



Identity in Transit

**Theatrical Explorations of Experiences
in the Luxembourg-French Borderland**

Natalie Bloch, Monika Dobrowlanska

A Question of Place?

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mir: à quels lieux tu appartiens ? Eine theatrale Spurensuche im
Land der Roten Erde”**

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Edited by Natalie Bloch and Monika Dobrowlanska



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A Question of Place?

On the Participatory Potential of Place in the Theater Performance *So mir: à quels lieux tu appartiens ? Eine theatrale Spurensuche im Land der Roten Erde*

Natalie Bloch

The Parameters: Place Attachment and Social Participation

Even from afar, when approaching Belval by car, the quarter situated on a small hill in the south of Luxembourg City, affords a view of massive buildings rising high into the sky. Entering the neighborhood, the core of which consists of banks, the university, and a shopping mall, the impression it elicits is even more imposing. The smokestacks, winding towers, and blast furnaces of the steel industry sector once situated here and ultimately shut down in 1997¹, stand next to gigantic star architecture resplendent in a variety of colors and shapes. Interspersed between the buildings are planted water basins and abstract light objects that impressively illuminate the grounds at night. Proudly telling of successful structural change, the remnants of the bygone steel industry stand next to the splendid sites of newfound wealth, housing banks and fiscal authorities as well as trendy apartments, retail, restaurants, and bars.² Without a doubt: the site offers out-of-town visitors quite a bit of a visual feast in terms of architecture. Yet, how do the people once employed in the steelworks relate or even feel connected to this imposing site of steel and concrete? And what about those who live in the surrounding area and possibly work or study on the site? And also: How do the people who live on the other side of the border—only a stone's throw away—relate to their French municipalities that struggle with financial difficulties? It was these very questions that the interdisciplinary project *Remix Place* addressed. For months, a team of geographers and theater scholars conducted interviews³ with people from the Luxembourg-France border region, focusing on their relationship to the places where they live and work. Some of the people interviewed and their positions one could encounter in the trilingual production⁴ *So mir: à quels lieux tu appartiens ? Eine theatrale Spurensuche im Land der Roten Erde*⁵ in summer 2022, which was presented in one of the massive buildings on Belval Campus.

1 The decline of the steel industry began as early as 1975. "The Steel Industry and Luxembourg," The Luxembourg Government, Service Information et Presse, last updated January 9, 2024, <https://luxembourg.public.lu/en/society-and-culture/history/steel-industry-luxembourg.html>.

2 The university library, the Luxembourg Learning Centre, was even moved to a former steel works building (the "Möllerei") which, having been combined with ultramodern architecture, has become a stop for tourist busses.

3 These were foremostly so-called walking interviews, a method used for data collection in geography.

4 Luxembourgers often speak three or more languages as Luxembourg is a trilingual country. In addition to French and German, the third official language of the state is Luxembourgish, a Moselle-Franconian dialect. The residents of the French border region often speak no other foreign language than French.

The staging and not just the scientific analysis of the material generated formed the core of the *Remix Place* project, thus linking art and theory. From thousands of original sound recordings⁶, director Monika Dobrowlanska first selected various stories and perspectives that were interesting from a theatrical point of view—i.e., either because of the inherent dramaturgy of the storytelling or because they revealed unusual and surprising views; out of this material, she then created a montage, resulting in a trilingual, sometimes quadrilingual documentary drama. The idea was to preserve the voices and views of the local people and to make them accessible to a wider public, to an audience. On the level of text, the result can thus be truly called a documentary drama, as viewers are solely presented with “authentic material”⁷.

This material was taken from so-called reality, in this case, from the documented interviews, and, following Peter Weiß’s famous definition, presented on stage unchanged in content, but reworked with regard to form. “Since the days of Piscator, the authors of documentary theater have aimed to explain complex conditions of reality not by means of fictional stories, but rather through reality itself.”⁸ Contrary to this intention, however, documentary theater working with the selection, montage, and artistic contextualization of documentary material amounts to it rather being art than to a presenting of reality on stage. This, nevertheless, does not take from the authenticity inherent in the contents presented, which is, on the level of performance, amplified by the fact that, apart from professional actors, so-called “experts of the everyday,” i.e., the residents of the border region themselves, are on stage. The term “experts of the everyday”⁹—or “specialists in their own lives”¹⁰—was coined by the internationally active group Rimini Protokoll with regard to those actors on stage theater critics used to call amateurs: “people with knowledge gained by learning or experience that can offer insights into a subject, and who are prepared to confirm their knowledge, evidence and experiences by appearing on the stage themselves.”¹¹ In the case of *Remix Place*, which deals with local residents’ relationships to the places in the border region, the experts were three elderly ladies from a French senior citizens home, the eloquent French mayor of the commune of Villerupt, as well as students of the University of Luxembourg. They were joined by four professional actors, embodying the documentary texts of those residents not present on stage.

5 The trilingual title (Luxembourgish, French, German) translates as *Tell me: Where Do You Belong? A Theatrical Investigation in the Land of the Red Rocks*.

6 In all, 65 interviews were conducted.

7 Arno Gimber, “Zeiten des Experimentierens: Tendenzen im Dokumentartheater der Gegenwart zwischen Faktum und Fiktion,” in *Der Deutschunterricht* 68, no. 4 (2016): 30–31. [If not stated otherwise, quotations from German-language publications were translated into English specifically for this essay.]

8 Gimber, 31.

9 The term also served as the title of a book on the internationally active group Rimini Protokoll that Miriam Dreyse and Florian Malzacher published in 2007 in German—with the eponymous “Experten des Alltags” becoming the “experts of the everyday” in the 2008 English edition.

10 Eva Behrendt, “Specialists in their own lives: Interviews with Rimini’s experts,” in *Experts of the Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*, ed. Miriam Dreyse and Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2008), 64.

11 Behrendt, 65.

The documentary means used here do not only result in immediately anchoring what is shown and spoken on stage in reality, but also impact the audience's perception. And that is because, with the experts on stage, the usual criteria for judging a performance, such as presence and acting ability, rather recede into the background. Instead, an intense reception aesthetics-based effect is foregrounded through "a personal fate," through people to whom "something real really [has] happened"¹². However, the aspiration to enable participation, which the stage presentation and the project as whole was based on, went beyond making visible and giving a voice to local residents on stage, as engaging the audience was also a pivotal element of the project. Thus, each and every spectator was invited to contribute their views on the topics addressed as part of the audience discussion sessions following the stage presentation and to participate in the discussion. It is obvious that the fundamental objectives driving many documentary theater practices can also be identified looking at this production: not only is what is addressed on stage vouched for and substantiated¹³, but it also enables those people to participate who are often overlooked or are not being heard. Although this may not necessarily entail a political promise, it, at least, entails political hope or expectations that correspond with the political program of a European Cultural Capital year.¹⁴ This form of theater is, as Benjamin Wihstutz states in view of theater history, often "seen as a space of others" where they "achieve a presence to which they are not entitled in their everyday social life outside of the theatre."¹⁵

This essay will analyze in what way this production makes use of the participatory potential of space with regard to its various dimensions. The first aspect to be examined is how the actual *physical* space the performance was presented in, as well as its surroundings, impacted the presentation and how it is discussed in the piece. Subsequently, the *social* and *communicative* space created by the production will be examined with regard to the participatory potential it affords and how it is actually used by the participants.

12 Diedrich Diederichsen, "Betroffene, Exemplifizierende und Human Interfaces: Rimini Protokoll zwischen Theater, Performance und Kunst," in *Rimini Protokoll. Experten des Alltags. Das Theater von Rimini Protokoll*, ed. Miriam Dreyse and Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2008), 159.

13 Following the functions of documentary theater according to Peter Weiß.

14 To involve local residents in projects and events is an essential goal of a European Culture Capital year, as stated in the concept paper of the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States: "A concept of the Cultural Capital festival aimed at the empowerment of all groups of society and at civic engagement can sustainably contribute to a participatory and inclusive urban society." [Kulturstiftung der Länder, "Kulturhauptstadt Europas 2025: Fragen, Fakten und Hintergründe (FAQs)," Sekretariat der Ständigen Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, accessed January 17, 2024, https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/2019/2019-10-01_Kulturhauptstadt/FAQs_Kulturhauptstadt_Europas_2025.pdf.] In reality, however, research is often conducted *on* local residents rather than *with* them.

15 Benjamin Wihstutz, "Other Space or Space of Others? Reflections on Contemporary Political Theatre," in *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 184.

The Socio-Geographical Setting of the Performance: Places of Inequality

It has always been a defining feature of European theater to leave its traditional performance space and instead utilize places not originally intended for theater: Thespis, the first tragedian, wandered about with his theater cart as early as the 6th century BCE; and the mystery and Passion plays of the period between the 9th and the 13th century were first performed inside churches to then, starting in the 13th century, move to the sanctuaries' forecourts, from where they later on made their way to the marketplace. In late medieval times, traveling troupes would then entertain their audiences in taverns and on public squares with their worldly, and as such, humorous and bawdy presentations.¹⁶ The exodus from traditional theater buildings was also a central characteristic of the avantgarde theater of the 20th century and has specifically gained momentum in recent decades in the independent theater scene, as theater scholar Jens Roselt observes: "On levees and mountaintops, in barns and harbor basins—no place is safe from becoming a performance space for independent theater."¹⁷ For a long time, however, academic research had only examined the spaces and places of theater with regard to their significance for the plays presented in them¹⁸, while hardly addressing the locations where the presentations took place themselves, including the architectural design of the respective buildings and their surroundings. Contemporary theater studies, however, do not only, for one, draw a distinction between the architectural space a performance takes place in and the performative space, that is, the specific usage of said space¹⁹, but the discipline now also widens the scope of its research to include further spatial dimensions and their significance for the theatrical experience. Richard Schechner takes this even a step further: As Marvin Carlson states, the founder of performance studies emphasizes that also the space traversed when traveling to or departing from a given venue significantly contributes to the effect a performance has.²⁰ Accordingly, the previously described impressions of the journey to Belval Campus constitute an integral part of the theatrical experience.

That the small Grand Duchy ranks among the richest countries in the world is not only evident from afar but also when walking along the footpath leading to the venue, which is not directly accessible by car. Here, the audience members find themselves among the gigantic sculptural buildings²¹ and the creatively-integrated industrial monuments of the

16 See Andrea Gronemeyer, *Theater: Ein Schnellkurs* (Cologne: DuMont, 1995), 39–40.

17 Jens Roselt, "Das Gießkannenprinzip," in: *Theater heute: Jahrbuch 2023*, 64 (2003): 28.

18 See Marvin Carlson, "The Theatre *ici*," in Fischer-Lichte and Wihstutz, *Performance and the Politics of Space*, 22.

19 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theaterwissenschaft. Eine Einführung in die Grundlagen des Faches* (Tübingen/Basel: A. Franke, 2010), 33, 35–36.

20 See Carlson, "The Theatre *ici*," 22; cf. Richard Schechner, "Towards a Poetics of Performance," in *Essays on Performance Theory 1970–1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), 122.

21 In the *Allplan Blog* for architects and engineers it says: "The prototypes of sculptural architecture are regarded as the eccentrics among buildings. With their unconventional, sprawling forms, they have mostly come to serve as cultural landmarks all over the world: museums, arts centers, concert halls. Often they are deemed 'egocentric' and showy—which, however, is not always justified." ("Skulpturale Architektur: Exzentrisch, plastisch, einzigartig," *Allplan Blog*, June 28, 2018, <https://blog.allplan.com/de/skulpturale-architektur>.)

site, where, past water basins and eccentric light objects, they then reach the shiny, golden Maison des Arts et des Étudiants to be greeted with drinks in the airy foyer of the honeycomb-shaped building. Usually, avantgarde productions of the independent theater scene, which the production at hand can also be classified as in view of its experimental parameters, rather take place in less fancy or what are deemed alternative neighborhoods, given the financial constraints theater professionals from that scene are faced with. That this production was presented on the spectacular Belval Campus was, however, not due to a large budget: it was only because the project was situated within the framework of the Cultural Capital and co-produced by the University of Luxembourg²² that the performance was to have a three-night run at the golden Maison des Arts. And this “mental contextualization”²³ of the theater visit influenced the performance’s reception and the effect it had on the audience, since the journey through campus made visible to the visitors the past and present sources of the country’s enormous wealth as they are represented by the relics of the iron and steel industry as well as the banks and investment centers of a country that is widely considered a “tax haven.” As “the second largest investment fund centre worldwide,”²⁴ the small country promises clients from around the globe not only profitable investments but also numerous tax benefits, such as through letterbox companies. With “big corporations and billionaires [using] the Duchy as place to avoid taxes,”²⁵ as international tax investigations have shown time and again, this is a highly questionable practice that leads to inequitable taxation and amplifies economic injustice. Thus, depending on their socio-economic background and critical awareness, the place affects audience members in different ways: International visitors of the Cultural Capital program as well as the culturally-minded and well-to-do residents of Luxembourg might perceive it very differently from the people having traveled here to see the performance from French municipalities in the border region that are in dire financial straits, such as Micheville, Villerupt, or Audun-le-Tiche. While, in view of the impressive architecture of the surroundings, the experienced theatergoers of the first group were expecting a similarly spectacular avantgarde theater experience, the audience that had made the journey from across the border was rather critical of Luxembourg’s wealth and its display. A survey at the entrance showed that most visitors hailing from the French side had never before set foot on Belval Campus and probably wouldn’t have had a reason to do so, unless they themselves, a family member, or an acquaintance had not been interviewed for

22 As a result, the high rental fee for the performance space was waived; however, the project team still had to cover the nightly cleaning fee for the performance space, the rental of equipment, such as lighting and sound, as well as the fees for the lighting and sound technicians.

23 Carlson, “The Theatre *ici*,” 22. Elaborating on this, the author writes: “Theatres utilize space in particular and meaningful ways internally, but Schechner and others pointed out that they also occupy space, and the amount and kind of space they occupy and the location of this space within the mental or experiential map of a community or a city obviously will affect the operations of, and audience attitude toward, that theatre.” (ibid.)

24 “Asset Management,” Luxembourg for Finance (LFF), accessed June 27, 2024, <https://www.luxembourgforfinance.com/en/financial-centre/asset-management/>.

25 Stefan Grobe and Darren Mc Caffrey, “Steuerparadies Luxemburg – wo Reiche ihren Besitz bunkern,” *Euronews*, February 16, 2021, <https://de.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/02/16/steuerparadies-luxemburg-wo-reiche-ihren-besitz-bunkern>.

the play or were to appear on stage. In everyday life, not only do these visitors live at a distance from the affluent neighborhood, but attending theater or other cultural events is not part of their regular habits either.²⁶ However, one of the main goals that the team of *Remix Place* had set for themselves was to get people, who would normally neither go to the theater nor participate in a cultural event of the Cultural Capital year, to come to the performance and, thus, to the other side of the border.²⁷ And this was also one of the reasons why—among production-related and aesthetic considerations—the initial plan to present the play in a former swimming pool in the budget-strained municipality of Audin-le-Tiche was set aside. The aim was to avoid that the performance would become a kind of “social tourism”, where well-to-do residents of Luxembourg pay a seemingly well-meant visit to their financially hard-pressed neighboring villages. Such a visit would conceal just how much Luxembourg needs these “poor” municipalities and profits of them: due to high housing prices, many employees from Luxembourg now actually live there and make use of the infrastructure these municipalities provide for their children, including day-care centers and schools. In a presumably romantic scenery, such as the former swimming pool, picturesquely illuminated and surrounded by old trees, they might temporarily forget the social and economic inequalities they profit from, breathing a surprised sigh of relief as they exclaim: “What a beautiful place this is!” This imbalance, which the Luxembourg side is only too happy to ignore, was, however, an issue that was highlighted in *So mir: à quels lieux tu appartiens ?*²⁸ on the chic Belval Campus and that proved to be the dominant topic in the audience discussion sessions following the presentations.

Below, I will be referring to my recollections of the performances²⁹ as well as a video recording of the premier³⁰. Having been a member of the *Remix Place* team and, as such, closely involved in terms of both the artistic development process and the project management of the play, I thus write from the perspective of a participant.

The View of the French Side: “The Major” and “The Visitor”

While, at first glance, the interview excerpts included in the play seem to relate individual life stories and the personal opinions of various people from the border region—such as the account of a man who was forcibly recruited by the German armed forces during

26 An aspect that became apparent during the performance and that will be examined in the following in more detail.

27 The fact that admission was free also played a strategic role in that regard.

28 In the following, quotations from the play will be referenced within the body of the text using the Siglum SM: *So mir: à quels lieux tu appartiens ? Eine theatrale Spurensuche im Land der Roten Erde*, printed in this volume, p.2-76.

29 I attended all three presentations and also moderated the subsequent discussion sessions. The premier took place at the Maison des Arts et des Étudiants, *Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg*, on July 23, 2022, and was followed by two presentations, which took place there on July 30 and July 31, respectively.

30 *So mir: à quels lieux tu appartiens ? Eine theatrale Spurensuche im Land der Roten Erde*, script and directed by Monika Dobrowlanska, recorded on July 29, 2022, at *Maison des Arts et des Étudiants, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg*, streaming video, 2:34:54, https://videos.uni.lu/media/DOC-2022-07-29-RP-Theatre-Full_ST-EN/1_4vicjohe

World War II or that of a former officer of the so-called White Guards of Soviet Russia³¹ as well as the recollections a woman with Dutch roots, who describes her childhood in a village in the Minett region that was characterized by poverty and social exclusion—these accounts always extend beyond the personal. Furthermore, the generic terms chosen to refer to the people that appear in the play, such as “Local,” “Forcibly-Recruited,” or “Mayor,” point to social roles and superindividual functions and, thus, also to the fact that what is presented on stage is not “authentic” speech, even if experts do represent themselves on stage.

On the superindividual level, what is also always at issue here are intercultural aspects, such as the curse and the blessing of being multilingual or being perceived as “other”—and this often from the perspectives of those who are defined as such—as well as questions concerning economic and cultural affiliation and, in that regard, regional imbalances of power and the distribution of resources. The performance and the speech of 70-year-old regional politician Jean-Marie Piermantier, who is referred to as “Mayor” in the text, are thus probably the political centerpiece of the presentation: Piermantier explicitly links his personal life story to the effects the Luxembourg cross-border commuting has on the French side of the border region, and, in doing so, gives voice to the concerns and grievances that trouble many people in the French municipalities. But before taking a closer look at the content of his speech, what shall be examined in more detail is the staging of his speech, that is, the specific use of theatrical means, the constellation of the speakers on stage as well as their facial expressions and gestures since these aspects significantly influence how spectators perceive and are affected by what is being said.

Conceived as a station drama with spectators having to actively change seats or position four times within the enormous, rectangular Cube of the Maison des Arts et des Étudiants and to thus cross fictitious borders, it is in the scene with Piermantier’s speech that also residents from French municipalities close to the border do have their say. Whereas the other stations of the play are further characterized by a few set pieces and props, such as platforms, sheets of cloth, or a samovar, this location is the most barren of all as it is simply marked by three chairs set up side by side. As is the case whenever there is a change of location during the presentation, also here, the player representing the “Luxembourg-made woman” with Dutch roots³² invites the spectators in the main three languages of Luxembourg and, as such, of the play itself to follow her, saying “Kommen Sie mit ! Koomt mat ! Suivez-moi !” (SM 20). This transition and then taking a seat in “France” is accompanied by a wistful love song whose chorus line states “Ich halte fest an Dir” [I hold on to you]. It is performed live by the singer and actor Jill Clesse, who accompanies herself on the piano while, on the wall behind the three chairs marking the stage, a large projection shows over the course of several minutes photos of the Street Art-covered facades of residential buildings as well as of people looking into the camera

31 While interviews conducted with contemporaries as part of *Remix Place* provided the basis for the accounts included in the play, his account is the only one based on historical research and was compiled by the director.

32 Actress: Fabienne Hollwege.

in a friendly manner. With such an emotional and philanthropic mood having been set, the audience is then soon confronted with the matter-of-fact statements of the regional politician Jean-Marie Piermantier. He entered politics in 1989 and has held numerous positions since then: He is deputy mayor of Hussygnny-Godbrange, delegate representative of the municipalities of the Longwy Bassin, a region directly adjacent to Luxembourg's southern border, as well as councilor for building and urban planning (SM 51-52). Hence, Piermantier knows what he is talking about, and so he is literally talking for himself, that is, he is not represented by an actor. His manner is unassuming, but effective: While the woman who is referred to in the playbill as "Loner"³³ describes the advantages of her self-chosen solitude in French, Piermantier enters—a down-to-earth and, at the same time, energetic older man with gray hair, wearing sneakers and a colorful shirt—to walk down the center aisle among the seated audience members to one of the chairs, where he sits down and listens to the "Loner" with arms crossed. In a calm voice, he then introduced himself in French and talks about his own biography, which directly leads to the current political situation: He was born and raised in Hussygnny-Godbrange, a French municipality in the border region. As early as the 1980s, when the Lorraine steel industry shut down its factories, he, like so many other young steelworkers, started to work for the mayor company ARBED³⁴, where one was paid double the salary for the same work. Piermantier calls this the "Luxembourg phenomenon" (SM 54), thus referring to the allure of high wages, which has led to a huge increase in the number of people who, today, profit from the Luxembourg employer. Eight thousand cross-border commuters would leave their homes on the French side in the morning to work in Luxembourg and return in the evening to "our small village" (SM 31), which they expected to provide numerous costly services, such as before and after school care for their children, sports facilities, senior citizens care services, road maintenance, et cetera. Here, Piermantier laconically adds, "All this has its price and is not subsidized" (SM 56).

Furthermore, this cross-border commuting was also the cause for the staggering rise in real prices (SM 55) and the burden that families from Portugal working in Luxembourg placed on the village, whose children, in many cases, didn't speak French. There were no resources to help them (*ibid.*), because the French Ministry of Education didn't provide additional teachers. Later on, he talks about the dismal state of the French health care system due to the outflow of health care professionals as these chose to work in Luxembourg.³⁵ Piermantier speaks with deliberation and without resentment, and it is through

33 Played by Jill Cleese.

34 The acronym stands for *Acéries Réunies de Burbach-Eich-Dudelange* (United Burbach-Eich-Düdelingen Steelworks) and refers to a mayor Luxembourg steel and iron production company founded in 1911.

35 According to Piermantier, there is a staff shortage of 70 percent in the municipality's Mont Saint Martin Hospital. Also, as he adds, there is only one physician to care for 15,000 inhabitants across the five municipalities Thil, Tiercelet, Hussygnny, Villers la Montagne, and Saules. Incidentally, the German border region is affected by this phenomenon as well: Citing European studies scholars Florian Weber, Claudia Oberst writes that "the high salaries paid in the Grand Duchy cause[s] a so-called 'vacuum cleaner effect.'" (Claudia Oberst, "Luxemburg-Nähe verschafft Fachkräftemangel," *Zdf heute*, March 19, 2024. <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/wirtschaft/luxemburg-grenzgebiet-deutschland-pflegekraefte-mangel-100.html>.)

this matter-of-fact account that he makes visible the seemingly insurmountable difficulties that the small municipalities on the French side are faced with.

The demeanor of the “Visitor,” as the text refers to a woman in her mid-thirties, is, however, very much unlike that of the level-headed regional politician (SM 57-59). She is one of the “newcomers,” who apparently lives in France but has a strong affinity towards Luxembourg and who adopts a view that is solely focused on her own interests. The actress Stephanie Reist portrays this woman as impulsive and absentminded as she alternates between taking a seat on one of the three chairs and sitting among the audience. Every now and then during her speech, she pops something to eat in her mouth from out of her big yellow tote bag and occasionally forgets what she was about to say, remarking “Where was I? Ah, yes, Luxembourg” (SM 53). She states that she is dreaming of “somehow making it to the other side of the border” (SM 53) to move to the “place of her dreams,” the city of Esch, because she doesn’t want to live in France any longer (SM 53). In German, she then asks Piermantier, “Why did you decide to stay on the French side of the border given that you have always been in Luxembourg?” (SM 56). Piermantier replies in French that he is very attached to his municipality, since his parents had already lived there and that, in addition, he could never have afforded the same standard of living in Luxembourg.³⁶ Following that, the “Visitor” talks rather snidely about the French border municipality Villerupt, saying, “Well, Villerupt, for me, that is also poverty. Yes, people there don’t have a lot of money. The streets are dirty, the infrastructure isn’t good; all sorts of things. One can see that in so many things. The buildings are insulated poorly. So, there are many aspects, really many aspects that one could mention here. Villerupt is just a place where many poor people live, and the municipality itself is . . . [repeats this sentence in French]” (SM 57).

The pronounced ignorance of many “newcomers,” who themselves contribute to the region’s problems, is clearly emphasized by juxtaposing the two perspectives: The erratic demeanor and the superficial view of the “Visitor” is in stark contrast to Piermantier’s calm, unassuming manner and his fact-based reasoning, which has an educational element to it. Not only the theatergoers who traveled here on the occasion of the Cultural Capital year, but also many residents and “newcomers” might not be aware of the fact that the commuters from the French side, who work in Luxembourg and earn high salaries, do so at the expense of the French municipalities. However, Piermantier might not have won over the audience solely by the various arguments he presented and by his demeanor: The woman’s overly general assessment is also at odds with the introductory projection showing friendly faces and interesting place as it set the mood for the following and provided an intimate view of places and people on the other side of the border.

If, following Boris Groys, art can be defined in analogy to politics as “activity effective on the levels of inclusion and exclusion [. . .], as the decision on what is shown and what

36 Here, Piermantier states: “I was very much attached to the municipality—and I still am. I was born there, spent my childhood there. [. . .] Back then, in the 1980s, I bought my house. And for the price that I paid for my house, I couldn’t have afforded to even buy a room in Luxembourg back then” (SM 56-57).

is not,”³⁷ what emerges here is a political approach that addresses issues of equity. Although the notions of inclusion and participation do always come into play when “real people” appear on stage who would normally not be part of a theater production and whose views are thus made visible and audible, what the project *So mir: à quels lieux tu appartiens ?* particularly focuses on is making what is excluded from societal discourse heard at specifically the place where it is usually ignored. In this scene, this is the perspective of the “others,” of the French side, which is rarely acknowledged in the expensive border region, as is the case here on the Belval Campus.³⁸ At the same time, the example of Piermantier, who has spent nearly his entire working life in Luxembourg, shows that many of the French living in the border region can achieve a good standard of living by working in Luxembourg. He, too, is among those who have profited from the proximity to Luxembourg and enjoyed the advantages this entailed, whereas, as a mayor who has the general welfare of his community at heart, he has to focus on the disadvantages.

Audience Participation: Real Spaces, Breaking Theatrical Illusion, and a Remarkable Audience Member

Although conceptually, the production was meant to only include a few instances of direct audience participation, that is, actively moving from one station to the next and, with that, from one location to the next as well as a short speech by an actor addressing the audience,³⁹ there was, however, a noteworthy reaction on the part of the audience as the scene described above unfolded. When the “Visitor” talked about Villerupt in the disparaging manner quoted above, an elderly lady angrily stamped the floor with her cane, crying out that this wasn’t the case and that Villerupt was a beautiful town and not “poor.” Although the claims of the actor were in themselves removed from reality by the aesthetic setting and the theatrical framing, the woman in the audience couldn’t let them stand. She obviously perceived the performance less as art than as a social event—which, of course, it always is as well, since, as a performative event, it takes place in a real space.⁴⁰ This uncertainty is an integral part of the theater experience per se and one that is some-

37 Boris Groys, “Boris Groys im Gespräch: Zur Situation des Geschmacks in unserer Zeit. Oder wie der Schauspieler zum Ready-made wird,” in *Reality strikes back: Tage vor dem Bildersturm*, ed. Kathrin Tiedemann and Frank M. Raddatz (Berlin: Theater der Zeit), 29.

38 Also the mayor of Audun-Le-Tiche, Viviane Fattorelli, raises this issue when interviewed for an article in the weekly newspaper *Lëtzebuurger Land*: The municipalities of the CCPHVA [Communauté de communes du Pays Haut Val d’Alzette] were, as she says, “very poor” and communities of similar size in Luxembourg had about ten times their budget. To generate additional income was difficult, because 80 percent of Audun-le-Tiche’s residents worked across the border and paid their income taxes there. (Luc Labouille, “Gentrifizierung ohne Grenzen,” *d’Lëtzebuurger Land*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.land.lu/page/article/743/337743/FRE/index.html>.)

39 In her role as the “Luxembourg-made woman” Fabienne Hollwege addresses the audience one time, but this will be touched on later.

40 In that regard, Erika Fischer-Lichte generally refers to the event character of a theater performance which affords participants “a specific form of experience” (Fischer-Lichte, *Theaterwissenschaft*, 60). And this is because they experience themselves as participants in a process that is both an aesthetic and a sociopolitical one, a process “as part of which relationships are negotiated, power struggles are fought, communities are established” (ibid.)

times more, sometimes less present. In this production, as it draws on documentary material and works with experts, this experience is bound to be very much in evidence. At the same time, following Wihstutz, it can be said that the (theater) space differs in terms of its role from other social and political spaces, because “it is also an externally located heterotopia that can function according to other conditions and rules.”⁴¹ The theater space thus affords the regional politician Piermantier the opportunity to talk about the issues he might perhaps not have been given the chance to talk about on other, political or media “stages” in Luxembourg. Also the elderly lady found herself in the role of an empowered subject (and this probably on behalf of audience members with similar views) and, as such, enabled to influence the performance as it unfolded by commenting loudly and making herself heard from out of the auditorium. This uncertainty as to whether this is a theater or a “real” event also brings to light the fact that theater suspends everyday differentiations that usually provide a clear frameworks and rules for appropriate or specific behavior.⁴² It is an aesthetic experience that, according to Fischer-Lichte, corresponds to what, in ritual studies, is called a threshold or liminal state.⁴³ These states can lead to transformative experiences, trigger strong emotions and the impulse to act—it is, however, not possible to say with certainty whether these have an equally lasting effect as do transformations that are brought about by rituals (such as weddings, baptisms, divorces, sentencing, et cetera).⁴⁴ This is due to the fact that although effect aesthetics do aim at transforming actors and viewers—as is evidenced by, for example, Aristotle’s concept of catharsis, Lessing’s dramaturgy of compassion or empathy, and Brecht’s epic theater—they do not lead to a change in status. That, following the presentation, viewers did, however, contemplate issues they had not previously been aware of is evidenced by the lively and, in part, fiery discussions sessions, and this specifically regarding Piermantier’s remarks, which were, after all, intended to enlighten the spectators to the state of affairs.

The engagement of the audience was, however, not only achieved by communicating hitherto unknown facts established by documentary means, but also by various instances of breaking the theatrical illusion. In that regard, not only do the four professional actors but also some of the experts change roles on the fly: The three elderly ladies from the senior citizens home, who, at the end of the play, talk about their lives and their dreams in a laconically poetic manner, had, just moments before, embodied the “Choir of Bad Girls” together with three further players. In the roles of “school girls,” they portray on stage how the “Luxembourg-made woman” was bullied during her childhood for being poor and coming from the Netherlands as they deride her in chorus in three

41 Wihstutz, “Other Space or Space of Others?,” 194. Here, the author makes reference to a term that was used by Michel Foucault to describe such places and which applies to the theater in particular: “Michel Foucault believed heterotopias to represent specific, institutionally-grounded places, which differ from other places in our societies due to their space-time relationship.” (Wihstutz, “Other Space or Space of Others?,” 185.)

42 Fischer-Lichte, *Theaterwissenschaft*, 62.

43 Fischer-Lichte, *Theaterwissenschaft*, 61.

44 Rituals always lead to a change in status: a single person becomes a married person, a free person becomes a convicted person, a married person becomes a divorced person, and so on.

languages⁴⁵, dance around her singing derogatory songs and push her (SM 24-25). On their heads, they wear wreaths of black flowers while the young version of the “Luxembourg-made woman” (played by actress Jill Clesse) wears a white dress and a colorful head wreath as she is, sad and helpless, at the receiving end of the meanness surrounding her. Through the alienation effects employed—old women playing young girls and the indication that the events portrayed are part of a flashback—the scene takes on a nightmarishly disturbing and, at the same time, model-like character, which creates both identification and detachment. However, not only do the “experts” get *into* character, that is, they assume fictional roles, but the professional actors get *out of* character as well to, seemingly, become private individuals: In her role as the “Luxembourg-made woman”, Fabienne Hollwege asks the audience in Luxembourgish “Sidd Dir en realen Stackletzebuerger? An Dir?”⁴⁶ (SM 45) to then talk to Nickel Bösenberg, who had, up until this very moment, played the “Officer of the White Guard” and who now talks to Jill Clesse as she sits behind the piano in a seemingly informal manner about their respective biographical backgrounds and experiences of belonging. This constant oscillation between the different levels of role-play and performance produces a veritably Brechtian alienation effect, which, in addition to the evening’s rather narrative focus, may well have contributed to audience reflecting on and then also discussing what they have seen.

The “Cube” venue: experiences and rebellion

The production and the play did, however, not only address specific local issues in a place where they are usually ignored, but what was also addressed was the actual physical, architectural space the play was presented in as well as its affordances. It is situated on the ground floor of the Maison des Arts et des Étudiants and is called the *Cube*. Measuring 25 by 25 meters, it is a windowless cubic space that seems to extend upwards into sheer infinity. The space is completely empty; there are no partitions or rostra, and if seating is required, it has to be rearranged for the respective occasion. Accordingly, there are no wings or a backstage area,⁴⁷ and, with that, no spaces either the players (when they are not part of the performance) or the technicians (to ensure the smooth operation of light and sound without being noticed) could withdraw to.

These factors render the Cube a space where both receptions, celebrations, and presentation of large companies as well as raves can take place, but hardly a space for artistic presentations and events. Even with creative spatial solutions, installing the technical equipment required for an artistic presentation, additional spotlights (there is only basic lighting equipment available), and the seats for the audience, or even bleachers, requires con-

45 Calling her, for example, “Läusebock, Laisbock, Pouilleuse” (SM 24), a flea-ridden or also down-and-out person.

46 Are you a real Luxembourger? And what about you?

47 Carlson points out that, with her publication *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), Gay McAuley was the first scholar to discuss in detail the “neglected spaces both in the front and in the back of the theater house. The former she designates as audience space and the latter as practitioner space, neither so fully documented or studied as stage space or audience space.” (Carlson, “The Theatre ici”, 21–22)

siderable effort. Since the venue lacks an infrastructure such as an in-house technical department, which, in theaters or cultural centers, would be able to realize artistic ideas in a very short time, such tasks have to be outsourced. Even the team that cleaned the space after the performances had to be booked separately. Not only are the expenses thus incurred here very high, but in order to cope with the organizational effort, an additional staff position had to be created. In addition, even the smallest of measures to be carried out in the space has to be discussed with the Fonds Belval, the entity managing the site,⁴⁸ which is hardly familiar with the processes involved in realizing a theatrical production and which insists, above all, on compliance with its rules and regulations.⁴⁹ Usually, the production conditions of a theatrical performance are not a topic that is addressed in the presentation itself as these remain invisible to the audience. In a production that does center on the question as to how places have to be designed in order to create connections, this topic is, however, of great importance. But the production conditions described above do render the Cube almost unfit for artistic or theatrical productions and prevent lasting ‘place attachment’.⁵⁰ The complicated, costly and, with regard to project management, labor-intensive production phase does not encourage attempts to again undertake such a project in this location.

Also, a former student of the University of Luxembourg recounts similar experiences with this place as part of the performance. Other than that he represents himself when he delivers a very short, but nevertheless rebellious monologue, one doesn’t learn very much about the young man, who is referred to in the text as the “Rebel.” Like an unobtrusive and somewhat lost spectator, he, at first, sits at the back wall of the first station, where on the few chairs set up there, only one other audience member, a woman, has taken a seat. Albeit not accompanied by song but by evocative piano music, also this scene is prefaced by a series of photos projected onto the rear wall, showing rolling hills and small villages from afar. Those familiar with the area might recognize the Luxembourg and French border villages. The accounts of the players appearing on stage in this scene indicate that those are situated in the South of Luxembourg near the border. The scene begins with two players facing each other like antipodes on two rostra that are covered with white lengths of cloth: “The Landscape Expert,” who lives in Luxembourg (and whom Fabienne Hollwege, wearing a white hat and a red vest, portrays as euphoric and out-of-touch) and “The Angry One,” who lives in France (and whom Stefanie Reist, wearing a baseball cap and a hoodie, portrays as stifling his anger and pugnacious). As if standing on a hill, they look down on the landscape, with “The Angry One” locating Luxembourg City, the airport, the city’s Kirchberg quarter, et cetera. Already here, the ignorance of many Luxembourgers towards the French border region, which is a recur-

48 The Fonds Belval is a public body established in 2002, which not only oversees the realization of the infrastructure and the construction of the public amenities in Belval but is also tasked with facility management. (See AGORA s.à r.l. et Cie, “Fonds Belval: ‘In terms of amenities, we still have a lot to offer!’,” *Agora Blog*, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://www.agora.lu/fonds-belval-in-terms-of-amenities-we-still-have-a-lot-to-offer/?lang=en>.)

49 Furthermore, the space is only available for rehearsals at certain times, which additionally limits the possibilities of artistic experimentation.

50 It is not possible to say whether these conditions might have changed in the meantime.

ring theme in the play, becomes visible.⁵¹ Shortly thereafter, the scene changes to a pub in Esch, where a slightly drunk man from Portugal (portrayed by Nickel Bösenberg as trusting and overly sociable) talks about his life and his love for Esch, only to recommend the following to all people from Portugal: “My advice to all Portuguese people is to stay in Portugal” (SM 17).

After these initially contrasting (i.e. French and Luxembourgish) and then personal views on the places and history of the border region, the young man’s statements then create a tangible point of reference even for those who do not know the region. This is because he not only refers to Belval Campus, which all audience members traversed en route to the performance, but also to the space in which the players and the spectators find themselves in, that is, the Cube. And he does so not from a visitor’s point of view but as a student: From his audience seat, the lanky young man with long hair and a blue shirt begins to speak, addressing the woman named the “Local” (Fabienne Hollwege, homely, in a red dress and with a wash tub). While folding laundry, she cheerfully muses in Luxembourgish about the cleanliness of the facades in the Minette region⁵² nowadays compared to when the smelting plant was still active.⁵³ This is like a starting signal for the young man, who subsequently launches into a monologue in English⁵⁴ about the chic university buildings as a mere facade, complaining about the unavailability of these spaces for carrying out students initiatives:

When you arrive here, the first thing is you are amazed. You’re like, wow, wow because you see all those beautiful buildings, brand new, fully equipped, you enter a classroom, and you have computers that come out of the desk. You see like everything is clean and perfect. That’s like in a dream, but in reality, it is a flaw in the system. [. . .] If you go at the wrong time, you don’t see anyone. If you want to put posters on the wall, you cannot. Even if you want to make an event in the open space, it is forbidden. Even booking a room is impossible. [. . .] We had to remove it from Facebook and other social media. (SM 19-20)

With that, the young man thoroughly debunks the promises of the “beautiful buildings” (ibid.), the sight of which visitors might associate with a fabulous campus life. It seems as if students are not allowed to do almost anything here; even outdoors, self-organized

51 As the “Landscape Expert”, effusively talking in German, cites “the cultural heritage in Schifflange, in Dudelange, in Rümelingen, in Tetingen, in Esch . . .”, “The Angry One” indignantly continues the list with the names of municipalities located on the French side: “In Audun-le-Tiche, Micheville, Ottange, Russange, Rédange . . . [. . .] You know, to at least preserve what still remains on the French side in terms of heritage. To make clear that it was the same story for me as it was for you” (SM 7).

52 The Minette region in the South of Luxembourg is also called the Land of the Red Rocks, because the rust-colored soil contains high quantities of iron-bearing ore.

53 Here, the “Local” says: “Listen, the facades are clean these days . . . [*smiles to herself*] Once, Minette was this kind of area where you just couldn’t keep a facade clean. And the facades were always dark gray; and when I see one of them here now—ugh. There is one back there that is still kind of brownish, but it is really clean compared to when we lived here. Because then, the plant was still running [. . .]” (SM 18-19).

54 He is the only one who speaks English in the play.

events are prohibited. He then also remarks on the Cube, which had supposedly been created for the presentation of artistic events, thus confirming the experiences of the artistic team during the rehearsal period.⁵⁵ During his short, but sharp monologue, the young man remains seated on his chair in semidarkness, which symbolizes his not being seen in the public perception of this campus, but also the ignorance of those responsible for managing the site, of the Fonds Belval, and of the government representatives in general. Because these do not focus on the students for whom the campus and the splendid buildings were built in the first place, but probably on larger prestige projects. Gesticulating emphatically, the “Rebel” openly criticizes this leadership style in an agitated voice, not shying away from strong comparisons: “Dictatorship. I mean that’s a strong word, I know you shouldn’t use it like this, but that’s sometimes you feel like you have no power” (SM 19). His verdict on the campus and the Cube is harsh: “[I]t starts to feel like a depressing place [. . .]. [T]his building, for me, is like a fight” (ibid.).

What “The Rebel” addresses is the asymmetry of power relations which, outwardly, present themselves as cosmopolitan, generous, and beneficent, but are, inwardly, rigid, thwarting each and every student-led or creative initiative or, at least, hamper them to such an extent that one wouldn’t want to embark on them a second time. The flagship architecture of the Belval Campus, managed by the Fonds Belval, thus proves to be a monument to the country’s economic elite rather than a space for student activity or artistic freedom. That this is addressed by the young man in an angry fashion shows the subversive power of theater, which can turn against the elites even in their own spaces. As in the speech of “Mayor” Piermantier, what is demonstrated here is discursive sovereignty, which is also added to by including perspectives that had been left out so far. The emancipatory potential of documentary theater works, which often evaporates as it appropriates what is supposedly excluded or “foreign” and adopts voyeuristic perspectives, acquires a different meaning as a result of this form of inclusion. And this is because the production not only explores people’s ties to the places in the border region and conveys marginalized views to a broad audience, but also situates these in the very spaces that are at issue. At least for its duration, these hegemonic spaces can be reoccupied and critically deconstructed by the players who make their voices heard as part of the performance. In that regard, the production impressively attests to how theater can be made use of in the sense of a temporary space external to society, a heterotopia, in order to challenge dominant spaces and include new perspectives.

55 “This room, the Cube in the Maison des Arts et des Étudiants, when you first see it, [it] is amazing; then you think it’s impossible to use it when using it. You have to because you don’t have a backstage. You don’t have the right speakers. It’s very expensive, but it’s suitable for classical music and conferences but not for the theater performances. Still, it doesn’t work if you want to make an event.” (SM 20)

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