

# Ruth Walz – The whole world is a theatre

An exhibition of photographs by Ruth Walz and  
selected works by Alexander Camaro  
Curated by Dr Sarah Hadda

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Grisebach, Fasanenstrasse 27, 10719 Berlin

“Monkey Theatre” – to the adult ear, this name has something grotesque about it. Such was not the case when I first heard it. I was still quite young. That monkeys must have looked rather strange onstage was a consideration wholly overshadowed by this strangest of all things: the stage itself. The word “theatre” pierced me through the heart like a trumpet blast. My imagination took off. But the trail it pursued was not that which led behind the scenes and which later guided the boy: rather, my imagination sought the trace of those clever, happy souls who had obtained permission from their parents to spend an afternoon in the theatre. The entry led through a gap in time – that uncovered niche in the day which was the afternoon, and which already breathed an odor of the lamp and of bedtime. One entered not in order to feast one’s eyes on *William Tell* or *Sleeping Beauty* – at least, not only for this reason. There was a higher goal: to occupy a seat in the theatre, among all the other people who were there. I did not know what awaited me, but looking on as a spectator certainly seemed to me only part of – indeed, the prelude to – a far more significant activity, one that I would engage in along with everyone else there. What sort of activity it was supposed to be I did not know. Assuredly it concerned the monkeys just as much as it would the most experienced theatrical troupe. And the distance separating monkey from man was no greater than that separating man from actor.”  
Walter Benjamin (trans. Howard Eiland), “Monkey Theatre” in: *Berlin Childhood around 1900*

## Point Zero

German theatre in 1945 faces an inevitable decision – it has to reorientate. Only: where is it going to, and where exactly does it come from to begin with? The place as Walter Benjamin had experienced it – the childlike collective amazement, the willing acceptance of a curtain separating the world of the “grotesque” from the world of the audience and yet declaring the actors its allies – has after the war grown into a venue for discussing social reality and political ideas. The innocence of little boy Walter is suddenly confronted with a pain “which throughout laments the irretrievability of what, once lost, congeals into an allegory of its own demise” (Adorno in the afterword).

**Ruth Walz** (\*1941 as Ruth Bertram-Nothnagel in Bremen) was born one year after Walter Benjamin’s suicide. Experiencing a completely different agreement between those creating theatre and those watching it, she will soon become the chronicler of the artistic turn of the times. After the collapse of the Third Reich, Goethe, Schiller and Lessing would still dominate the repertoires of German stages – equally to promote the country’s cultural heritage and thus prove the existence of a “better Germany”, as well as to atone for the historical guilt by its rebirth. So the search for a radically different form, or rather something yet to be named, begins. This very theatre, exciting and passionate, will ignite a barely insatiable love in the young Ruth Walz. But she is no director, nor does she sense any talent for stage design or

costume, she doesn’t even consider herself an artist. She is just a photographer, a craftswoman. At the end of the sixties, the mother of a then three-year-old son made her own money creating beer advertisements. In order to take up photography studies at the renowned Lette-Verein in 1967 – the same year the UN announced the “Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women” – she dropped out of her psychology studies and ended her marriage. Her creative profession, not least as a woman, would enable economic and artistic independence, but finally also grant her access to the beloved theatre.

## Emancipation

It may have been the synchrony of a theatre emancipating itself from the traditional forms with the personal story of Ruth Walz’s own emancipation which inspired her to a new, her very own, approach. The research work for Ulrike Meinhof’s film *Bambule* in 1969 reveals a lot about her understanding of photography, as it transcends mere documentation: Walz deliberately staged the institutionalized children and adolescents in rooms reminiscent of a theatre setting. The harsh reality of these girls, reflected particularly in their eyes, is colliding with the world of the stage, where dreams still seem allowed. This contrast is a distinctive feature of the exhibited works: Walz’s photographs are as aggressive as they are emotional – as if all of a sudden the mood might flip. Ten days before *Bambule* was finally to be broadcast on German television, Ulrike Meinhof participat-

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ed in the liberation of the imprisoned RAF terrorist Andreas Baader and went underground. As a result, the TV drama about the abusive circumstances in an institution for girls, to which Meinhof wrote the screenplay and Walz contributed photographs supporting the costume and stage design, was cancelled and locked away for 24 years.

### Loyalty

This early work also illustrates Ruth Walz's unwavering appreciation for every single person involved in a theatre production. Stepping back, staying invisible, she says, is essential for her independence. She intends to leave the arts to those in the limelight and those enabling the limelight to shine. Her goal is to capture what others create. It's the admiration for, perhaps even more so the amazement about, the creative act that permeates her pictures.

In 1976 she officially became the photographer of the Berlin Schaubühne. Similar to her approach for *Bambule*, her photographs added to the final impression of the productions. Actors/actresses and directors relied on her unerring eye. Robert Wilson would scribble and draw onto her prints – prints of photographs taken by her seemingly invisible and unnoticed lens during the rehearsals. Wilson and Walz both shared a mutual understanding of theatre and mise en scene: as long as the people in the pictures didn't recognize their beauty, no spectacular lighting or stage design would be able to veil this deviation from the theatrical ideal. Consequently, something needed to be changed!

In a similarly intimate way Walz realized the picture of **Libgart Schwarz and Jutta Lampe in *Triumph der Liebe*** (The Triumph of Love, Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux; dir. Luc Bondy) in 1985. Only the sharp precision of the two rehearsing actresses enabled Walz to document that moment. Another example of such precision is the iconic performance of **Jochen Tövöte as a ghost in *Hamlet*** (William Shakespeare; dir. Klaus Michael Grüber): anyone who attended the 1982 production at the Lehniner Platz will undoubtedly admire Walz's technique and timing. She managed to capture the reflection of the sparks in Tövöte's armour in spite of a thousand coincidental spotlights. Ruth Walz's devotion to her profession is reflected by the photograph of **Peter Simonischek in the dressing room of the elders of Argos** in an extraordinary way. When Peter Stein's *Die Orestie des Aischylos* (Aeschylus' Oresteia) held a guest performance in Warsaw in 1983, Ruth Walz had decided to join the costume set department alongside Marita Kaiser. That photograph once again is charged with historical significance, although its surface only shows two actors changing or going through their lines. The window in the centre of the composition clearly hints at a latent space. The drama on stage is as much a comment on, as it is an anticipation of, the dramatic political reality in the streets behind that window: the formation of the "Solidarność" democracy movement. Ruth Walz still fails to put into words how deeply moved the Warsaw audience received Stein's Oresteia.

Her later work as a freelance photographer from 1990 onwards, including the Salzburg Festival, the Wiener Festwochen or De Nationale Opera Amsterdam, passes on that same respect and loyalty, the closeness, and the love

for the theatre and those who make it happen.

### Friendships

Let me also point to the exhibits which colleagues and friends from the theatre donated to Ruth Walz; among which are a pencil drawing by visionary artist Robert Wilson depicting the second act in scene 15 of his production **Death Destruction & Detroit** (1986), the 1995 sketches for the stage design of Grüber's mise en scene of ***The Pole*** (Vladimir Nabokov; 1996) by French painter, scenographer and writer Gilles Aillaud, as well as Arnulf Rainer's over-painting, dating from the early eighties, of a photograph of **Bruno Ganz as *Hamlet***, which Ruth Walz originally had taken in 1982. Equally notable in this context of amicability is the collection ***70 Blätter für Botho Strauß*** (a 70 piece loose-leaf collection for Botho Strauß), initiated by Walz on the occasion of the author's 70th birthday. It contains large- and small-format theatre photographs by Ruth Walz et al., drawings, watercolours, sketches for stage sets and graphic designs for posters as well as figurines by Neo Rauch, Thomas Demand, Karl-Ernst Herrmann, Jürgen Rose, Moidele Bickel, in addition to texts, letters, stage notes and essays by Thomas Hürlimann, Michael Krüger, Wolfgang Rihm, Otto Sander, Udo Samel, Verena Buss and many others.

**Alexander Camaro** (\* 1901 Wroclaw † 1992 Berlin) created ***Hölzernes Theater*** (*Wooden Theatre*) one year after the war. The subject of all 19 pieces of the series, like all of his paintings of the year 1946, is the stage. Considered his major work, it ultimately founded Camaro's reputation as a painter. In the past he had worked as a circus artist, later accompanying the legendary Mary Wigman as a dancer. Wigman (actually a German) publicly performed her emblematic "Witch Dance" (the primitivist central motifs of which can be read as opposing the Nazis' race doctrine) before Hitler at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

Personifying the actors as mere clowns or Harlequins, portrayed in dull colours, Alexander Camaro's melancholic pictorial variations presented here testify to the absence of influential cultural figures and stage artists, evoking a faded memento of his vibrant circus background. By depicting the spectators as clearly recognizable figures on the other hand, contrasting the actors painted as fragments, especially in ***In den Kulissen*** or ***Parktheater***, his point of view and his grief become apparent. Camaro takes the look behind the curtain in order to find, if only a trace of, the beloved irretrievable, taken from him in the previous twelve years.

One generation onwards, Ruth Walz was able to capture the ecstatic, spectacular, passionate and unleashed soul of Germany's post-war theatre like few other photographers could. The essence of her art, and the key to her brilliance, lays in her skillfulness in recognizing an instant of real beauty. This is her way of sharing her immeasurable happiness about being a part of the theatre with us, the audience.

Sarah Hadda