrates from outside? What are we doing when violence bursts in, either with restrained, institutionalized force or with a raging, aggressive one? How do we react? Do we go on with our verses, or do we cut the speech in protest and go stand behind the cops with our cameras up in the air? Do we speak about power, or do we speak to power? Do we react to the policemen's faces, or do we shout and protest outside of violence's hearing range? And when we do it, do we still believe? Really? Really really? Or do we constantly regress to the ars poetics, to the meta, because any concrete statement might reveal more conflict than this room, in its current form, can maintain? More conflict than institutional art will be able to swallow, or needless to say, to fund?

6

If I spoke sarcastically about the artists who took to the streets in solidarity with themselves, I did not do well. Virginia Woolf said that a writer who writes with a frown or a ridicule will always fail at the complex task of conveying an idea. After all, fighting cuts to cultural budgets is fighting censorship, homogenization of speakers and positions, anti-pluralism and anti-intellectualism. I am conscious, as you are, that fighting against cuts to cultural, educational and welfare budgets is fighting against a society that surrenders itself to nationalism, capitalism, fascism and militancy. And here, exactly here, Gaza is awaiting us. With a gaping mouth it awaits. Shocked by blood, empty from teeth. Where? At the heart of a protest against budget cuts in Berlin.

The hand that shapes Germany now is the same hand that is involved, to say the least, in what we see in Palestine, in Lebanon, in Syria, in Iran over the last two years. Police violence against Palestinian solidarity activists in Berlin and right-wing policies of budget cuts are both manifestations of the same system of lies and violence, of gaslighting and hypocrisy. And violence – as well as fighting violence –, lacks the ars poetic delight, the meaningful feeling

that comes with poetry. It is petty. Sisyphean. It is 'too' everyday. 'Too' particular. Non-Universal. It lacks the importance-feeling of the speech, the festiveness of the keynote. 'Most people' experience way more institutional, bureaucratic, physical violence in their lifetime, than applause and nodding smiling faces. 'Most people' experience way more violence than this room can ever handle.

Resistance, empathy and solidarity would make a good speech topic. In practice, however, they can become extremely challenging, sometimes even triggering, as they require groups with completely different agendas to speak with one voice, and this requires constant negotiation of differences. This will always hit the point of challenge and discomfort. But what empathy and solidarity do well is speak of—and influence—the creation of new connections, which lead to new apprehensions regarding the ways power functions, and especially: how to stand, shoulder to shoulder, bloc to bloc in protest against those who want to see us all falling apart.

Sivan Ben Yishai,
born in 1978, has been living in Berlin since 2012. Her play *LIEBE /Eine argumentative Übung*, written during her residency as playwright-in-house at the Nationaltheater Mannheim, was invited to the Mülheim Drama Prize in 2020. She received the Mülheim Drama Prize in 2022 for *WOUNDS ARE FOREVER* (*Selbstportrait als Nationaldichterin*), a work engaging with Palestinian–Israeli–German history.
Like Lovers Do (*Memoiren der Medusa*), produced by the Münchner Kammerspiele and directed by Pınar Karabulut, was invited to the Berliner Theatertreffen in 2022.
In 2023, she was again represented at the Theatertreffen with *Nora. A Thriller* by Sivan Ben Yishai, Henrik Ibsen, Gerhild Steinbuch, and Ivna Žic (directed by Felicitas Brucker).
In 2023, she was named Playwright of the Year in *Theater heute*'s critics' poll for *Bühnenbeschimpfung (Liebe ich es nicht mehr oder liebe ich es zu sehr?) Stage Insult* (*Do I No Longer Love It or Do I Love It Too Much?*) and received the Berlin Theatre Prize.
In 2024, she was awarded the Mülheim Drama Prize for *Nora oder Wie man das Herrenhaus kompostiert Nora or How to Compost the Manor House*. Her plays are translated into German by the author Maren Kames.

Jakub Depczyński
Fifteen thoughts on the far-right, culture and artistic freedom. A perspective

→ Watch Jakub Depczyński's contribution as a video

I am writing this short text at a weird moment. It's been nearly two years since the so-called "15th of October coalition" won the general election in Poland, ending the eight-year rule of the Law and Justice party, which is our local version of the global wave of far-right / new-right / alt-right / neo-authoritarianism / post-fascism / illiberal democracy (you name it). At the same time, it's almost certain that in two year's time, these forces will return to power—stronger, better prepared, fierce (think: Donald Trump's second term in the US). In the cultural field we maintain business as usual: artists produce art, curators curate exhibitions, institutions organize programs. Yet everyone knows that this will not last; "we've got two years left" is the refrain you hear from everyone, again and again.

The memories of how arts and culture in Poland looked under the Law and Justice government are still very fresh—and they are not good. As a cultural worker—curator, organizer, art historian, member of various groups, collectives and networks—I was a witness and participant of many cultural, social, and political struggles that happened during those eight years. These experiences, I believe, gave me some insight on the effects of far-right (we'll stick to this term for now) politics on arts, culture, and freedom of artistic expression. Or at very least I can tell you how it looked in Poland. What the Law and Justice government was doing, how the arts and culture sector reacted, and how the situation looks now—at the moment of disillusionment—when any and all belief in "democratic change," "restoration of rule of law," or "rebuilding arts and culture" (which was, let's be honest, quite naive in the first place) fades.

Before I move on, I need to make two disclaimers. First—I am writing these words in my own name, from a concrete, situated position, and I am not representing the ideas and views of any particular group, movement, organization, or institution. Although the whole field of arts and culture in Poland was affected by the cultural politics of the far-right, the institution in which I work was spared its worst effects, and I personally did not experience the level of abuse of power, censorship, and pressure that many artists and cultural workers suffered from.

Second—I do not claim that anything I say about how the far-right deals with arts and culture is universal, and applies to every other place in the world. The way the Polish art world is organized, managed, and funded is specific, though not unique. It relies to a large extent on public institutions and funding, which makes certain tactics of political pressure and control very effective, and renders others useless. Still, what I learned speaking with international friends and allies is that the far-right playbook is quite similar across different countries, cultures, and contexts. Even if the exact means are different, the basic goals and rules remain the same.
I believe that what I describe below, though very much grounded in my experiences in Poland, may sound at least recognizable to colleagues and comrades in other places, like Türkiye, Hungary, Slovakia, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, US, UK, India, Finland, and many others.

Five far-right tactics to dismantle, take over, and control arts and culture

1 First of all, after coming to power, the Law and Justice party focused on exchanging the leadership in all of the key public artistic and cultural institutions: museums, theaters, galleries, institutes, governmental agencies, and funding bodies. As these are all organized very hierarchically in Poland, it was enough to replace the directors with loyal and obedient party members to completely seize the institutions, and turn them into machines spawning nationalist cultural politics championed by the far-right. Some institutions—especially those run by municipalities and local governments—resisted the changes, but the longer Law and Justice was in power, the more of them fell to the people loyal to the party and its vision of arts and culture.

2 The new leadership focused on building parallel structures in the institutions. They did not engage in a firing spree that targeted those who expressed…They did not go crazy *firing* people who expressed progressive views or resisted implementing the new cultural politics of the far-right. They kept most of the 'old' employees on the payroll, but they simply did not give them any tasks, budgets, or assignments. Instead, most of the resources were given to the new employees, recruited from the (admittedly not so large) pool of old-school, often forgotten conservative artists; anti-identity politics, and cultural Marxist bloggers; and self-proclaimed free-speech martyrs who built whole careers on their personal mythologies of 'being canceled by the woke-left art world.' Many of those newcomers lacked experience, knowledge and competence. This strategy was devastating for both institutions, artists and cultural workers. Many suffered from mental health problems and other upsetting psychological conditions. Many voluntarily left institutions, organizations, and projects they had been developing for years. Some decided to stay, trying to exploit cracks in the system, or simply waiting for better times.

3 While building these parallel structures, the new leadership tried to create an impression of a positive change happening. They promised an end to harmful and unfair practices in workplaces, more transparent programming and management, and larger budgets from public funding bodies. Very often they would raise everyone's salaries, focusing particularly on the most underpaid and mistreated workers. While this may sound like a considerate response to the real problems plaguing the world of arts and culture under neoliberal regimes, the reality proved to be very different. After the initial pay raises, many of the seized institutions and organizations quickly spiraled into chaos, suffering from poor management, cronyism, lack of competence of the new leadership, and (surprise, surprise!) actual deterioration of work conditions for everyone, no matter their views or affiliations.

4 All of the above was accompanied by a never-ending campaign of attacking, threatening, censoring, ridiculing, gaslighting, or simply ignoring everything even vaguely resembling any kind of progressive art and culture making. The far-right didn't have to create a Ministry of Censorship—all they needed to do was to change the priorities in state-funded programs, scholarships, and grants; adjust budgets, policies, and regulations; force new priorities and threaten anyone that resisted. Basically, their goal was to redefine art and culture is according to their narrow vision, through direct control of money and infrastructure. If you are reading this text, it is very likely that anything you find even vaguely interesting, touching, or valuable in art and culture would be deemed 'woke bullshit,' 'cultural Marxism' or 'liberal propaganda' by the Polish far-right. And in their language, this excludes it from being either art or culture.

5 Finally—the crucial point. The far-right play was *divida et impera*: divide and conquer. They would do anything to destroy the existing networks of solidarity and support between art and culture workers. They would do anything to drive a wedge between people who, only a moment ago, were comrades in a common struggle. They would happily fuel all kinds of rifts and arguments between different sectors of arts and culture (think feminists versus refugees versus climate activists, *etc.*, or freelance artists versus institution employees versus freelance curators versus freelance critics *etc.*). And, I must admit, they were very good at it—every time there was common resistance, they were able to break it into smaller pieces, which were much easier to deal with.

I know this sounds bad, but those eight years were not only darkness. There was also a lot of coming, and being, together, a lot of struggle and comradeship, a lot of solidarity and support, a lot of conspiring and plottin, a lot of demonstrations and protests. The arts and culture world in Poland put up resistance, and in the end managed to survive, however damaged.

Five ways to fight back against the far-right takeover of arts and culture

1 First of all—be ready for anything. I mean, literally anything and everything. It took us some time to learn this lesson, but the truth is: the more something seems impossible, the more probable it is. If there is something you think that the far-right will not do, this is exactly what's going to happen. In Poland, we had been in this spot time and again. We were in our community meeting discussing something, like a new outrageous policy or another crazy political rumor. We were saying "nah, they won't do this; nah they won't do that; nah the law doesn't allow them to do that; nah they would lose all EU funds if they did that." Really, the far-right won't care. Whatever you think is impossible is going to happen. And be ready for the impossible to happen time and again, no matter how much you try to stop it. The struggle against the far-right is a task for decades to come; it will take a lot of effort and patience. In our case it had been eight years of really tiring, boring, and frustrating work—and it is barely finished.

2 Seek solidarity, show solidarity, stay in solidarity. As I said above, the far-right will do anything to break any bonds of support, so it's very important not to let this happen. Keep all your contacts; stay in touch; share thoughts, emotions, and experiences; collaborate and organize with your friends and comrades—no matter how much someone will try to tell you that you shouldn't. Reach out to others, especially internationally. Don't be afraid to be honest and ask for support. I know very well how important that is, as for eight years many of my activities were sustained mostly thanks to international relations, friendships, support, and funding. What's even more important is to be ready to show solidarity and collaborate with those who are not so close to us. To me solidarity is about going beyond your comfort zone, staying in the struggle with those who might not be your 'ideal comrade.' This is also very much a tactical thing—this struggle cannot be won alone and to sustain resistance, it is necessary to join forces with those that one doesn't consider their 'natural ally.'

3 Document everything that's happening and leave nothing unanswered. Every time the far right attacks an artist, cultural worker, project, organization, or institution, show them support. Every time the far right does something unacceptable—censor, change policy, refuse funding, attack, silence, gaslight—never stay silent. Write a complaint. Write a formal letter. Question the decision at the meeting. Write a diary and note down every interaction, decision, event, and discussion. Let the press know, go to the media, do an interview, speak in a podcast. Publicize everything with every means, spread news locally and internationally. And always, always protest. Even if it's going to be the smallest demonstration in the world. Even those five people with a banner, one photograph and a small note in the media—it's worth it. Maybe just for your community to strengthen morale. Maybe for others to feel less alone. Maybe for future struggles and future justice. Maybe it won't change anything at the moment, but the time will come, sooner or later.

4

Unionize. I know this has been said so many times. I know it's different in various countries, societies, legal systems, and branches of the art and culture world. But if you can—unionize. Frankly, for those eight years of far-right rule in Poland the only battles against far-right takeover of arts and culture that were truly won, were the ones led by unions in workplaces. This is because the far-right are terrible managers, terrible administrators, terrible bosses, and terrible colleagues. Because they bring chaos, bad practices, fraud, corruption, and exploitation. And that's why the only powers that were able to oust a terrible far-right museum or theater director in Poland were the workers' unions. Of course it is important to participate in other networks—but unionize, if you can.

5

Last but not least: never give up. Never allow the far-right to make you believe that your case is lost. This is something that we experienced a lot during those eight years of struggle. So many battles were lost. So often we felt like "the case is closed," "they won," "nothing is possible," "there will never be change." It simply is not true. To be honest, the far-right is pretty incompetent in their actions. They are not masterminds or political geniuses. Sooner or later they show weakness. They start to struggle with their own agenda, they make mistakes. And you have to be ready for that moment, and act when it comes.

I would really love to end this text here. To remind you that after eight years of far-right rule in Poland, the Law and Justice party lost elections to the broad pro-democratic coalition. To tell you that the art and culture world survived—yes, harm was done, but we are healing now. To tell you how we are rebuilding institutions, bringing back funding, implementing better policies and protections for the future, making the arts and culture sector a more just and fair space.

But unfortunately, it's not that simple.

Five ways the far-right arts and culture politics will stay with us for the foreseeable future

1 What comes after the far-right government is ousted? Disappointment. Sure, the broad coalition of centrist (or rather, mostly conservative-but-not-as-fascist) parties could only ever be a disappointment. But disappointment is an understatement. The new government won, riding the wave of the energy of eight years of resistance to the far-right. They championed many of the liberal, pro-democratic, and even some progressive demands put forward by the protestors. But when they finally got to power, they failed to implement any of them. What the arts and culture sectors received, was the dismissal of people connected to the far-right (often with dubious legal excuses), pretending that all is fine and promising to 'restore normality,' to somehow go back to the pre-2015 era. As if the eight years of Law and Justice, resistance, and progressive demands never happened. As if the old-school neoliberal business as usual could be the answer again.

2 It turns out that once the far-right opens the door to direct, manual control of arts and culture, no one seems to be interested in closing them again. The new authorities learned all the tactics and tools from the far-right playbook, and do not hesitate to use them. The way in which far-right leadership was ousted and replaced with new 'democratic' directors was dubious. All kinds of pressures are still very much present, and institutions are still treated as tools of party politics. The difference is that the new government does this quietly, from behind the scenes, with threats packed as kind words of good advice. Artists and cultural workers are being told that it is for "the greater good," for "preserving democracy," for "not letting the far-right attack you," for "not annoying the silent majority of voters."

3 The worrying thing is that, despite widespread disappointment with the politics of the new government and their treatment of arts and culture, there seems to be very little resistance. It turns out that it was much easier to organize against the neoauthoritarians than it is against the neoliberals. Of course, part of the story is that people are exhausted after eight years of struggles against the far-right. And yes, there is a tangible difference between the previous and current government. But everyone understands that the current situation is not the 'democratic change' they have been fighting for since 2015, and that the social and political situation in Poland is deteriorating rapidly. It is surprising how quickly the networks of solidarity and support disappeared; how rapidly the demands of justice, democratization, transparency, and inclusion were abandoned; how easily people got atomized, alienated, disconnected, and individualized. It seems that most people in Polish arts and culture want to believe that the struggle has been won, and that now we can just get back to business as usual.

4 But the truth is that the far-right shift in arts and culture is here to stay with us for the foreseeable future. This has changed the way we publicly discuss arts and culture and their societal perception, the way institutions operate, the way politics influence the sector—and this change will be long-term. Despite the electoral win over the far-right, arts and culture in Poland are constantly under fire. People increasingly consider the arts as something weird, marginal, obscure, controversial, wasteful, and unnecessary. The mechanism for this is very simple and not unique to Poland: the more the neoliberal center parrots far-right discourse, the more they legitimize and popularize it, and the weaker the democratic and leftist alternatives become. The result is simply the conservative and far-right hegemony in the sphere of culture, media and public discourse—a fact that we will have to somehow deal with for the years to come.

5 And the final point: this is not only a discursive, social, and cultural shift. It is also a long-term political trend. The far-right as a movement and international coalition of parties and politicians is here to stay with us. And it's only going to grow stronger in the coming years. The dominant feeling in Poland—again, not unique to our country—is that we are currently living in a brief in-between moment, bracing for the electoral win of the far-right in the upcoming elections. And when this happens, it will be much harder to resist, as we will probably face 'all gas no brakes' fascist and authoritarian politics. If the far-right changes their tactics, how will we respond? No one yet has the answer. But one thing is quite certain: this is the new normal, and there is no coming back to what the world was before.

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graduated in art history from the Faculty of Management of Visual Culture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. He currently works in the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw as the Curator of Public Programs, and is particularly interested in post-artistic practices, the relationship between technology and art, art in the face of the planetary climate and environmental crisis and contemporary ecological thought. Jakub is one of the creators of the Atlas of the Anti-fascist Year—a social archive of anti-fascist and anti-war activities and attitudes in culture, art and other walks of life, as well as a co-founder of the Office for Postartistic Services and "Sunflower" Solidary Community Center.

Caspar Weimann
Hacking the Manosphere: performance strategies fighting online authoritarianism

Watch an interview with Caspar Weimann

I use virtually every social media platform because, in many ways, I am chronically online. On average, I spend around five hours a day navigating these digital spaces. My background, however, lies in spoken theater: I studied acting and now work as a professor of acting. Yet my artistic practice has expanded far beyond traditional performance. Today, I work primarily in transdisciplinary teams—groups of artists with different professional backgrounds who combine their perspectives to imagine new ways of responding to a constantly changing digital society.

Our collective is called online theater. online theater live. The name reflects both our artistic mission and a certain defiance. Many people tell us that what we do is not 'real' theater. We insist that it is. We see social media as a stage, and we approach it as such. For us, theater has always been an emancipatory tool—something I learned early on in the theater youth club at Theater Magdeburg. Theater gave us authorship over our own lives and stories. It helped us find our voices—verbal voices, democratic voices, and the ability to orient ourselves within a complex society shaped by polycrises. My understanding of theater is therefore deeply pedagogical. Theater makers are not only storytellers; they are curators of encounters. They create situations in which meaning can be generated, shared, and reimagined.

This, to me, feels like a superpower—one that can be applied in many places, including online spaces. In the youth club in Magdeburg, we did not limit ourselves to stages: we performed in supermarkets and public squares. I carried that spirit with me into our work at online theater live, where we began to look at social media as the central public space of our time. These platforms shape our daily routines, our social interactions, and the topics we discuss. As one of my theater pedagogy students once said, "Social media is pop culture—and pop culture is where pedagogy happens." That statement resonated with me deeply. It confirmed our intuition that our theatrical practice belongs on social media, and it pushed us to examine what theater can become when it unfolds in these digital environments.

What we discovered is that social media platforms are already theaters. Every user creates profiles: curated versions of themselves, much like the roles we embody on stage. We slip into different characters depending on the app, the context, or the audience we imagine watching us. And we know we are being watched. Even when we consume content, we create data that signals our presence. The entire system is built on feedback loops in which everyone is simultaneously producer and consumer—a 'prosumer.' This term—used since the early days of Web 2.0—describes an environment fundamentally shaped by performance.

> On social media, visibility becomes a kind of dramaturgy. Stories compete for attention; audiences gather and disperse; roles are played, exaggerated, or strategically hidden. In this sense, social media is the largest stage of our shared reality. Yet many theater makers—people trained to think deeply about storytelling and human encounters—approach these platforms with hesitation, if not complete avoidance. I understand the personal reasons for keeping one's distance. Still, the irony is striking: while artists withdraw, other groups have already recognized these platforms as theaters and have mastered their dramaturgy. Far-right networks, masculinist communities, and anti-feminist organizations systematically flood digital spaces with narratives designed to shift public perception toward authoritarian ideologies.

This metaphor of theater is not one I invented—it is explicitly embedded in right-wing extremist strategy. A 17-page document from a German extremist network states clearly: "You don't want to convince your opponent on the internet. They are mostly stubborn idiots. It's about the audience. It's not about who is right—it's about who the audience thinks is right." This logic guides their online performances.

> Although our work often focuses on right-wing radicalization, today I want to shift to a closely connected but distinct topic: masculinist radicalization. While linked, the two phenomena are not synonymous. Masculinism is an integral part of online culture and an increasingly influential force in shaping gendered identities and behavior.

The term masculinism may appear as a counterpart to feminism, but historically it emerged from the men's rights movement—an anti-feminist movement grounded in the belief that feminism is responsible for the discomfort men feel in a patriarchal society. Masculinism positions itself as a parallel liberation movement, yet it ignores that emancipatory feminism already strives for the equality of all genders, including men. Masculinist discourse, however, demonizes feminism, offering men easy explanations for their frustrations. These are seductive narratives because they provide clear villains and simplified solutions—without requiring self-reflection.

> Online, masculinist influencers turn these narratives into profitable business models. They sell masterclasses, access to pyramid schemes, self-optimization products, and countless brands of protein powder. Their success depends on amplifying feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and resentment. Radicalization, in this context, becomes orchestrated. These networks cultivate emotional vulnerability, reinforce it, and then capitalize on it. The process is never about the well-being of men—it is about sustaining their dependency.

The social consequences are devastating. Masculinist ideologies normalize segregation, emotional numbness, hyper-individualism, misogyny, and the conviction of male supremacy—often enforced through violence. In Germany, every major killing spree of the last 18 years has been carried out by men, many of whom were radicalized online. Masculinism may not always be the primary motive, but it is almost always present as a secondary one. It is unmistakably central in cases of femicide: in 2023, 360 women and girls were killed in Germany, and 80.6% of these homicides were related to intimate partner violence. Essentially, every day in 2023, a man killed his partner or ex-partner.

> Knowing all this can create a profound sense of powerlessness. To counter that feeling, our collective turned to research. We wanted to understand radicalization processes in detail—especially those unfolding online. One crucial insight emerged: online radicalization is not sudden. Before a person posts radicalized content for the first time, they typically spend at least six months consuming extremist material. Not one video, but hundreds—each providing micro-impulses that eventually reshape their worldview.

Often, this process involves a shift across platforms, from mainstream video apps to more closed spaces like Telegram or Discord. By the time someone posts for the first time, the radicalization process is already well underway, and the window for intervention is small. Intervening later becomes increasingly difficult: people begin dismissing critics as 'sheep,' a familiar term in German right-wing discourse.

> And for online theater live, it became clear: if social media is the most influential theater of our time, then we must create strategies to intervene within these spaces, not outside them.

We therefore focus on the six-month window of exposure before a person becomes visibly radicalized. At that stage, individuals can still be reached through narratives of empathy, connection, mindfulness, and solidarity. Our research eventually led us to identify what we call radicalization synergies: the way micro-impulses from different accounts and platforms work together to gradually shape a new worldview. Radicalization is never the result of a single source, but of a network of reinforcing stimuli.

Understanding these synergies has become central to both our research and our practice. Through online theater live, we seek to explore them, challenge them, and ultimately disrupt them—using the tools of theater, storytelling, and carefully curated encounters. In doing so, we hope to contribute, even in small ways, to reclaiming our digital public spaces from the forces that seek to manipulate and polarize them.

Caspar Weimann
works at the intersection of digital technology and performance, using virtual platforms to challenge authoritarian systems and hegemonic narratives. Professor and mentor for acting at the ADK Baden-Württemberg, focusing on expanding the concept of acting and exploring processes of actorly emancipation. He is the initiator of onlinetheater.live (homepage), the project *Myke* (FAUST Theatre Prize 2025 in the "Genrespringer" category, Berlin Prevention Prize 2025, re:publica 2025), the app *Loulu* (Amadeu Antonio Prize 2021, Heidelberger Stückemarkt 2022), and numerous mixedmedia projects, primarily with an anti-fascist focus. He leads seminars and workshops and delivers lectures on artistic strategies for deradicalization on social media, right-wing recruitment processes, participatory theater online, and the theatricality of social media. He serves as a board member of Bühne für Menschenrechte and is also the initiator of a network of over 500 artists who organize anti-fascist initiatives online. Born and raised in Magdeburg.

Ezenwa Okoro
Legislative Theatre in Focus

An Addendum
can be found at the end of
the text

Watch Ezenwa Okoro talk about artvocacy

Introduction

Theater has always been a means of investigating humanity, sharing stories, and examining our role in the local, political, and global community. These contributions are deeply meaningful, but sometimes leave open the question: in addition to personal transformation and social critique, can theater also be a tool for concrete social and political change? Does theater have that power? The goal is to show how this methodology can be used to raise awareness of pertinent issues of oppression, shift the minds of policymakers, and engage audience members in civic action. By sharing this methodology, I hope to ignite advocacy efforts by artists and other arts-based institutions looking to make change in creative ways.

Strategic Tool for Civic Engagement

This methodology was born out of the desire for theater to move beyond emotional catharsis and toward becoming a tool for community dialogue, actively challenging mechanical thinking, and rehearsing for revolutionary change.
The core idea of Legislative Theatre is that theater is a means of political activity, in which voters are given the opportunity to realize their desires for political change and engage in deep discussion with legislators on their opinions, field counterarguments, and share responsibility for governance.
It uses roleplaying to engage community members in identifying solutions to unjust and inequitable systems and institutions, and then translating those ideas into new laws.
Think of it as a paradigm-shifting technique and envision it as 'democracy coming alive on stage.'

Here's how it works:

In Legislative Theater, communities, advocates, and policymakers work together in a creative process to identify, develop, and build support for new legislation. Through interactive theater performances, community members act out solutions to situations of oppression, then work with officials to transform them into new laws or changes to existing laws.
Legislative theater can be deployed to develop creative solutions for issues such as homelessness, inequitable justice systems, workers' rights, and other critical social justice issues plaguing the world today.
To achieve the aims of civic community and legislator policy shift, Legislative Theatre is executed in three parts:

1) Advocacy Fair;

2) Play
Performance and Policy Idea Generation;

and

3) Activism Workshops.

PRE-PLAY ADVOCACY FAIR

Prior to each Legislative Theatre play performance, audience members are invited to participate in an Advocacy Fair. The Advocacy Fair is an opportunity for audience members to connect with social justice organizations in their various communities and join campaigns of interest to them. The experience of the fair primes the citizens and residents —addressed as "Spect-Actors"—to see themselves as activists. Spect-Actors are given the opportunity to engage with various organizations, join coalitions, and target elected officials on issues of social change.

PLAY PERFORMANCE AND POLICY IDEA GENERATION

The play performance and idea generation are broken down into three segments that are referred to as: Watch, Act, Vote!

WATCH

The acting troupes perform a Forum Play. Each acting troupe is united around a particular oppressive structure or policy. The Forum Plays highlight the various ways that policy or agency practice can impact someone's life on an interpersonal level.

ACT

The audience members are first asked to strategize with the actors on ways to respond on an interpersonal level by engaging in Interventions onstage: spect-actors enter the scene to improvise new ideas, and the actors and audience analyze those Interventions through dialogue. The Jokers also ask the crowd, "what ideas for policy change do you have to fight this oppression?" The actors and audience are invited to turn to their neighbor and discuss possible ideas. Once the ideas have been discussed, everyone writes their ideas on note cards that are collected and sorted by a team of legal and policy experts referred to as the Legislative Panel. Those experts review the cards and work with government representatives to agree on selected ideas, actionable after the play.

VOTE

The Legislative Panel shares the selected policies with the Actors and Spect-Actors.The crowd debates each idea until it is clear and concise. Once clear, there is a vote. If the majority of Actors and Spect-Actors accept the idea, the government representatives make a promise to act on those ideas in some form after leaving the theater.

SUMMARY

Those who participate in Legislative Theatre are challenged to think outside of just facts and figures and, instead, in terms of human impact; to hear the desires and experiences of the actors; and let those outlooks change their worldviews. The actors writing and performing their pieces are able to advocate directly to policymakers in their own interest. This effectively creates a civic community and shifts policymaker perspectives.

Addendum

The terms below are frequently used in Legislative Theatre's vocabulary.

FORUM THEATRE

the goal is to generate strategies for the actors to fight against oppression and respond to the actions of the Antagonist. The actors perform their play highlighting unresolved problems resulting from the acts the Antagonist(s). Once the play is finished, the Spect-Actors are invited to step into the play and act out other possible tactics for engaging with the Antagonist. The actors in the play are prepared to improvise and respond to the Spect-Actor in character.

ACTORS

citizens, residents, and community members experiencing a particular type of oppression—such as housing or race-based discrimination—and seeking to push back against that oppression through theatre.

JOKERS

facilitators of the play-creation process. Like the Joker in a deck of cards, they are unbiased and do not belong to any particular suit.

SPECT-ACTORS

audience members who jump into the play and act out potential strategies for change, or brainstorm tactics to fight the oppression in the play.

PROTAGONIST(S)

the person or people facing an oppressive obstacle in obtaining what they need.

ANTAGONIST(S)

the person or people creating the obstacle that is preventing the protagonist from obtaining what they need.

INTERVENTION

the process of a Spect-Actor entering into the play that is facilitated by Actors and Jokers.

Ezenwa Okoro
is a social justice advocate, human rights activist, poet and art administrator with seventeen years-experience working with communities and entities across West Africa. He is the Program Director of Street Project Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that uses creative arts to foster youth engagement, social mobilization and cross-cultural dialogue. Street Project Foundation is a recipient of the Intercultural Innovation Award by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC). Ezenwa is a Mandela Washington Fellow and a Global Fellow of the International Society of the Performing Arts (ISPA).

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