

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Choreographer's 'Dog Poop Attack' on a Critic Inspired This New Play

At this year's Theatertreffen drama festival, one production explores an incident that shocked the German theater world last year.

By A.J. Goldmann

The critic A.J. Goldmann saw the shows in Berlin

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On Feb. 11, 2023, the choreographer Marco Goecke cornered a dance critic, Wiebke Hüster, during intermission of a performance at the Hanover State Opera in northern Germany. After asking her about negative reviews that she had written about his past productions, Goecke took out a bag of dog feces and smeared her face with it.

That shocking incident, which generated headlines around the world, is the starting point for "The Dog Poop Attack," a production at this year's Theatertreffen festival in Berlin.

Of the 10 shows at the event, a celebration of German-language theater, "The Dog Poop Attack" has arguably generated the most excitement, thanks to its explosive subject matter and its unlikely place of origin: Jena, a city in eastern Germany that is hardly known as a theatrical capital.

After the incident, Goecke gave up his position as Hanover company's ballet director "by mutual agreement." He was later suspended from the Nederlands Dans Theater, the Dutch company where he was an associate choreographer. Hüster filed a criminal complaint against him; Goecke was ordered to pay 5,000 euros in damages. And while he has issued public apologies, Goecke has remained more defiant than contrite, and disturbingly equivocal: He has both admitted to overreacting and tried to justify his behavior.

"The Dog Poop Attack" mulls over the incident, the attention it generated and what it says about the state of the performing arts in Germany. The play's premise is simple: A troupe of actors at a provincial theater hope that mounting a production about the infamous affair will help them gain wider attention. This meta-conceit recalls backstage farces like "Noises Off" and "Waiting for Guffman," but this show, devised and written collectively by the six performers, the director Walter Bart and the dramaturg Hannah Baumann, does something so straightforward yet daring that it's a

minor miracle that it works.

The production's gambit is to dramatize the creative process itself. For the bulk of the evening, the actors — playing themselves, or thinly fictionalized versions of themselves — dramatically narrate their email exchanges about how to stage the show. The lively way they put their brainstorming, discussions and quarrels onstage, along with a healthy dose of irony, makes for provocative and absorbing theater.

Pina Bergemann, who suggests the topic, persuades her fellow performers that a show about the incident would be more interesting than yet another production of Goethe's "Faust." Anna K. Seidel is skeptical about turning what she sees as a blatantly misogynistic attack into entertainment. Do we really need to platform this bully? she asks. Nikita Buldyrski writes a comically bad rap about power. Linde Dercon, a Dutch dancer, grows exasperated with the actors for their inability to show up to rehearsals on time.

Pondering Goecke's extreme act leads Leon Pfannenmüller to obsess about bad reviews he received early in his career. Henrike Commichau drafts letters to the choreographer peppered with questions: "Do you see yourself as a martyr? Do you think your attack was a powerful act? Do you feel honored that we're doing a piece about you?"

All this adds up to a shrewd analysis of art-as-process, the easily bruised egos of directors and actors, and the crucial role that criticism plays in Germany's theatrical ecosystem, while raising troubling questions. Where does artistic exploration end and the exploitation of real life violence begin? In examining the attack from all sides, does one not run the risk of also seeing it from the perpetrator's point of view?

The show puts these weighty issues onstage with a light touch. In an unexpected and exuberant coda, the actors leap out of their chairs. Through kooky dance, pantomime and, yes, terrible rap, they perform many of the ideas we've heard about over the past hour and change with gusto, ending the evening on a raucous, irreverent note.

At Theatertreffen, this scruffy resourcefulness was a stark contrast to productions from some of Germany's top theaters.

Lina Beckmann's sensational performance in the solo piece "Laios," from the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, was ultimately more compelling than this new play, which is a quirky if not entirely persuasive updating of ancient myth. The production, by the company's artistic director, Karin Beier, is the second installment of "Anthropolis," Roland Schimmelpfennig's five-part cycle about the ancient Greek city of Thebes, which is inspired by tragedies by Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus.

Alone onstage for 90 minutes, Beckmann breathes life into this dramatic monologue

about the king who was father to Oedipus. Her magnetic performance, full of wide-eyed intensity and feral energy, offered further proof that she is one of Germany's finest actors.



Lina Beckmann in "Laios." Monika Rittershaus

Both bravura acting and clear-sighted direction are hallmarks of "The Fatherless," a darkly robust version of Chekhov's "Platonov" from the director Jette Steckel that comes from the Münchner Kammerspiele. Joachim Meyerhoff, an invaluable ensemble member at Berlin's Schaubühne theater, stars as the embittered schoolteacher and inveterate womanizer, and Wiebke Puls and Katharina Bach, both from the Munich troupe, are standouts as two of the women he is entangled with.

"The Fatherless" runs close to four hours, sustained by the visual boldness of Steckel's direction and the gripping performances. A production of "Macbeth" from Schauspielhaus Bochum, in northwestern German, is only slightly shorter but feels twice as long. It is certainly the slowest production I've seen of Shakespeare's tragedy, thanks, in part, to the long stretches of silence, ritualistic dressing and undressing, and other directorial choices that are calculated not so much to deconstruct the tragedy but to bring it to the cusp of abstraction.

This is the Scottish play as absurdist drama. The director Johan Simons recasts "Macbeth" as a chamber drama for three actors who play all the roles. Striving for intimacy on a vast stage, they show remarkable unity and control. As the bloodthirsty royal couple (and assorted other roles), Jens Harzer and Marina Galic seem

inexorably drawn to their downfall. Stefan Hunstein, as a witch and perhaps the personification of fate, is menacing and droll. But the whole thing looks like a stylistic exercise and feels like an endurance test.

Rereading that last sentence, I wonder if “endurance test” is too harsh. Maybe, “the effect is, at times, soporific” is less likely to offend. After all, the next time I’m at the theater I don’t want to be looking over my shoulder to see what someone is about to fling into my face.