

**James Skidmore**

Today I'm speaking with Brandon Woolf, author of *Institutional Theatrics: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin*, published by Northwestern University Press. Brandon is a theatre artist and Clinical Associate Professor at New York University, where he directs the programme in Dramatic Literature. Brandon, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

**Brandon Woolf**

Thanks so much for having me. I'm honoured to be here and to get to speak with you today.

**James Skidmore**

We're happy to have you. Your book – it's really quite an interesting book. You explore the changing nature of state support for theatre in reunited Berlin. It sounds dry, but you certainly make it much more interesting than what a book about funding policies could be.

**Brandon Woolf**

Well, I hope I don't disappoint today.

**James Skidmore**

No, I'm sure you won't. Some of these policies and their effects on the theatre scene, like the East Berlin Volksbühne that comes up in your book that suddenly found itself as part of a West Berlin funding system, these are interesting stories. And I found your approach to these issues singular, in a way, and really quite incisive. You argue that understanding performance as itself a form of policy can help us understand the way artists engage systems of state support. And you go on to say that cultural policy must be thought of as a performative practice of infrastructural imagining. Help me understand what you mean here.

**Brandon Woolf**

Okay, sure. So, as you say, the central project of the book was to explore how various artistic strategies might be employed to critically engage, or maybe even to undo entrenched institutional habits, infrastructural frameworks, and organizing principles. And to think about how contemporary theatre and contemporary performance might also do the urgent work of what we might call cultural policy, or Kulturpolitik in German. So the book takes up these questions, as you said, in the unique context – or I found it to be a really highly unique context – of post-Wall Berlin. As the new capital city redefined itself as the global arts epicentre it is today, amidst what I saw over those 30 years post-reunification [was] a steady proliferation of governmental agendas to dismantle Germany's longstanding tradition of state-subsidized arts. So what I try to argue is that these varied stages of what I call "neoliberal disavowal," this constant dismissal of this tradition of state subsidy, these varied stages that I track in the book in the wake of German reunification, also provoked a range of experimental performative practices, both on stage and off stage, that work to forge new kinds of relations between performance and the institutions that house and support it. So the different projects that I track throughout the book, they assume radically different forms. But I found myself – and we were talking about this before we started recording – I found myself really fascinated over and over again, especially as a North American, by the seemingly paradoxical scenario where theatre artists who receive public support in different ways make use of that support both to avow the administrations that govern from above while also working to transform them from within, from the inside. So in other words, theatre artists are caught in this position of being dependent on the state in all kinds of ways, and at the same time they're tasked – or often tasked themselves as artists within these different state apparatuses – with

using that state support to undermine the state in different kinds of ways. I'm happy to get into some examples of this from the book to make that a little bit more clear if that's useful.

### **James Skidmore**

That's a very good explanation. One thing that just occurred to me, and maybe you'll say this later, but I'll just ask you now: do the theatre artists themselves see it in the same way? Do they see themselves as benefitting from the state while also critiquing it?

### **Brandon Woolf**

I would say yes. Those were the cases that I found most interesting because there are certainly artists that go "I'm totally free" – or they find themselves constantly in this paradox, right? Where artists in the free scene will go, "we want to be free; long march of the institutions from bureaucracy, but we need to reform free-seen funding practices" which of course, are also taxpayer and state money, right? Or artists like Frank Castorf who, now infamously, after 25 years at the helm of the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz infamously instituted an aesthetic as well as an administrative philosophy based on chaos, really, throughout the 90s through the 2000s. So for Castorf, I think he only wanted to be in mesh in a big bureaucratic institution, right? Because in a way, coming from the former East, this was an opportunity to sort of sit within the walls of administration and undermine it from inside. And he spoke about this in lots of different ways. So for him, in those years after the Wall fell, the Volksbühne was at its best when right-wing and left-wing radicals came to blows during marathon post-traumatic performances, or when arguments in the Kantine that maybe came to blows downstairs drunkenly were just as interesting as the works happening on stage. Or he thought that in many ways, the state-subsidized stage was its most successful when it featured or promoted actively a kind of chaotic jumble of theatrical forms, supplement that are often contradicted by robust auxiliary dramaturgical programming – which was so not auxiliary that it's almost embarrassing to call it auxiliary – of concerts and symposia and films and lectures and political meetings from the left and the right, and theatre groups organized by the homeless, and children's groups with no organization, no adults. And I think for Castorf, quite explicitly, this chaos was a kind of dutiful and deeply politicized practice, quite conscious on his part of critique, in order to rethink and reorganize and even restructure the way a state apparatus could function from the inside. So that's one example that comes up in the second chapter of the book.

### **Brandon Woolf**

In a very different context, a group of interdisciplinary artists set out to question what might be the best kind of arts institution for newly gentrifying Berlin in the early 2000s. So they picked maybe the most iconic and controversial building that they could, the Palast der Republik, you know, the former centre of East Berlin, which was destined for destruction to make room for the erection of the now ever-controversial Humboldtforum inside the facade of the Stadtschloss that was built from so many years before. And these artists from Berlin's burgeoning Freie Szene, [meaning] independent or free scene, invaded the building in many ways. But of course with state support, right? In fact, the artists that were working on that were really responsible for activating the Hauptstadt Kulturfonds at that time, the capital city cultural fund, and using that money to erect a new form of temporary performance institution. It was amazing. They took this federal money and flooded the building, literally, and built this kind of performative water park tasked with critiquing the policy structures that were leading to the destruction of the Palast in the first place. And so you have these artists sort of situated and situating themselves in these really interesting circumstances at the intersection of policy and performance.

**James Skidmore**

But they got the right permits, right?

**Brandon Woolf**

They did; they did it with permits. They got the permits. [inaudible 00:08:27] won a number of prizes now, but these people that were organizing this have been at the forefront now since the 2000s of leading, cutting-edge institutions. So Amelie Deuffhard moved to Hamburg eventually and now runs the Kampnagel; Matthias Lilienthal, who was Castorf's dramaturg at the Volksbühne then went to really reinvent the Hebbel am Ufer and turn it into a kind of centre for Freie Szene work in Berlin. They were working within the rules but the rules, of course, permitted them to make this kind of radical work. And I always find that to be such an interesting place to situate this kind of analysis.

**James Skidmore**

It's fascinating. In your book, you look at the state-supported institutions, the more traditional institutions, if we can say that, and then the more free scene kind of groups. But you start the book with the story of the Volksbühne in 2017. I was wondering if you could tell us about the protest that occurred then and why you use that as kind of the entryway to your topic.

**Brandon Woolf**

Well, this is one of the wonders of writing a history of the present, in many ways. Sometimes you get very lucky and if you have the luxury to sort of wait around for it, the present manages to strengthen and further the arguments or augment the arguments that you're trying to make. And in my case, history reaffirms in a way what I was hoping would happen, even though I was sad about the [situation] – I wasn't a fan of Dercon, but I thought it was indicative in many ways of the historical argument I was trying to make. So just to give a little bit of context, after 25 years at the helm of the Volksbühne, as I said, it was announced in 2015 that Castorf would be replaced by Chris Dercon, who was a curator, a big art world star and a curator from London's Tate Modern Museum. And this was really a surprise announcement that unleashed a firestorm.

**James Skidmore**

Sorry to interrupt, but was it a surprise that Castorf was retiring or was it a surprise that Dercon had been named to replace [him]?

**Brandon Woolf**

I think both. I think the Dercon announcement came really out of the blue; and many people for a long time had been sort of ready for Castorf to step down. He hadn't announced that that's what was going to be happening. And there was all kinds of discussion about who might lead the most iconic theatre in Germany – maybe in Europe – in the 1990s with radical left politics and radical aesthetic, as I said before; really a totally different way of thinking about what a Staatstheater might be. And so, to bring in a sort of art world magnate set off a kind of firestorm because it started as a debate about competing aesthetic priorities: theatre versus interdisciplinary art and performance; or Berlin as a sort of international global arts epicentre versus Berlin as a sort of centre of German culture. These polarities erupted in the Feuilleton, but it quickly became a conversation about the future of the whole German theatre landscape. Is the German theatre, for instance, still committed to maintaining highly costly ensembles and repertoires and auteur directors with full-fledged state support? Or has the time come now in 2015 to rethink things and justify activities economically like they do in other parts of the world – in France and Britain and certainly in the US – and compete in a kind of innovation-based,

global economy of creative industry? And Chris Dercon's answer was unabashedly "yes" to that second question. He called for more flexible models in place of large "bureaucratic" apparatuses and elimination of the ensemble and the repertoire in exchange for a kind of ensuite guest artist system, much more like in the art world, of touring exhibitions. He wanted – in conversation with Michael Müller, the new mayor – to sort of rework, perhaps regentrify, the Tempelhof region of Berlin by activating the airfield as this sort of larger-than-life art community, [or] creative industry centre in Berlin. And was even interested in things like profit-motivated box offices and robust corporate sponsorships to fill the gaps of state subsidies.

### **Brandon Woolf**

So in September 2017, a real broad coalition of artists, activists, and it had been planned earlier, before [crosstalk 00:13:37] with the staff of the theatre about whether it was, from a labor perspective, fair to ask them to take responsibility for this theatre but also to stay on in the Sommerpause. So in September, which happened to coincide with the elections, which sort of brought out all kinds of [discourse] because this is the first time AfD gets voted into the Bundestag also. So it's a loaded political moment. Oddly, AfD comes down on the Volksbühne occupation, so they find themselves aligned with unlikely political interlocutors. But artists, activists, students, scholars, employees of the theatre, longtime fans, and community members from really radically different communities across Berlin occupy the Volksbühne. And they call this action an "active interdisciplinary performance," which is one of the reasons I started the book with it. But over the next six days, the occupiers sought to – before Dercon called the police and evicted everybody – they sought to rework the space of the theatre and critically reactivate it, apropos Castorf, as a piece of massive public infrastructure, really, to wonder what might it mean to activate it as a space of debate where we might also perform new modes of collaborative institutionality; where they might model modes of rethinking how public culture and theatre and performance institutions might be organized differently in Germany moving forward. And certainly differently than Dercon intended.

### **Brandon Woolf**

So for me – and this gets to the second part of your question about why I begin the book with it – the whole Dercon debacle seemed to me to call attention to the ongoing relevance of questions that first emerged after the fall of the Wall as Berlin was thrust, and also thrust itself, through a grand coalition government explicitly interested in austerity politics and nascently in neoliberal urban development policies. The Dercon situation demonstrated that Berlin's artistic landscape is still caught, in a way, uncomfortably between a shrinking welfare state and the emergence of what we might call an alternative ethos of self-administering and project-based creativity. So the rest of the book in a way looks back after the Dercon situation frames a set of questions that are active since the 1990s. And the rest of the book sort of looks back, beginning with the Schillertheater, and tries to historicize the conditions of possibility for this most recent crisis by looking at a number of different performance-based responses to, I think, this ongoing set of policy questions.

### **James Skidmore**

Yeah. The protests against Dercon and [his] vision seemed to bring to a head all of these issues or all of these irritations that had been in the Berlin theatre scene for a good many years, like 20 years.

### **Brandon Woolf**

I think it boils down to: how neoliberal can the city afford to be? Or how neoliberal does it want to be? And depending on how we answer that question, what kinds of theatre and other arts institutions are

necessary, what should they look like, and how should they function? And I think that's a policy question that's getting negotiated artistically in this long wake of reunification.

**James Skidmore**

Right. And where is Dercon now? Chris Dercon, is that his first name?

**Brandon Woolf**

Yeah, I think he's in Paris. He stepped down or got fired, it depends on which newspaper you read, and now I think he's running a big arts institution in Paris.

**James Skidmore**

Okay. As a focal point for your book, it really functions well. Another thing that I found interesting about your book is the use of literary and cultural theory to interpret the history you're presenting. For example, the chapter that starts with the Volksbühne controversy is entitled "The Arts of Institutional Dis/avowal." That's a term from Adorno that comes up often in the book. So I'm wondering, how does Adorno and Adorno's theory of disavowal help you make the point you're trying to make in the book?

**Brandon Woolf**

I mean, what point doesn't Adorno help you make or not? In addition to making use of the Dercon situation to historicize, as I said, a longer set of debates in the Berlin theatre scene specifically or the German theatre scenes specifically, in the introduction to the book I'm also trying to demonstrate how these debates might be framed in terms of a contentious set of conversations in the critical humanities about the relations between so-called culture and administration, Kultur und Verwaltung – which is also the title of this famous Adorno radio lecture from 1959. And for me, this lecture serves as a kind of methodological ballast to unravel what I found to be binarising or often even suffocating logics that unfold in these conversations between, say, state subsidy versus neoliberal reform; or bureaucracy versus flexibility; or overabundance versus austerity; or artistic freedom, like autonomy from the market in a sort of classic aesthetic theory sense, versus artistic freedom or autonomy from the state in a good neoliberal sense. And these things are sort of poles that tend to get mobilized in these debates. And I find Adorno's lecture really helpful for the ways in which he helps us to unravel this kind of thinking.

In the opening half of his lecture, he thinks about and examines how all artists and their modes of production are deeply reliant on – or even determined by – the material and financial supports of the varied institutions and administrations in which they're situated. But his dialectical or negative dialectical imagination also obliges him in a way, in later parts of the essay, to start to think about – and it's tentative – to start to think about alternative possibilities for administration itself. If administration is this sort of bureaucratic, domineering thing, what are the ways in which it also undermines itself? So he begins to sketch what I call this negative art of institutional dis/avowal. A practice or dialectical idea of absorbing that which is spontaneous or not planned into planning itself. In doing so, Adorno alludes to – though he doesn't specify what necessarily what it might look like – alludes to the ways in which an institution might embrace its own negation, how it might both embrace the reified tendencies of administration to which it's subjected. But also at the same time, might have opportunities to practice alternative forms of institutional organization that embrace its own inherent penchant for undoing itself. So he holds onto this sort of both and neither/nor. It's not just an and/but; it's [rather a case of] "this undoes this and, at the same time, this undoes this." And what does it mean to hold those things in a sort of, in a Castorf way, chaotic state of suspension? This methodological examination of artistic

critique as institutional overhaul seemed to me [to be] what Adorno gives us here. And the ways in which that conversation, beginning with Kultur und Verwaltung, have been taken up, that dynamic, that mode of disavowal to avow administrations that govern as the means of disavowing them at the same time, served as a powerful heuristic for reading this complex intersection of performance and policy in post-Wall Berlin that unfold in each of the book's case studies.

**James Skidmore**

You're right. It's such a good lens for helping the reader understand the nuance of the argument that you're making because it's not a cut-and-dried argument, it's not a black-and-white argument. And so the Adorno dis/avowal is such a good lens to bring together these competing frictions, if I can call it that.

**Brandon Woolf**

He provokes us, in a way, to focus and really turn our attention to these performances that lean on and into systems of state support. This leaning in, this sort of embracing administration is the means by which these artists seek to rethink and destabilize and even disrupt administration at the same time.

**James Skidmore**

Right. It's not just marching in the institutions or however that plays out, but getting in there and also dismantling them, I guess.

**Brandon Woolf**

Yeah, I think it's a different strategy. And that's why policy feels productive to me, because policy is inherently administrative. So what might it mean to imagine a sort of critical form of policy that undoes administration as it administrates?

**James Skidmore**

Right. Yeah, that's very intriguing. Another comment I want to make [is] that the book is really vividly narrated. It's really well written, and one of the jurors said it read like a crime story, which I thought was really an apt description. So I think that's really marvellous. I was also impressed just [by] the layout of the book. The cover is fantastic. Anyone listening to this, go and look at the cover of the book. It's really provocative. But within the book, you set off parts of the text with a Sans Serif typeface to separate [them] from the main text. Can you tell us about what you were trying to accomplish there?

**Brandon Woolf**

Yeah. Well, it was a long and wonderful discussion with the fabulous editorial team at Northwestern, both thinking about this cover, which has a big curse word on the top of the Volksbühne as a sort of sinking ship – which I hope in many ways, if one reads the book, [that it] sort of performs a version of the argument as well. But ultimately, my hope was that both the cover but also some of this typesetting that you're talking about was a means of demonstrating the book's methodology; of conceiving of aesthetics and infrastructures, performances and policies, together as inseparable methodologically. As you said, the book is broken into two parts, state stages and free scenes. And it was important to me that one chapter in each part set out to narrate a particular policy problematic. So beginning from the policy problematic in order to understand the performances that were staged in response and as proposed solutions to that policy problematic. And the other chapter in each part took a different methodological approach where I set out to close read a single performance in micro detail, and then the close reading sections are the ones that appear in Sans Serif. That set out to close read a single

performance as a kind of key to unraveling the policy problems bound up within the staging itself. So the gambit of this kind of formal choice in those two chapters, one in each part, was to underline or maybe even perform my argument that artistic work can do more than merely thematize or comment upon policy puzzles. It can also stage new modes of institutional imagination. So, in foregrounding these real micro bits of performance, what would it mean to read those as not only being like, "well, look at this policy problem out in the world; here's our discursive solution," but formally, we're staging alternative modes of engaging with policy in the first place.

**James Skidmore**

Right. Yeah, that makes sense. I found myself when I was reading the book really [jumping] into those [Sans Serif parts] because they really help crystallize a few of your ideas, I felt. They brought it together.

**Brandon Woolf**

Thank you.

**James Skidmore**

You know, books answer questions but they also raise new questions. And I'm wondering: what questions does your book raise?

**Brandon Woolf**

Well, my hope for the book is that the various forms of institutional interrogation and transformation that I look at in post-Wall Berlin specifically might have implications beyond their historical moment and give us new ways to think about politics at the theatre. One major question that guides me always in addition to Adorno, the late and wonderful Hans-Thies Lehmann, who is really a wonderful mentor of mine who passed away recently, I take this gesture from him: what might it mean to make theatre politically in addition to making so-called political theatre? So throughout the book, I try to suggest that aesthetic formations can't be separated from larger institutional and broader social context, and that formal experimentation, thought of in a more robust way, how might that provide us with different kinds of conceptual, artistic, practical means for rethinking and reorganizing our institutions of public life? That's one large question.

And I guess another question that I get at by returning to the Volksbühne in the epilogue to the book is one of the challenges I faced in writing this book over many years. One of the striking features of Berlin's post-Wall theatrical establishment is that a significant or dominant portion of the performance landscape in the 1990s and early 2000s was dominated by white and most often male artists, thinkers, and politicians. That is just the fact of the way things happened in Berlin in the 1990s, right? So at the end of the book, I try to wonder about what it might mean to extend some of the book central questions and commitments into today's pressing questions about difference, bias, and exclusion within Berlin's theatrical landscape and theatrical institutions, about the future of race and gender politics in the German art world more broadly. So, in reading the Volksbühne occupation from a sort of different slant in the epilogue, I try to explore and also provoke myself toward future work to think about that occupation and how this public performance demanded that we think about the ways radical feminist, queer, and anti-racist reorientations and reorganizations might serve as opportunities for both institutional as well as aesthetic transformations in Berlin and beyond. So in other words, what might anti-racist institutionality look like in the German theatre? And what new aesthetic forms might these new organizational forms enable beyond and, of course, in addition to more robust

representation for historically marginalized subjects? That's the central question that I end the book with.

**James Skidmore**

Clearly, those are the questions of the present, aren't they? Stages across Germany are wrestling, I think, with that as elsewhere. And speaking of books, final question for you: have you read anything lately that you want to recommend to our listeners?

**Brandon Woolf**

I heard that Netanyahu's is really good, but I haven't read it yet. But one of the questions I'm asking myself that, in an oblique way, comes out of ending the process with this book – and I'm in the early stages of a new project and I'm not sure what it looks like yet – about the relations between antisemitism and anti-black racism in German theatre. And different in the US, in which Jews have become white in a certain kind of way – though that is sort of recast into question now with Kanye – you know, the racial politics in Germany and the German theatre are quite unique, as we saw with the Mbembe scandal, as we've seen with Documenta. So one of the ways that I'm thinking or refracting some of this or combining it is with an interest that I have in one of the abandoned aesthetic capacities of performance, namely olfaction. I'm really interested in theatre and smell, and smell and fear, and smell and fear and race. And so I've been thinking a lot about this in terms of the ways in which there is no smell at the theatre, or smell has been banished from the theatre, and looking at specifically through the lens of garlic in Germany, and garlic and histories of antisemitism. So [there are] two books I have that have really helped me do some thinking on this. Neither of them are new, but [they] really took me by surprise. There's a book by Jay Geller called "The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity," which some of our readers might know. He's got some really interesting stuff on there on Messianism and smell, taste in the alimentary canal, and aesthetics. And then another book by Sander Gilman, which is even older, called "The Jew's Body," and there's an amazing chapter in it about the first Jewish rhinoplasty. So, as Freud is thinking about banishing olfaction or the way in which olfaction was banished in civilizations [inaudible 00:33:15], you have a plastic surgeon developing the first ethnic rhinoplasties and Jews start cutting their noses off as they start banishing garlic from their diets in order to integrate into German and Viennese society more. So I've started thinking about: what does this have to do with theatre and performance and long histories of moments in Germany in which [the question is] do Jews become white? If not, how might we think about olfaction and performance as ways of thinking about these histories?

**James Skidmore**

Wow, that sounds really intriguing. Good luck with that. [It sounds like] those books are made to help you figure out some of those questions. I've been speaking to Brandon Woolf, who is the author of *Institutional Theatrics: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin*. Brandon, thanks very much for speaking with me today.

**Brandon Woolf**

Such an honour to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

**James Skidmore**

You're welcome.