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Jewish Theater of Austria. Ein Interview mit Warren Rosenzweig

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Das Jüdische Theater Austria wurde 1999 von Warren Rosenzweig mit dem Ziel initiiert, „... einen zerstörten Aspekt österreichischer Kunst wieder zu entwickeln, zur Mannigfaltigkeit in der österreichischen Kultur beizutragen und um freundschaftliche Beziehungen zwischen Juden und Nichtjuden zu fördern.“¹ Das JTA wurde im Sinne eines pan-österreichischen Projektes als Wandertheater mit administrativen Sitz in Graz gegründet, um vor allem jüdische KünstlerInnen zu fördern. Die Themen der produzierten Stücke umfassen die Darstellung jüdischen Lebens und die Thematisierung jüdischer Identität: „Genauso wie das jüdische Theater in Wien bis 1938, beabsichtigt das Jüdische Theater Austria mit seiner Arbeit, ein unterhaltsames Medium für die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit populären Denkweisen und den Manifestationen von Vorurteilen und Bigotterie zu schaffen.“²

„Interkulturalität ist ein vielgeliebtes, viel gebrauchtes Schlagwort geworden. (...) Was Warren Rosenzweig, ..., hier etabliert hat, ist jedoch mehr als die Begegnung von zwei einander fremden Kulturen. Denn das Judentum ist für Österreich nicht nur eine fremde Welt, ..., sondern genau

¹ JTA, Flyer, Herbst 2001

² ebenda

so ein wichtiger Bestandteil der hiesigen kulturellen Identität. – Wenn auch ein verkümmerter, verdrängter.“³

Zielgruppe des JTA sind Juden der heutigen Diaspora aber auch Nicht-Juden. Spielstätten und Kooperationspartner sind u.a. das Theater des Augenblicks, die Theater m.b.H. und das Jüdische Museum der Stadt Wien sowie der Forum Stadtpark und das Schauspielhaus Graz. Zu den zahlreichen Veranstaltungen seit Juni 2000 gehören die kürzlich produzierten Arbeiten „*Weisman und Rotgesicht*“ von George Tabori und „*ohne Begleitung – ein Solofestival des Jüdischen Theaters Austria*“. Das Stück „*Der Flüchtling*“ des 1986 verstorbenen österreichischen Autors Fritz Hochwälder wird ab April 2002 auf Bühnen im In- und Ausland zu sehen sein und „*Compulsive*“ von Rafi Weinstock, das im JTA „*Solothon*“ 2001 zum ersten Mal aufgeführt wurde, wird im Herbst 2002 auf Österreichtournee gehen.

Über die Beweggründe, das JTA zugründen, seine Probleme, Wünsche und Perspektiven spricht Warren Rosenzweig im folgenden Interview. Das Interview wurde bilingual – in deutscher und englischer Sprache – geführt:

Der Begriff Jüdisches Theater ist für mich mit zwei Richtungen verbunden: mit dem jiddischen Theater – mit seiner ganz spezifischen Tradition und Dramatik, also einem Theater, das heute nur mehr wenig präsent und auch kaum aktuell ist – und dann einem ganz anderen Zweig von jüdischem Theater, nämlich einem Zweig des amerikanischen Theaters, den man als amerikanisch-jüdisches Theater bezeichnen könnte. Ich spreche von Autoren wie Paddy Chayefsky, Herb Gardner oder Neil Simon oder Aufführungen, die das American Jewish Theater in Manhattan zumindest

³ JTA: Ohne Begleitung. Ein Solofestival des Jüdischen Theaters Austria. Programmheft, 2001

noch vor einigen Jahren produziert hat. Wie ist nun die Positionierung des Jewish Theater of Austria? Welche Ziele und Absichten hat es?

When we consider the idea of making Jewish theater today, we can't really expect to fill the gap between the Yiddish and Jewish theater of the past and now. I don't think that making Jewish theater today in Austria is about continuing something that was destroyed long ago. New York still offers both forms. In a sense, Yiddish theater is museum theater. The audience that goes to see Yiddish theater in New York is one that suffers from continuous attrition. Smaller audiences turn out year by year. As the people who speak and understand the language die, the interest dies. The interest is two-fold: It's an interest in what was done in the past – the theater of the past – and it's an interest similar to that of Yiddish speaking audiences in Europe until the late 1930s: in coming together with a common language and a common background and seeing familiar stories reflected on stage. But today such audiences are older and are dying. We have to see Yiddish theater as a relic – a reminder of what came before. And while remnants of this kind of theater are still extant in New York, this is not the case in Austria. Perhaps the modern kind of work that you refer to as „Jewish American“ could also be called, simply, „Diaspora theater“. It seems natural that in the States, where nearly three fourths of the world's Diaspora lives, many plays are written that might suggest the label „Jewish“. Many of the artists who imbue their work with a strong sense of Jewish identity live in the States or in Canada, where so much of the Diaspora is concentrated.

So what exactly is the position of the Jewish Theater of Austria? What are its aims?

The Gentile often wants to know what it is, what it means, to be Jewish. To know about this aspect of identity, one needs experience with people who identify themselves as Jewish. But if there are no such people around, or very few, then a viable substitute is needed. Theater can provide this by substituting one kind of experience with another, experience with Jewish stories, lives, and ideas on stage. But another aim shared by most of my colleagues is the promotion of artistic work that reflects a sense of Jewish identity. The theater scene in Vienna offers a plethora of opportunity for creative exploration. But the idea of exploring Jewish identity on stage finds little support in the current configuration. Being Jewish in New York City is no big deal – something I take for granted. It's certainly not anything to feel uneasy about. But in New York, the diversity of cultural, ethnic, or religious identities is a welcome part of the social landscape. I wouldn't say the same is true here where one is often confronted in a negative way with one's divergence from mainstream conceptions of identity.

What about the plays? Can you find local plays here in Austria or in Germany or other German-speaking countries?

The industriousness and productivity of Austrian Jewish artists in the early 20th Century is well known. But the dearth of post-Holocaust Jewish culture includes a dearth of good modern drama. So when we look for quality plays written by Austrians that are appropriate for our programming, we're naturally limited. But we have uncovered some works that are interesting. We're currently rehearsing a play, for example, by Fritz Hochwalder, that will premiere at Forum Stadtpark in Graz in April. Written in exile in 1945, it's a three-character drama called „*Der Fluchtlings*“, about a man who must flee his country because he's been branded a representative of the wrong human type. This could stand as a metaphor for the decimation of

culture in the 20th Century and has its echo in the intolerant slogans and shibboleths of some 21st Century politicians. I recently introduced an exhibition at Schauspielhaus Graz called „*Verehrt, Verfolgt, Vergessen*“ about German-speaking actors who were known and respected before, but vanished from public memory after their lives were destroyed in the Holocaust. Playwrights and writers were also primary targets, right along with the rest of the intelligentsia of the time. There are historically renown artists who escaped the Nazi terror in Austria like Hochwälder, who are anyway now totally forgotten along with those who were murdered. It's easiest to forget when memory reminds us of the unsavory devastation of an era. We're also promoting and developing new works by Austrian writers. One production in development, for example, which is being written by the comic book author Harald Havas, concerns the ethical origins of the pulp fiction/comics character Superman and his creators.

This is more or less a more personal question: Do you have experience as an artist with Jewish theater?

No. None at all. I'm the closest thing to the opposite of an expert on Jewish theater. But I have experience in what one might call „theater of the underdog“, so it comes natural to me to found a Jewish theater in Austria. Being Jewish myself, I also identify in a personal way with the themes that our project addresses. I'm either a student or, at best, an inventor of Jewish theater, with no prior experience in the genre.

Was hat Dich auf die Idee gebracht, ein jüdisches Theater in Österreich zu gründen?

I was walking my dogs in Graz in a small, unlit, unkempt park. Just a patch of grass where other dogs had been before. And as my dogs were doing

their doggie thing, I noticed an object standing in the center of the park – a short, black obelisk – and wondered what it represented. But because it was so dark, I had to come right up to it to make out that there was writing, in Hebrew, with a German translation, on the sides of the monument. To my astonishment, I read that this crude little site for doggie business was formerly the ground upon which the old temple of Graz had stood until its violent destruction on November 9-10, 1938, in the so-called „Reichskristallnacht“. The monument had been erected in 1988. I was mortified. „My dogs just shit here!“ To think of the transformations from synagogue to inferno to the present use of this memorial ground. I went home, pulled out the telephone book, and looked up the number of the Jewish community of Graz. An acquaintance had recently mentioned the community, but I had had no particular interest at the time. Suddenly, I wanted to know: Who are these community Jews of Graz? Where are they? So I went and met them in person. They were a mere handful of people who, despite their small number and the small town they lived in, barely knew each other. They had a prayer room, but seldom came together to use it. Some were frightened – it was unclear why. I didn't think in terms of Jewish fear. But for several of these people who were among the few who called themselves community, fear was a factor in their lives as Jews.

What ages were they? Were they elderly people?

Mostly. They included people who were here before, fled, and, for whatever reason, had come back. Several were the progeny of Jews who had lived in Graz before the Holocaust. There are also younger community members who came to Graz for other reasons, usually through a love connection. In most cases, they've been there for years. But yes, it was mainly some of the elders that tended in the direction of fear. It wasn't something they discussed freely, and certainly not beyond the narrow

confines of the makeshift community. But then the good news: a new synagogue was soon to be constructed. The plan included a cultural center that would be housed in the basement. And I thought, why not also build a Jewish theater! The new synagogue would replace the one that had been destroyed, but what would be done to replace the culture that had been destroyed along with it? Would the synagogue stand as a mere symbol of Wiedergutmachung – a ghostly island of recompense? So I went around telling everyone that Graz needed a Jewish theater and that I was the one to build it. The theater would bring people together in a secular environment where research into Jewish experience would be creative and entertaining. People asked the right questions: Who would be our audience? Where would we get Jewish artists? What would be Jewish about a Jewish theater in Graz? But, in general, they welcomed the idea. It wasn't long before Graz community and cultural leaders including Mayor Alfred Stingl and the then city cultural councillor, Helmut Strobl, as well as the directors of theaters and other institutions expressed their good will and their intention to help. When I first introduced the idea to Rabbi Eisenberg in Vienna, he thought I was a little meshugge. A Jewish theater of Graz would never work. A Jewish theater of Vienna – maybe. So, determined as I was to found the project in Graz, but heeding the Rabbi's wise advise to establish a broad profile from the start, I decided to call it the „Jewish Theater of Austria – an international project in an intercultural Diaspora“. Graz was our chosen „Hauptsitz“, where our travelling theater was not only conceived but would also be administratively based, but it would be a pan-Austrian project with an international profile.

Wie waren die ersten Reaktionen?

Not all reactions were positive. Again, some of the elders in Graz, seeking to maintain the status quo in which Jews were invisible as a cultural

presence, rejected the proposal straight-out. I was told, „let’s not rock the boat“ and even charged with preparing the ground for the next pogrom. A condition of relative enmity lasted through the first two years of Jewish Theater activity and has only recently begun to turn around. On the opposite extreme, the zeal of several Gentiles who initially plunged headlong into the process expired almost as rapidly as the project took shape. Of course there are others in Graz whose commitment has been solid and stable – people like Heinz Anderwald, Erik Göller, and Kurt David Brühl, among others, who have stood by the project from the onset and are its lifeblood in the city of its conception. Meanwhile, a few people have expressed their aversion with surprising candour. For such people, the Jewish Theater is the antithesis of progress. I remember my wife and I attending a dinner party in 1999 where one of the guests, hearing about my plan to start a Jewish Theater, seemed to validate the concern about not „rocking the boat“. Dismissing my idea for the theater with jovial incredulity and overt contempt, he turned his focus to the plan of the new synagogue which he passionately opposed. There were no Jews in Graz, he said, „Und es ist gut so.“ A computer engineer in his mid 30’s, whose wife and 15-year-old son were present at the table, he went on to enquire about my curious interest in Jewish culture. When I told him I was Jewish myself, he argued that I didn’t *look* it and that I had no right to call myself Jewish if I wasn’t observant. It was when he turned to the doctrine of the chosen people and began ranting that there could never be peace as long as the Jews maintained such stupid ideas, that my wife and I slowly made our way. Talking about the Jewish Theater of Austria invites all kinds of responses and has from the start.

Wie sieht es seitens der Schauspieler aus? Wer hat sich gleich engagiert? Und aus welchen Gründen? Waren es die Ziele Deines Konzepts, wo sich

die Künstler angesprochen fühlten, mit zu machen? Oder waren es persönliche Gründe? Vielleicht kannst Du darüber kurz erzählen?

Most of the artists who were interested, whether Gentile or Jewish, greeted the project wholeheartedly and didn't need convincing that it had its place in Austrian culture. Nearly all the actors I interviewed in Graz were Gentile and, honestly, few had any interest at all. Some of the younger actors were ready to participate, but for strictly opportunistic reasons, so nothing ever came of it. I was looking for people who wanted to participate *because* of the Jewish theme and not in spite of it. Some of my colleagues in Graz had strange personal stories to tell, for example about how their families had done possible good or possible evil during the Hitler period. But there were only a few actors who loved the idea right away and fewer still who were ready or able to take part. For those who did, their reasons were varied – perhaps it was the artistic and social concept that attracted Erik Göller, whereas more personal reasons may have played a role for Hertha Heger. The important thing was, they were good, professional people whose commitment was sincere. Most of the Austrian actors who have gotten involved are in Vienna. Old friends like the Viennese actress Dagmar Schwarz or the singer Sandra Kreisler were immediately supportive and introduced me to other actors, Jewish and Gentile, who were equally enthusiastic and helpful. Other distinguished stage personalities like Miguel Herz-Kestranek, Florentin Groll, and Gerhard Bronner, to name a few, were generous with valuable advice and have participated or helped in various ways. I wouldn't even guess about the personal reasons of many of the fine artists who participate. The main thing is they're there.

Inwieweit schließt das Jewish Theater Austria auch Israel und die dortigen Probleme ein?

Our project is an international one. It seeks to send its work to other places, and conversely, to bring the work of artists from other places in the Diaspora and in Israel to Austria. If one perceives Jewish identity as associated with a conceptual „nation“, then Israel may be seen by some as a kind of conceptual homeland. The contemporary work of artists and troupes in Israel is important to me and to several of my colleagues, as are the particular trials of Israeli-Palestinian and Arab coexistence. We plan to invite Israeli talent to come here to work together with us and to share with our audiences their diverse perspectives on the successes and failures of a statehood that was originally conceived right here in Vienna. We can hope to understand better what's happening in Israel through the encounter of Israeli life and ideas as interpreted on stage. And we would like to travel to Israel with works created here.

Welche Rolle nimmt für Dich Theater im Allgemeinen und das JTA im Besonderen im Kontext von Integration ein?

One must have experience with the other to have understanding. It doesn't matter who the other is.

Integration bedeutet doch auch Verschmelzung: Eines geht im Anderen auf.

Yes and no. Integration is one thing, assimilation is another. There's a positive side to assimilation, but it can become tyrannical. If it sets a ban on the expression of Jewish identity, it thwarts the process of integrating cultural difference. If a cultural group feels compelled to merge identities with other groups, I'd say the process is more one of assimilation than integration and suggests a dictatorial conception that tends to divide us more than it brings us together. In this sense, assimilation opposes

integration. By integration, I think of people coming together while retaining and respecting a degree of difference.

So you consider theater rather to be a meeting place to learn about – in your case – Jewish culture and Jewish ideas.

We're only beginning to realize a distinct cultural identity through our work. The project is secular and invites the participation of a diverse audience and Gentile as well as Jewish artists. Yes, it's a meeting place, but also a kind of laboratory where we use artistic means to experiment with an aspect of identity. Its success as a meeting place depends also on the continued support of our sponsors which, until recently, has come mainly from the city of Graz and the province of Styria, along with a number of respected institutions and commercial enterprises. That's another vital part of the integration process – having real support from the powers that be.

Do you consider humor to be a means to transfer messages in that sense?

Humor is important for communication, and it comes naturally in theater, especially in Jewish theater. One doesn't have to look for it. It's just there.

Can humor be seen as a kind of link to the past Jewish theater tradition in Austria?

I think it can. If there are any links, then humor is probably among them. But especially the idea of laughing at one's own misfortune.

Earlier, you mentioned the problems you were facing within the Jewish Community. Did the work with the Jewish Theater of Austria in any way

change its attitude towards it? And in the case of the artists themselves, did they see their being Jewish differently through the project?

It wasn't really a problem, so much as a disappointment. We enjoyed the official endorsement of the Jewish Community of Vienna and of all the local community presidents in Austria, except in Graz, where our project was founded and where it was administratively based. The community in Graz has recently elected a new board and, in November 2001, we successfully cooperated on a small project together for the first time. I have no way of knowing the extent that our work may have already exerted some influence on how Jewish artists who participate perceive themselves as Jews. It has had such an influence on me. I've thought more about my own roots than before, remember experiences long forgotten, and am eager to learn.