William Shakespeare

**Measure for Measure**

In 2008, Thomas Ostermeier presented a deeply moving production of Shakespeare’s Hamlet in a new translation by Marius von Mayenburg, featuring Lars Eidinger in the title role, which was celebrated all over the world. Now, the winning team takes its Shakespeare explorations a step further for the Salzburg Festival. At the Landestheater, Ostermeier directs Measure for Measure with Gert Voss and Lars Eidinger in the main roles. Michael Eberth talked to Lars Eidinger, whom Die Zeit has called the “actor of the moment”.
The Hamlet production with which you have been touring around the world since its premiere has received such rave reviews as if you had touched the nerve of our times. What happens to an actor who is the cause of such extraordinary hype?

First of all, I am happy that what we do is recognized beyond Berlin. Wherever we appear, they celebrate us as if we were the greatest thing ever.

Do people describe what fascinates them about the production?

In Moscow, they said that what I do as Hamlet is the embodiment of a totally modern type of person. That there had never been anything like it. They asked me if I was aware of the effect that has on the people who see it.

Could it be that this totally modern man is the narcissistic performer produced by pop culture?

It has more to do with the fact that I am willing to give a lot of myself when I am on stage. It impresses people to see somebody who does not merely display his abilities. They have the feeling of looking into my heart. I am lucky in that my phenotype is rather unconventional. I don’t look like somebody who people think does not deserve the things that go right for him, because they are jealous of his attractiveness. I do not conform to any ideal of beauty. At least my face doesn’t. Instead, I look a bit strange. I have this body which is not an athlete’s, but it is at least somewhat defined, and a slightly too female bottom. Actually, it corresponds to the Greek ideal.

If one plays a Hamlet in Berlin in which a whole generation recognizes itself, regarding the male image and the transformation it has undergone, one has reached the top.

If I had had my way, it would have happened a lot earlier. I am glad that it happened the way it did, but I wanted to play Hamlet from the very start. As an actor, you have to build a house, father a child, plant a tree and play Hamlet. It also happened at the right moment. Five years ago, I could not have played him the way I do now.

All the figures I have seen you play recently show a man struggling with the fact that he has lost his belief in love. The actor Lars Eidinger seems to convince his directors most in this type of role.

I found the key to these figures in Sarah Kane’s plays. In Cleansed, she uses Carl and Rod to demonstrate what it means to cut off somebody’s tongue, arms and legs, thus robbing him of any possibility of expressing himself, and to then say: Now show the other person that you love him. This raises the question of what is possible in such a moment. Whether it is really possible to experience love. Or whether it is a promise that is only fulfilled in transcendence. When I study her plays, I realize that my idea of love is influenced by romantic images which postpone fulfillment to the afterlife, and that I never experience it in the moment. The greatest proof of love is the statement: I would die for you. Sarah Kane turns this statement on its head by having Rod say in his dying moment, “That can’t be it.” She counters this with the question: what can you give me now? Promises mean nothing to me. I want to be loved now!
I notice that the romantic dream, to which my generation clings, no matter how often it crashes on us, has given way in your generation to great disenchantment. Why is that?

We live with the constant feeling of being estranged from ourselves, and that is why we want to feel ourselves live in the present. The Romantics were able to get intoxicated on their longing. They were less fixated on fulfillment. We want to have love’s promises realized in the present. We want to find an answer to the question whether it really exists: love.

As long as you feel safe and secure in a love relationship, you don’t ask that question. You only ask it when you have been expelled from paradise.

I cannot imagine that there are people who are safe and secure in a love relationship. That is an ideal. It is something that does not happen in real life.

Do you have role models?

Marlon Brando.

And among the living?

Gert Voss.

Do you travel to Vienna to see him perform?

Sometimes.

You resemble each other.

He came to see our Dämonen and said that he had felt as if he were in a zoo where they had let out the beasts of prey.

What roles will you play in the near future?

Thomas Ostermeier wants to do Measure for Measure with Gert Voss and me at the Salzburg Festival. Voss is to play the Duke and I Angelo. I have never had the good fortune to play with one of the older colleagues, like Voss or Bierbichler or Thieme, in order to learn something from them. I always felt that to be a deficit. And so I am really looking forward to performing with Voss in Salzburg.

In the portrait that Die Zeit published about you, Thomas Ostermeier said you had called him “Dad” during a rehearsal. Does that reflect your relationship?

I don’t remember that, but I can understand it. One seeks out people who can judge what one is trying to do. Thomas is the one who reflects me most accurately. He gives me the space in which I can be as creative as I am. I cannot draw everything out of myself. Two imaginations have to complement each other in such a way that the result is something nobody thought possible in the beginning. That is Thomas’ quality. He can make things happen which could not be achieved through instructions or directions. I notice that when I work with other
directors. In Thomas’ case, I feel that he trusts me implicitly, even if I make occasional mistakes. He watches me exactly and always knows when he has to affirm me in such a way that we can go on. I only do what I do to please him.

*Translation: Alexa Nieschlag*