

**Staging feminism(s) in Vienna's contemporary
theatre scene: a case study of *Die Wand//Wandbefall*
at Volkstheater Wien and *Keeping Up With The*
Penthesileas at Kosmos Theater**

By Marieke Wierenga

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Gender Studies

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in
Women's and Gender Studies (GEMMA)*

Main Supervisor: Hyaesin Yoon (Central European University)

Second Supervisor: Boriana Alexandrova (University of York)

Vienna, Austria

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Approval signed by the main Supervisor

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference. I further declare that the following word count for this thesis is accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 29,805 words

Entire manuscript: 38,288 words

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Marieke Wierenga". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Marieke" and last name "Wierenga" clearly distinguishable.

Signed: Marieke Wierenga
Vienna, 31/05/2024

ABSTRACT

Theatre in Western Europe has historically been a male-dominated and white industry and profession. The recent decades have seen growing criticism and resistance to gender inequality in the theatre landscape whilst concurrently, the rise of feminist plays reflects a global discourse on feminism in popular culture, particularly salient within the German-speaking theatre sphere. This thesis explores the manifestation of feminist strategies and debates in contemporary Viennese theatre, examining not only the thematic content of plays but also how respective productions convey their specific perspectives on ‘feminist theatre’ through an adaptation to and transformation of material/spatial, social and historical conditions to stage feminist content and gendered bodies. The plays discussed are *Die Wand//Wandbefall* at Volkstheater Wien (director: Olivia Axel Scheucher) and *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas* at Vienna’s feminist Kosmos Theater (director: Anna Marboe). Departing from Western conventional views of theatre as mere entertainment, this study positions it as a site for education, critique, and social transformation. Methodologically, it combines performance and narrative analysis, participant observation, audience reflection through autoethnographic vignettes, a focus group discussion, and interviews with creatives. Drawing on theories of feminist authorship and spectatorship and concepts surrounding gender, bodies and gaze, this thesis investigates how the discussed productions engage with and challenge the marginal position of feminist perspectives and gender norms in a Western theatre context and how the creatives define their own version(s) of ‘feminist theatre’. This includes the confrontation of historical biases and risks of further perpetuating stereotypes in a field that struggles to overcome its white, patriarchal history on stage and behind the scenes.

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1. Introduction

Theatre in Western Europe has historically been a male-dominated, white industry and profession (ETC, 2021). The recent decades have seen growing criticism and resistance to gender inequality and lack of diversity in the theatre landscape whilst the interest in and production of ‘feminist’ plays have increased. Discussions on the role of feminism in popular culture have taken place worldwide throughout the last decades and very strongly currently within the German-speaking theatre context (Leucht et al., 2023).

In Vienna, yet another man, Jan Philipp Gloger, was just appointed as the new artistic director for the Volkstheater, taking over from Kay Voges, despite half of the 47 applications coming from women (Affenzeller, 2024a). This decision comes to little surprise, considering that all major theatre houses in Vienna have had a history of white, male principals since their beginnings (Maus, 2023). Although the number of women working at Viennese theatres have increased, one wonders why recent discussions on diversity and gender quota (see Leucht et al., 2023) have not produced any significant changes in terms of leadership positions at the big theatre houses which, after all, determine the cultural profile of the city.¹ Currently, only one of the major stage houses, the Volksoper Wien, has a woman as a director, Lotte de Beer (Volksoper, 2024).

Considering this context, the thesis explores the manifestation of feminist strategies and debates in contemporary Viennese theatre, examining not only the thematic content of plays but also how respective productions convey their specific perspectives on ‘feminist theatre’ through an adaptation to and transformation of material/spatial, social and historical conditions to stage feminist content and gendered bodies. The plays discussed (in chapters 4 and 5) are *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas* at Vienna’s feminist Kosmos Theater (director: Anna Marboe) and *Die Wand//Wandbefall* at Volkstheater Wien (director: Olivia Axel Scheucher). Considering both places’ respective history (a traditional theatre house versus an ‘alternative’ stage), one can assume that the respective creatives had to navigate different working environments, work with different material and starting conditions which in turn might have shaped specific perspectives on and embodiments of feminist theatre. Hence, this thesis explores how the respective positions, formed

¹ The discourse on equality in the theatre landscape is, like in many domains, primarily discussed in binary terms. When sources speak of ‘women’ and ‘female’, the same or similar forms of discrimination have usually also applied to non-binary, gender-diverse and queer people.

through, e.g., state support and the consumers, are linked to the staged content and messages behind stage design, costumes, etc. I deploy ‘the body’ and ‘the gaze’ as lenses to detect a feminist ‘vision’ in both plays, created and maintained by a (feminist) creator-spectator-relationship. I examine how an institution and artform that relies on the presentation of gendered bodies in a designated space evaluates its own possibilities and limitations, especially in a Western theatre context that struggles to free itself from its white, patriarchal history on stage and behind the scenes, the homogenisation of its audience and the (re)production of stereotypes (Sharifi, 2018b, 50).

1.1. Contemporary issues in German-speaking theatre

One reason for the rising strong interest in the intersections of feminism and (German-speaking) theatre, can be traced to one announcement by Yvonne Büdenhölzer, the former leader of the renowned *Berliner Theatertreffen*, who introduced the *Frauenquote* (= women’s quota) for the biggest German-speaking theatre festival in 2019: This decision was met with both praise and criticism and debates came about surrounding the motivation and need for this step, which highlighted a dimension of ‘feminism’ in the performing arts that goes beyond its mere manifestation or representation on stage (Leucht et al., 2023).²

The *Berliner Theatertreffen* can be regarded a reference point for the state and acceptance of diversity within German-speaking theatre circles, due to its history, scope and reputation (Berliner Festspiele, 2013). It gives an insight into the social profile of contemporary theatre as it simultaneously demonstrates which stories, voices and bodies receive which type of stage/space, time, promotion and review. Accordingly, on-stage representation is closely tied to off-stage debates along gendered and racial lines.

Another reason includes the recent release of the documentary *Gegen das Schweigen – Machtmissbrauch am Theater* (*Against silence – Abuse of power in the theatre*) by the reporters Zita Zengerling and Kira Gantner, who interviewed around 200 creatives in the German-speaking film and theatre scene about their experience on set/behind the scenes (NDR, 2024). Their report

² With the 2020 festival edition, the *Theatertreffen* realised a women’s quota of at least 50 percent for the directing position in its annual ten chosen productions, planned for two years initially. Worth noting is the German terminology in this context. *Frauenquote* (= women’s quota) is used predominantly. Only rarely do I find the term *Geschlechter-/Genderquote* in German sources, whereas English sources employ *gender quota* more often. I use gender quota throughout this thesis as I find it more inclusive. The *Theatertreffen* quota was extended for another year up to and including 2025. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Laudenbach, 2019), Büdenhölzer explains that between 1964, the festival’s founding date, and 2019, only 11.7 percent of the productions invited came from female directors. There are fears that the recent decision puts the quota above the quality of the works. But Büdenhölzer considers the action to be more than symbolic: it would be a tool to inspire structural change (Nachtkritik, 2019).

uncovers various instances of violence normalised within a system of discrimination. The question remains why silence has become so normalised about off-stage abuse whilst details about perpetrators in this scene had already been public for years.

Scheucher, the director of *Die Wand/Wandbefall*, tells me:

I believe that [abuse of power is] a problem in all large institutions, but in the theatre or the artistic field it has escalated through a cult of genius [...] you are simply much more dependent on individual people in your career, which makes abuse of power easier [...]. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

The NDR documentation closes by asking the open-ended question to which degree perpetrators are to blame for structural violence and how much responsibility lies with other creatives, sponsors, production companies, broadcasters, the audience. I have seen various social media posts/stories on this documentation, confirming, sympathising with the message delivered. Whilst this observation is partly a result of my algorithm, it nevertheless proves the reality and urgency of this discussion and demonstrates the linkage between feminist theatre-making, institutional discrimination and the role of society/the *spectator*. Two plays that I watched for context hint at the off-stage dimension specifically: *Nestbeschmutzung* at Kosmos theatre (Kosmos, 2024b) and *Bühnenbeschimpfung* at Schauspielhaus Wien (Schauspielhaus, 2024), both dealing self-critically and self-ironically with the theatre as an institution that discriminates certain bodies more than others. Thereby, they respond to multiple incidents related to harassment overshadowing the German-speaking theatre landscape (see ETC, 2021; Leucht et al., 2023) which have shaped and necessitated the existence of feminist theatre, in theory, analysis, practice.

1.2 Aims and limitations

A major underlying question drives this thesis and will be examined more closely in chapter 2, the literature review: *What is feminist theatre?* By nature, feminist theatre resists categorisation due to its respective local/national traditions and constant evolving, hence, defining it is barely possible (Berger, 2019). Answering this question entails the issue of dealing with different understandings of feminism and theatre. Whilst ‘feminist theatre’ is considered necessary, it comes with risks of reproducing the patriarchal structures of conventional theatres (Aston, 1995, 22).³ Similarly,

³ I use the terms *theatre* and *performance* interchangeably whilst being aware of their distinction in the dominant discourse which is concurrently related to an imbalanced separation between a conventional/patriarchal canon and ‘feminist’, ‘experimental’ theatre/performance. This has also resulted in each side’s refusal of the ‘other’ whilst many

gender quotas are contested as their implementation is not rarely a reaction to external pressures, working in the same patriarchal, capitalist logic that created gender inequality in the first place (Leucht et al., 2023). Do these conversations find their way on Viennese stages somehow?

Creating a canon for feminist theatre would risk establishing a (counter-) model to the male canon “no more balanced or representative than the one we have inherited” (Schlueter, 1990, 13). Structural change within the performing arts, like elsewhere, therefore faces the paradoxes of representation: ensuring a place for feminism, either on stage or as an institution committed to feminism might enlarge the gap between genders rather than closing it and might reproduce the same issues of exclusion that one planned to challenge.

Additionally, representations in the conventional male-dominated canon that sees women as sexually available, coupled with increasing reports of sexual harassment, naturally questions the position of the ‘actress’ (Dolan, 1993, 126). Simultaneously, any theatre that rejects and criticises conventional, sexist representation is linked to this relation.

Undeniably, there exists a ‘feminist’ *tradition* of theatre, diverse in its respective approaches and strategies, yet united in the intention to make marginalised voices heard and bodies seen (Aston, 1995, 20). Rather than engaging in a biased, subjective discussion on what constitutes or should constitute ‘feminist theatre’, we should, as Susan Bassnett points out, be looking “seriously at the contexts in which [...] women were writing and the tradition out of which they wrote” (1989, 112). Whilst this thesis does not uncover the working conditions and situations of discrimination by, e.g., female and non-binary directors and performers in the Viennese context, it is linked to the above-mentioned reports and current issues of Austrian/German-speaking theatre that have found their way in/directly into the discussed productions. More generally, it presents the state of research on feminist theatre and the need for feminism on stage. Preventing a subjective, generalising definition, I focus only on plays that explicitly state that they are feminist and/or are directed from a feminist perspective.

I hope to contribute to studies on feminism in Vienna’s theatre scene, as these barely exist. The German-speaking research seems to focus on individual productions rather than on looking at performance through an intersectional lens, or recognising feminist theatre as an own field of

see the boundaries more fluid and the understandings shifting, also regarding performativity, theatricality, etc. (O’Hagan, 2010). I personally do not differentiate much between those terms but aim to pay attention to the individual usage preferences of the creatives, as I believe that their perspective on work terminology is related to autonomy, agency, identity and respect, similar to accepting their stance on the terms ‘feminist/feminism’.

research or making a connection between real-life contexts and stage contents (Rost and Schrödl, 2017, 16). Referring to interview data, I look at how the creators define feminist theatre for themselves, to which extent they can translate and embody these definitions and how these are linked to institutional and audience expectations which are in turn shaped by cast availability, education, Western cultural history, etc. For instance, both productions are shown in non-traditional, ‘unusual’ spaces: the ‘Dunkelkammer’ in the Volkstheater is a narrow, dark space and the Kosmos theatre is currently the only theatre in Vienna that calls itself feminist. Although I take the existence of a feminist theatre and the growing range of feminist productions as an indication that there is a desire for change in Vienna’s cultural landscape, I believe that their respective solitary fight demonstrates the slow pace at which the latter is taking place (Gerdes, 2012, 14).

Theories on feminist spectatorship (e.g., Dolan, 1988) inform my methodological framework consisting of play analysis, participant observation and interviews, through which I aim to redirect the focus from the mere feminist message on stage to the value existing in between spaces of performance and reception. I emphasise that this work should not be seen as an investigation into the success and failure of a production. The spectator perspective predominantly serves to demonstrate that feminist staging strategies often consider the role and/or presence of the audience, but rarely does performance want to provoke a singular reaction nor does it always want to create a certain message or inspire activism (Snyder-Young and Omasta, 2022, 3).

Due to Vienna’s reputation as a city with a rich theatre culture, a high standard of measures for gender equality (Bauer, 2009) but also a high number of racist incidents (FRA, 2023, 90), my research might aid contextualising the state of feminism in theatre culture in places that are less liberal. I build upon the notion that theatre is not only a place of entertainment and aesthetics, but also a form of education, knowledge production, criticism, representation of everyday life and catalyst for social change, further uncovering perceptions and acceptance of theatrical performances through their respective reception in society (Dolan, 2001).

In chapter 2, the literature review, I look at former and current insights from (Western-centric) theatre studies, demonstrating the extent to which terminology, history and other disciplines have shaped different understandings and foci of ‘feminist theatre’. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodological framework, followed by the analytical chapters, 4 and 5, in which I examine the plays *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas* and *Die Wand/Wandbefall* under consideration of their employment of feminist themes and staging strategies, informed by

(feminist) theatre theories and conceptualisations of spectatorship in recent decades. In chapter 6, I summarise the findings of the case studies and relate the creatives', other spectators' and my understandings of 'feminist theatre' to the context and implications of making theatre in the current German-speaking cultural landscape, as mentioned above.

2. Literature review

Since this thesis aims to detect understandings of feminist theatre in Vienna, the literature review focuses on (feminist) theatre history/studies, subversive staging strategies, the historical role of the viewer's gaze and the political dimension of theatre. I rely on critical theatre theory which has brought perspectives from semiotics, cultural materialism, anthropology, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, post-modernism and feminism together and aids the examination of 'feminist' staging and 'feminist theatre', of social constructs on stage and the creator-spectator-relationship. The latter also inspires the methodology of this thesis (see chapter 3).

2.1 Gender and spectatorship in theatre (studies)

Highlighting 'gender' in debates surrounding theatre has been an immediate result of a shift in drama analysis: Theatre studies has evolved as a relatively recent interdisciplinary field focusing on the literary/semiotic, material/physical, psychological, aesthetic, sociological, and historical contexts of performances. It has introduced the examination and relocation of studying theatre within its historical-theatrical context rather than its purely literary one and hence, deviates from the dominant text-focused practice in the fields of literary studies and criticism (Aston, 1995, 2). Whilst the playtext continues to be a central concern, theatre studies have continuously looked for different ways of reading it, which has given the field of theatre semiotics and its understanding of the theatrical text as a sign-system an increasing importance since the 1980s (Ibid., 4). According to German scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte (2012, 26), this shift towards body-centred understandings of theatre in the twentieth century mirrors a general reform in European culture that up until then had defined itself primarily through text and literacy, thereby creating a hierarchy based on demarcating other cultures as 'primitive' and 'Other' and drawing clear lines between elite and popular culture. Hence, introducing the interactions and presence of (performers' *and* spectators') bodies as concepts in theatre has potentially, indirectly, aided intersectional and decolonial scholarship.

This thesis rests on observations from recent research delineating a connection between gender studies theories of performance and theatre studies (Pailer and Schöblier, 2011): Gender studies have long employed a vocabulary of the theatrical (Butler, 1990; 1993), especially regarding gender as a performance, re/presentation (Goffman, 1959) and/or masquerade (Riviere, 1929). Theatre is considered to be particularly suitable for expressing identity through its inherent

aliveness and the physical presence, but also for presenting the latter as a construct, e.g., by exaggerating everyday practices in an aesthetically abstract manner (Fischer-Lichte, 2007). However, gender performances in theatre and reality are differentiated in that stage actions predominantly contain a targeted and reflected representation (Lehmann, 1999), while performance in everyday life is often perceived and practiced subconsciously (Butler, 1990). Both forms, however, are not fixed phenomena: performing, thereby constructing gender identity, is open to subversion once the repetition of gendered acts is recognised as something that can be broken. Butler (1990, 192) describes this as follows: “The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.” Arguably, this is easier to achieve by means of acting with an *intention to perform* onstage, considering the aspect of reflection, rehearsal and feedback behind a production. Simultaneously, acting presents natural, uncontrollable processes in human behaviour as controllable and thus its psychological, political potential ought to be treated carefully (Pailer and Schöblier, 2011, 8).

Another linkage between gender and theatre studies concerns the ‘behind-the-scenes’-dimensions. Whilst theatre turned out to be one of the first industries in which women were able to work a creative job, the relation between women and this profession has been overshadowed by misogynist remarks on a woman’s ability and right to act/perform and the precarity that liberal artforms have always been subjected to (Möhrmann, 1989). This is linked to the prevalent connotation of the arts with ‘the feminine’ which can also be related to historical views on the division of labour (Künzel, 2011, 242). Misogyny in the field has developed from the much-documented historical link between prostitution and (female) performing which itself has also been reclaimed to challenge the former (Pullen, 2005).

Through its interdisciplinary nature, theatre studies have brought forward crucial notions on the relation between performance and spectatorship, e.g., by twentieth-century scholar Max Herrmann who is regarded the founding father of the German-speaking academic field of theatre studies (Fischer-Lichte, 2012). Departing from a sole focus on literary analysis, Herrmann made relevant steps in theorising spectatorship and assigned viewers an active role not limited to their imagination, but characterised by physical, synaesthetic processes, thus *embodied knowledge*, taking place between them and the performers (Herrmann, 1931, 153). Such analysis is significant

as it uncovers power dynamics that can go as far as manipulation with impacts unfolding even after the viewing experience, giving art a political dimension.

Poststructuralist insights in theatre studies claim the dimension of spectatorship to be impactful not just within the field of theatre criticism – which is retrospective, specialised and largely passive – but always in the in-betweenness of performance and audience, in the latter's mere presence, shaping the performance actively itself (Diamond, 1988; Fischer-Lichte, 2012). This assigns each performance uniqueness and singularity.⁴

Cross-read with media theory and its detection of media's polysemic nature, it has been argued that the audience not only has impact but potentially has more power than the media (here: theatre) (Fiske, 1989).⁵ Hélène Cixous states that as a woman one could not go to the theatre, as this would mean being complicit with the theatrical frame oppressing women: "How, as women, can we go to the theatre without lending our complicity to the sadism directed against women, or being asked to assume, in the patriarchal family structure, that the theatre reproduces *ad infinitum* the position of the victim?" (1984, 546). The spectator's influence becomes visible especially when critical thinking produces interpretive resistance, e.g., in the form of refusing dominant messages through reinterpretations or deconstructions of meaning (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003). According to Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer (2012, 155), interpretive resistance should however not be overestimated due to its preponderant symbolic nature that would not automatically turn into material resistance and direct action or social change. Applied to a feminist play and audience, this means that these elements are not necessarily guarantees for structural change.⁶

Milestone and Meyer (2012, 165) further highlight that there exists a strong relation between the impact of media and the formation of gender identity, e.g., through many products' gendered or referential nature which shape mainstream discourses on gender-appropriate

⁴ Ideas of active rather than passive spectatorship, the degree of influence from the initial creator/artist and theories on perception and phenomenology (e.g., regarding the openness and reception of art) have been taken up by multiple scholars over the decades and include Jacques Rancière's concept of *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008), Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (1989 [1962]), Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1977) or Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences* (1997).

⁵ Theories on spectatorship have also grown out of a rising general interest in the role of the audience's consumption of popular media culture. Whilst a strong support towards the rather simplistic 'direct-effects theory' prevailed in the twentieth century, stipulating passivity and powerlessness of the spectator and simultaneously, media's uncontested dominance, the notion of 'active audiences' has gained increasing popularity among sociologists and media scholars in recent decades (Gauntlett, 1998).

⁶ Such critical perspectives have been of great importance to feminist studies on gender and media (consumption), uncovering the ways popular narratives have maintained patriarchy by fostering stereotypical gender representations that construct femininity and 'feminine culture' as inferior (Ang and Hermes, 1996).

behaviour, or the notion that gender is related to performance and performativity (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). Besides gender, audience responses and meaning-making have been related to various other socio-individual factors (see Gill, 2007). This hints at the complexity of studying audience responses and their respective role in challenging and/or (indirectly) reproducing stereotypical representations. Such insights are valuable for this thesis since a) they posit the spectator/audience as an active, intelligent and essential contributor to the socio-political relevance of the arts, b) both productions that are analysed here criticise and play with popular culture's dubious brandings and receptions of feminism and feminist figures whilst being a form of media, thus an additional source of consumption, themselves.

Feminist studies have aided this understanding of the 'active' viewer, e.g., through examining the subjectification/objectification of bodies, and taken it further to discuss the distinct role of the 'feminist spectator'. Jill Dolan (1988) depicts the feminist spectator as one with activist principles and stresses the potential to notice invisibility and marginalisation along gendered and racialised lines. Her work is largely inspired by French feminism's focus on writing with the body and centres the symbiosis of presence and desire in spectatorship (1993, 5). Dolan's insights mainly relate to the 1980s/90s US context but her historical analysis (1993, 46) of, e.g., the importation of Bertolt Brecht's *Epic theatre* (1964) can be somewhat subordinated to Hans-Thies Lehmann's notion of *postdramatic theatre* in the German-speaking context (1999) due to their emphasis on performer-spectator relationships, even though Lehmann moves away from the dramatic (text) and illusion almost entirely to foreground the phenomenological and aesthetic experience of spectatorship.

Such perspectives on spectatorship I consider essential to underscore the significance of my personal experience and methodology because they situate and explain theatre as representative of real-life social and political contexts through a focus on the staging, forms of communication between different bodies, between bodies and space and the (female vs male) gaze.

The latter has been conceptualised in Laura Mulvey's foundational essay on *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) which uncovers the binary heterosexual split of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" and puts film theory (also, theatre theory) in a psychoanalytical framework (Mulvey, 1992 [1975], 27). Viewing is accordingly considered a topic of sexual difference. Her concept of the *male gaze* has been applied almost interchangeably to theatre criticism. Mulvey (1992 [1975]) studies not only the process of consumption that 'the gaze'

encompasses but also the element of pleasure that it produces, reserved twofold to the male viewer who gets it from looking (*scopophilia*) and from feeling in control. Additionally, theatre does not offer the same level of ‘comfort’ for voyeuristic intentions like cinema: “the fact that performer and spectator occupy the same physical/temporal space makes more difficult the distancing needed for safe fantasizing”, as Forte highlights (1990, 263), which, arguably, also applies to the performer.⁷ The “problem for the woman-as-viewer, the female spectator, is how can she ‘look’ when the economy of the gaze is male?” (Aston, 1995, 39). Especially generalisations of ‘woman’ in traditional plays ask the female spectator to identify with a subject within an economy of male consumption which is often the girl of desire or the subordinated wife (Ibid., 39). A female spectator risks reproducing herself as an ally in this phallogocentric order, aided by male-dominated drama criticism (Ibid., 40). Accordingly, also the female spectator is silenced and denied subjectivity. It has been argued that an ‘active female gaze’ is normalised in Western society, developing from increasing displays of male bodies in popular culture since the 1980s, yet it is less powerful or prevalent than its counterpart due to the historical dimension of female objectification (Milestone and Meyer, 2012, 180).

Nevertheless, (theories on) feminist theatre practices (e.g., Aston, 1999) have challenged this mark of powerlessness which does not assign the female (or expanded: queer) body on stage any agency. Rather, feminist understandings of theatre and bodies as sign-systems have brought forward the notion that performance is always multi-authored, not exclusively created by the single (male) director, author, dramaturg (Aston, 1995, 28). Hence, after all, one should not overestimate the spectator’s power.

2.2 Feminist theatre (studies)

Jill Dolan (1988, 3) usefully points out that “feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse”, yet “the routes feminism takes to redress the fact of male dominance [...] are varied.” Regarding feminist theatre studies,

⁷ Mulvey’s points have brought forward a revolution in art criticism, demonstrating the intersection of film theory, psychoanalysis and feminism. Worth noting is that cinema can take ‘the gaze’ to its extreme as it has more room to shift the emphasis of looking, of exposing viewing patterns through cinematic codes (editing, narrative, etc.), controlling dimensions of time and space – more so than theatre with its spatial and temporal restrictions ever could. Yet, Elin Diamond (1988, 83) notes: “feminist film theorists, fellow-traveling with psychoanalysis and semiotics, have given us a lot to think about, but we, through Brechtian theory, have something to give them: a female body in representation that resists fetishisation and a viable position for the female spectator.”

this is further complicated by the latter's late emergence as an area of scholarship. It has relied on borrowing from feminist approaches in the related fields of film, media, literature, psychoanalysis, especially when it comes to deconstructing the mainstream male-authored construction of 'woman' as a sign system, e.g., in Brechtian, postdramatic and feminist theatre (Aston, 1995, 5).

One theme picked up in various contemporary feminist plays, e.g., the plays discussed here, is that of challenging *the gaze*, but also critically examining its theorisation in former (second-wave, white feminist) scholarship. (Feminist) theatre studies rely on a 1970s/80s context, e.g., on psychoanalytic explorations like that of Jacques Lacan's reading of Sigmund Freud and his conceptualisation of the *mirror stage*.⁸ Lacan's research (1977) on various ways of seeing draws a connection between the context of vision, (refusal of) identification with the images in front of oneself (in theatre with the presentation of a plot on stage) and the construction of identity. He expands on Freudian psychoanalysis with an aim to decipher the construction of the 'human subject' which has then been reframed by feminists for a model of analysing the construction of 'the feminine' (Mitchell and Rose, 1982, 5).

Another theme prominent in current productions seems to be the topic of female writing and speaking and how it corresponds or stands in contrast to more embodied, less text-centred understandings of feminist performance/theatre.⁹ Again, this theme has its roots in theories of previous feminist generations, including French feminist theory's discussion of '*écriture féminine*' (*writing said to be feminine*) and reworking of Lacan's concept to explore women's subjectivity within an imposed symbolic order, demonstrating the oppressive rationale behind the perception of the 'woman' as 'the other-from-man' (Aston, 1999, 199). Central to these theories is the construction of femininity and feminine language, the fight against the symbolic order, the relocation of the woman in a *pre-Oedipal stage* (Aston, 1995, 43) and a woman's return to her desires and sexual pleasures (Irigaray, 1981, 100).

Julia Kristeva does not speak of a 'female/feminine language', rather a language and 'theory of marginality' (Moi, 1985, 164). She is primarily associated with her theory on signification which is, according to her, split into the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*. In Kristeva's terms

⁸ A stagnancy in scholarship on feminist theatre has made it difficult to engage with modern understandings, as studies have barely been updated or looked at holistically in recent years.

⁹ This includes various levels of writing, e.g., an original prose text, its adaptation for a theatre script, a script specifically written for (a specific) theatre, a script about writers and writing, etc. *Die Wand/Wandbefall* is an adaptation and continuation (by Scheucher) of a drama text (by Jelinek) which deals with female/feminist writing (by Bachmann, Haushofer, Plath...) = hence, various dimensions of writing are addressed here.

(1980), *semiotic* describes the real *self*, lacking structure, internally formed, expressed through the body, in a pre-Oedipal, pre-mirror stage. Upon entering the *mirror stage* and adopting language, the child begins to distinguish *self* and *other* and encounters the *symbolic* (Aston, 1995, 49). This transition to the *mirror stage* is not final or fixed, however. Both stages are interdependent and merge in language, which represses rather than supersedes the *semiotic* (Ibid., 49). The *mirror stage* thus also represents a portal into a world of external impact and cultural meaning. Since the latter is inherently patriarchal, the *semiotic* (pre-mirror) stage has mainly been associated with the *feminine*, and the *symbolic* with the *masculine*, which is also why the Kristevan *semiotic/symbolic* order has been appropriated by various theorists on contemporary feminist theatre, in order to delineate the feminist return to the *semiotic* in the arts (Ibid., 49).

Kristeva is also linked to a discussion of female subjectivity and its alienation to and nonconformity with linear temporalities (1982, 35). In contemporary feminist theatre, the staging of body, gender, space and temporalities speaks to the general tendency of refusing the traditions of realist drama that favours linearity and the male subject: Linear time thereafter applies to male lifestyles more than it does to the female experience whose temporality would better be described by the term ‘cyclical’ (Aston, 1995, 51). Kristeva’s concept of woman’s time and return to the *semiotic* have found its way into feminist theatre theory, primarily forming a practice that refuses linear structures and ‘breaks up’ patterns of dialogue, character, style (Aston, 1995, 53).

Whilst psychoanalytic theory and theatre (studies) have been almost inextricably linked, also because Sigmund Freud conceptualised the Oedipus complex partly through being a theatre spectator (Turri, 2021, 3), psychoanalysis’ dominance in feminist theatre studies has been heavily debated. As Laura Kipnis notes (1989, 153), psychoanalysis’ influence in “current feminism could be seen as an epiphenomenon of a regressive tendency toward modernism, problematic inasmuch as it is part of a larger impetus toward the aestheticization of the political.” Its pre-eminence has been challenged by coupling it with historical critique that diverges from traditional materialist notions of the ‘social’, the site/sight of the female body and place history or the romanticisation of women as main characters within a phallogentric historical system (Diamond, 1985). The latter clearly does not support them, especially considering the limited ability of narrativity in representing the female experience due to traditionally having a coercive structure, a beginning, middle, and end (White, 1980).

I have listed these examples from psychoanalysis, since, especially *Die Wand//Wandbefall*

deals with the pre-Oedipal symbolism in the text and through the metaphor of ‘the wall’. The call for ‘woman to write herself’, *écriture féminine*, (Cixous, 1981) with its emphasis on transformation and profusion and its reference to the corporeal, provides a perspective through which to view performance and the relationship between performance and the written theatrical text (Running-Johnson, 1989, 179). Thus, to uncover a feminist perspective of the plays, one needs to realise that both audience and the creatives are spectators (in society) and that the staging is also a response to the expected viewing behaviour and gazes.

This ‘tension’ between feminine/female writing and the feminist approach of returning to the *semiotic* and the body (rather than the drama text) has accordingly also formed different approaches of analysing and theorising feminist theatre.¹⁰ Nowadays, materialist feminism can be said to dominate a modern understanding of feminist theatre (studies) as much of its attention lies in ‘the body’ (Rost and Schrödl, 2017).

Viewing spectatorship and theatre through a materialist feminist lens allows a broader understanding of ‘feminist’ as it sheds light on the engagement with feminism by any spectator, including the male one, and further attempts to break with gender stereotypes in theatrical realism by deconstructing “traditional, male-identified realism and alternative, woman-identified ritual drama and performance art for their belief in coherent, unified identities” (Dolan, 1993, 88). Various fields of feminist theatre studies remain in tension with each other, which, according to Dolan (1993, 90), further demonstrates how feminist communities employ censorship against each other, dictating the visibilities of certain bodies and voices over others. This is also discussed in both discussed productions, as they reflect on/criticise former generations of feminism.

As Elaine Aston shows in *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (1995, 5), the pioneering scholarship on theorising feminist theatre has occurred in America where the *Women’s Theatre Program* has given feminist theatre a national platform. This has still not found a strong equivalent in German-speaking countries. Whilst the dominant English-speaking field of feminist theatre studies has borrowed extensively from theatre concepts situated in German-speaking theory (e.g., Brechtian theatre) and made ‘feminist theatre’ an academic field on its own, the German-speaking context interestingly lacks this clear assignment and canon of ‘feminist theatre studies’ so far. Rost’s and Schrödl’s recent study (2017) bridges a gap between various national contexts

¹⁰ Scholars have identified three positions dominating the feminist theatre landscape: bourgeois (liberal) feminism (pro-realism, separating art and politics), radical feminism and materialist feminism (Aston, 1995; Dolan, 1993).

and links the feminist reading of Brechtian theatre, performativity (theories) and French poststructuralist theories to German scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Aesthetics of the Performative* (2004), the *Semiotics of Theatre* (2007) and Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). They highlight the marginalisation of gender as an issue in German-speaking theatre studies (2017, 16) and discuss that materiality in the discourse of theatre aesthetics does not only describe firm structures, like decorations or the stage set, but the appearance and effect of bodies and movements during their reception, which manifests in the interdependent components of corporeality, spatiality, temporality, sound, communication, etc. (2017, 2). Besides this study, a concept of performativity has increasingly been discussed in German-speaking theatre discourse since the 2000s, but less in relation to Butler's theorisation (1990) that features more prominently in the English-speaking theatre theory. My impression is that feminism in German-speaking theatre is mainly discussed within the field of *Postdramatic Theatre* after Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999), which has brought about a shift in research interest from the *semiotic* to the *phenomenal* and emphasises the unrepeatable character and aesthetics of theatre (and gender) performance.

As previously mentioned, gender performance on stage is not comparable to the focus on *iteration* in Butler's notion on performativity (Rost and Schrödl, 2017, 5). The fact that there is no large field for feminist theatre studies in the German-speaking context is not necessarily a disadvantage. Perhaps, it offers scope to escape the dilemma of reproductions that feminist theatre as an alternative to conventional theatre with its own institutional character often entails. However, there is a need for revision as such cross-cultural gaps have prevented the visibility of German-speaking feminist theatre and its scholarship itself: Lehmann and Fischer-Lichte, pioneers in the German-speaking theatre context, do not even thematise 'gender' as a crucial category (Rost and Schrödl, 2017, 16). Cara Berger (2019, 423) also notes that, unlike Brechtian theatre, Lehmann's work has interestingly not been recognised in the international context yet, due to its late translation into English in 2006. Besides noting these gaps in the international network of feminist theatre scholarship, Berger (2019, 423) points out that the latter is outdated in general, having had its peak in the 1980s/90s and remained stagnant afterwards. Therefore, theatre scholarship needs revision globally, particularly considering the ever-changing socio-political conditions of feminist theatre-making that always create new themes of contemporary relevance (such as commodity feminism and female subjectification in the plays discussed here). The marginalisation of feminism in the

German-speaking theatre field arguably also shapes the individual creators' perspectives and relation to it.

2.3 Feminist theatre practice and staging

As mentioned in the introduction, feminist theatre as such is neither definable nor categorisable. Jeanie Forte (1990) shows how women's performance art in general resists these attempts yet has been a recognisable genre since the 1960s due to its inherently political nature and deconstructive intent. She also frames the use and abuse of spaces by performance artists as an anti-patriarchal, deconstructive act (Ibid., 251). Applied to feminist theatres, this includes the unconventional space use and the understanding of performance as a metaphor rooted in its own very real experience of 'the personal is political'. The latter manifestation would not just be pushed for demands on equal pay but primarily as a strategy to challenge the language and sign-systems defining women's oppression (Ibid., 252).

This relates to the subversive potential of staging strategies. Generally, theatre can be said to be critical of social constructions by breaking up, e.g., binarities of masculinity and femininity through cross-dressing. It is worth remembering that the latter is not inherent to feminist theatre but was central to early and medieval theatre traditions globally, such as English Renaissance theatre (Clark and Sponsler, 1997). Ironically, however, cross-gender acting has also stood for women's oppression and lack of rights in that time and less for progress disrupting gender distinction, as the theatre was regarded a fictional place and thus reinforced a monolithic patriarchal system (Ibid., 1997).

Further, theatre employs social constructs directly and indirectly by challenging them in front of an audience. This makes it difficult for both sides to imagine a world beyond such constructs. It gets even more complicated when theatrical performance makes active use of popular media familiar to the spectator as then a connection to it and its gendered nature has already solidified. In that case, the viewing behaviour and gaze of the spectator are thrown back at them, opening up space for reflection and discussion.

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993, 26), Peggy Phelan reflects on visibility politics and the dilemmas of representation through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic theory. She argues that overturning representational economies through inviting more diversity cannot be productive as long as "the image of the other can be other-than a cipher for a looking self" with the inward gaze failing to be reflective. The latter would require recognising the "nonvisible,

rhetorically unmarked aspects of identity, and a greater willingness to accept the impotency of the inward gaze” (Ibid., 26). The in/visibilities and temporalities of performances also create paradoxes in performance analysis due to its attempt to capture something *nonreproductive*, aka the inherent differences between each repetition of a performance, which is by nature not specifiable or analysable (Ibid., 27). Whilst theatre might not be able to refute this argument, it does make the spectator’s gaze a central element, an actor, when executing social critique and asking open-ended questions. This also relates to the spatial possibilities of staging, what can be seen from which seat, and what cannot be seen. As Phelan points out, “representation is almost always on the side of the one who looks and almost never on the side of the one who is seen” (1993, 25–26). Spectatorship and its socio-political consequences, the action it might stir in the spectator during and after the performance, might thus be feminist theatre’s most valuable asset whilst it does not necessarily or directly change anything for the represented people/topic. For instance, *Keeping Up With the Penthesileas* makes society’s gaze a character of the play, criticises not only the Kardashians’ (self-)marketing and branding strategies, but also the often misogynist backlash of society and the media they receive, the differences between receptions of actions by people read as male and people read as female. Worldwide (to different degrees), a woman remains subject to intense scrutiny whenever she does (or does not do) something, e.g., about her looks: She is an *object-to-be-looked-at* in all forms of political discussion and cultural and creative expression, from early paintings to modern-day pornography (Aston, 1995, 39).

Barbara Freedman (1990, 56) demonstrates how one central challenge is to apply the phallogocentric vocabulary of psychoanalytical theories to (re)imagine a “feminist, anoedipal theatre”. Due to changing views on the construction of masculinity and femininity, feminist theatre ought to disengage from Western traditional theatre and its reliance on dividing drama into a binary construct of *comic and tragic*, as well as navigate the contradiction of reframing the construction of the subject in a space that is determined/limited by its own frames onstage (Freedman, 1990, 56). Exploring the question, “Is a feminist deconstructive theatre possible?”, Freedman (1990, 60) points to Lacan’s failed attempt at subverting phallocentrism and highlights the paradoxes of countering the cultural reproduction of castration, phallic signifiers, sexual difference whilst already being part of it. She also reminds us, however, that this discourse rests on the symbolic (structure of the phallus) and is thus open to change, especially through a “disruptive potential of the theatrical gaze” that can be aided by Brechtian strategies of audience interaction (1990, 66).

Freedman (1990, 74) further highlights how theatre is not bound to the paradox of frame and gaze, rather it can stage this frame so as to subvert it: “Unlike feminism and psychoanalysis, theatre has no allegiance but to ambivalence, to a compulsion to subvert its own gaze, to split itself through a reflected image [...it] is quintessentially deconstructive.”

Ellie Ragland-Sullivan (1984, 268) summarises the feminist potential of reversing the current symbolic order as follows: “We must remember that the Symbolic here does not mean anything representative of a second hidden thing or essence. Rather it refers to that order whose principal function is to mediate between the Imaginary order and the Real.” Certainly, this depends on the viewer’s reflection on their spectatorship as well as on the possibility to manipulate the viewer’s gaze temporarily into believing something extraordinary, such as a reversal of gender roles, a matriarchy, etc.

Josette Feral (1982, 176) supports the idea that feminist theatre can acknowledge the symbolic whilst disrupting it from within, yet only when theatre is a mixture of theatre/drama and performance: “in its [...] exploration of the body, and its joining of time and space, performance gives us a kind of theatricality in slow motion [...]. Performance explores the under-side of that theatre.” A characteristic that applies to much feminist theatre nowadays is certainly this focus on ‘performance’. Yet, the fact that theatre and performance are still distinguished and that the latter is often regarded as ‘other’ to the conventional canon, as shaped (therefore, to some, also limited) by the fine arts and popular culture still shows a tense, binary, imbalanced relationship of practitioners in the field of theatre (Carlson, 2004).¹¹

Regarding (subversive) staging with socio-political relevance, contemporary scholarship highlights two approaches predominantly: postdramatic theatre in the German-speaking discourse (increasingly more in the international context, too) and Brechtian theatre in both the German-speaking and English-speaking discourse. Since feminists have appropriated Brechtian theory for a long time (see Diamond, 1988) but *postdramatic theatre* has only recently been related to categories of gender and feminism (Rost and Schrödl, 2017), sees itself as post-Brechtian and/or not clearly defined (Lehmann, 1999, 48), my analysis aims to consider both approaches, as these are also representative for the specific generational contexts of the plays. To me, a feminist reading of Brecht comes closest to dominant understandings of *postdramatic theatre* and I argue that a feminist reading of postdramatic theatre will increasingly shape feminist theatre in the years to

¹¹ See also footnote 3.

come.

Elaine Aston, in her comprehensive work *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (1999, 12), identifies a “materialist-feminist theorisation of representation combine[d] with a feminist re-visioning of a Brechtian-based, materialist practice” as a unifier of most feminist theatre practices.¹² As Elin Diamond summarises in her seminal, much-circulated essay *Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory* (1988, 84), Brechtian theatre draws attention to its staging through, e.g., episodic narratives, visible ruptures and stage changes, thus does not emphasise an element of illusion. Thereby it also shows ‘the body’ on stage as “paradoxically available for *both* analysis and identification, paradoxically within representation while refusing its fixity” (Ibid., 89). Brecht (1964) uses the term *Gestus* to describe the human body as a mirror of social hierarchies, historical changes and alienation of labour inscribed on bodies – the character of society becomes visible in the actor’s body. Brechtian theatre dismisses approaches from the theatre fields of naturalism and realism. This strong rejection might at first seem contradictory to the feminist scholar: After all, realism, with its focus on everyday life and realistic, believable characters mirrors feminist calls for political content and representation, yet it also gives the impression that all issues are representable, all bodies readable within a fixed historicisation (Diamond, 1988, 87). The intention to make a set or a dialogue ‘realistic’ works with the assumption that there exists a standard idea of realism for each of these elements which is modelled on the dominant, thus patriarchal, norms of culture and language.

In her work *Unmaking mimesis: essays on feminism and theatre* (1997), Diamond relates this refusal of realism in contemporary theatre to a feminist reading of psychoanalytical theories on mimesis. She explains how a ‘realistic’ staging is impossible as there is more to signifier/signified relationships than their obvious one-to-one correspondence, e.g., meaning and signification (Ibid., iv). She links this to Jacques Derrida’s coinage of *phallogocentrism*, following Jacques Lacan’s concept of the phallus as a signifier structuring our social symbolic order, and his claim that the latter works through a contingent, semiotic simulation (Ibid., iv).

Brecht’s *Epic Theatre* aims to draw in viewers just enough to evoke emotions whilst not manipulating them. His theatre has a political dimension, speaks to a proletarian, rather than a

¹² As her work is 25 years old, it is time for an updated examination of feminist theatre. As said before, the scholarship suffers from stagnancy in that regard. My analysis offers data to review this theorisation but the thesis itself cannot develop the latter within its scope.

bourgeois, audience and regards its viewers first and foremost as equals, activists, accomplices - intelligent enough to have their own opinion and criticism on the staging (Diamond, 1997, 52). Particularly, Brechtian theatre's main element, the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), represents the ruptures that turn the viewer from passive recipients into active participants of the storyline. Diamond (1997, 45) acknowledges Brechtian theory's limitations, such as its "Marxian blindness towards gender relations", and does not call it feminist per se, but its deconstructive rhetoric and rejection of "mimetic linearity, bourgeois naturalism" would share similarities with feminist theory. Its emphasis on defamiliarising 'the normal' is best suited to achieve the same for binary understandings of masculinity and femininity and the category Woman itself.

This refusal of realism has also been criticised by feminist scholars, e.g., by Sheila Stowell (1992, 82), for its underlying assumption that the audience is "some sort of monolithic tabula rasa unwittingly acquiescing to its inscription by an author", thus not capable of resisting and critiquing realism's representation. It has brought realism back into modern productions but under increasing scrutiny of its spectatorial paradigm. Most importantly perhaps, Brechtian theory has highlighted theatre's elemental position as a mode of representation that is not merely a form of literary criticism, imaginary, illusory or detachable from spectators' realities and responsibilities, but primarily one of socio-political resonance.

2.4 Contemporary perspectives on (feminist) theatre

As the previous chapters have shown, the prevalent literature and research on feminist theatre (which is very Anglo-/Americentric and 1980s-centred) appears mainly concerned with *the gaze*, *the semiotic*, female voice/writing, *the body*, mostly read through a psychoanalytical lens of second-wave feminism. Recent discourses, especially on *postdramatic* theatre, have highlighted performative approaches and their 'modern', 'experimental' and 'feminist' character, departing from a fixation on the drama text and writing.

In the context of *postdramatic* and *postmodern* theatre, Lehmann (1999, 124) states (and this is still congruent with many plays today) that a tendency towards a focus on temporality, spatiality, (re)interpretation and reconstruction can be observed as well as portrayals of theatres as places of staged remembrance of (theatre) history.¹³ The latter element is particularly striking in feminist discourse, as theatre history with its legacy of abuse provides rich material for a feminist

¹³ As is also thematised in *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas* and other plays that I saw in Vienna: *Nestbeschmutzung* (Kosmos, 2024b), *Bühnenbeschimpfung* (Schauspielhaus Wien, 2024), etc.

reappraisal. This includes reworkings of classical theatre and myths; roles are reversed, heroes become heroines, patriarchy turns into matriarchy, etc. (see Friedman, 2009).¹⁴

I chose *Die Wand//Wandbefall* and *Keeping Up With the Penthesileas* as case studies precisely because they either focus on (and re/interpret) the female/feminist writing aspect, employ elements of non-spoken performance (e.g., dance or wrestling) and/or are shown in non-traditional spaces, yet these plays may not be taken as representative for all feminist plays in Vienna. I thereby would/will assign the labels ‘feminist’ and ‘postdramatic’ (with Brechtian staging strategies) to these plays as an individual, subjective decision.

Since both performance locations do not correspond to the conventional image of the theatre, I will briefly refer to Lehmann’s insights on the element of ‘space’ in *postdramatic* contexts. Both places are designed to break the *Fourth Wall*; due to their size alone, there is hardly any distance between the performers and audience. Lehmann (1999, 285) sees in this proximity a *space of tense centripetal dynamics* and extremes, in which the space can no longer just be *spectatorial* (as on a large, distant stage), but becomes a social situation that affects everyone differently and therefore defies objective description (Ibid., 182). The proximity creates a frontality of the performer’s body, i.e. a focus on physicality itself, which sidelines the body as a signifier and foregrounds *a body without meaningful gestures, a paradoxical, absolute body* (Ibid., 164). This also results in the separation of the body from language, back into the realm of physicality, the *semiotic*, as Kristeva calls it (Ibid., 163). Whilst I do not go into detail on the connection between theatre studies and sociology (of space), I emphasise this element as it is tied to politics of inclusion and exclusion: For long, space as a category was neglected in sociological theories until 1990s scholarship highlighted the element of spatiality (see ‘topological turn’, Schroer, 2013; ‘body turn’, Gugutzer, 2006). Derived from insights in gender studies (e.g., Butler, 1990) and theatre studies (e.g., Lehmann, 1999), it can be argued that the body itself is a form of ‘space’, with various (political) dimensions and thus receives a particular role in theatrical contexts.

This study has a very Western liberal focus; research in other contexts will look different, depending on the respective dominant political ideologies/opinions and cultural histories. Whilst not the case in Vienna, theatres in other countries have been heavily censored, e.g., in neighbouring

¹⁴ Also, in the plays discussed here (e.g., the Amazon element in *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas*; the reference to Teiresias in *Die Wand//Wandbefall*). Many more plays shown in Vienna play with the mythology aspect: *Elektra* (Krakau, 2024), *Phädra in Flammen* (Lanik, 2023/24), etc.

Hungary (Asavei and Kocian, 2022). *What do people want to see on stage, but what are they not allowed to see?*, directly shows the status of social issues in the national context. Language impacts the discourse greatly, both the obstacle of translation and translatability between different countries (see, e.g., the late translation of Lehmann's work into English) as well as cross-generational differences in terminology and thematic foci.

To conclude, there are few studies on *feminist* contemporary theatre in the German-speaking context. If any, the term *feminist* is rarely mentioned. There are general questions about staging of gender and space (Lehmann et al., 2019), representatives and approaches of postdramatic theatre are illuminated and/or (re)defined and feminist perspectives are rather discussed within the field of theatre criticism/reception than theatre analysis (Ebert et al., 2018). This marginalisation of feminism and gender in German-speaking theatre studies also stems from the fact that theatres themselves seem hesitant to apply feminist labels to plays which I relate to the bureaucratic conditions of the white, male-dominated theatre industry. I would like to emphasise that this literature review entails a very subjective component that is further limited by my outsider perspective on theatre (studies).

The following analytical chapters will show whether the previous observations are current or outdated, can be confirmed, expanded or challenged. As mentioned, feminist theatre is neither definable nor categorisable, yet certain strategies and aims can be considered characteristic, certain feminist perspectives can be highlighted and differentiated.

3. Methodology

Following explorations of participant observation as a method to study theatre audiences (Snyder-Young and Omasta, 2022), I rely on my experience, analysis and observations as an audience member, informed by personal notes and reflections shared in a focus group after the performances, to see how the feminist spectator's understandings correspond to the feminist perspective of the creatives behind a play. I thereby support the notion that audience research is not solely linked to “market research, surveys focused primarily on counting demographic attendance patterns, and research rooted in [...] an ‘advocacy agenda’” that prioritises successful marketing over looking at the complexity of spectatorship experience (Ibid., 2022, 2). I expand on the theories of spectatorship mentioned in the literature review by attempting to track the effects on audiences rather than solely highlighting or proposing staging strategies aimed at integrating the audience. This then allows me to see whether the artists' intentions (if stated in the interviews) had the desired outcomes, especially considering that “there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world” (Rancière, 2008, 75).

Overall, I aim to uncover how the two plays interpret and stage ‘feminist theatre’, which, I argue, is only possible through reviewing the context of contemporary theatre in Vienna on the one hand and the relationship between the creator, performer and spectator on the other hand. Hence, an additional source is the interview data with the director of *Die Wand//Wandbefall*, Olivia Axel Scheucher, and the dramaturg of *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas*, Anna Laner.

Further, this thesis has, of course, a prehistory of selection that was bound to the availability of ‘feminist’ plays in Vienna at that time. The latter, however, rests on my personal evaluation of what constitutes feminist plays. I initially selected many plays for contextualisation and analysis due to their centring of female protagonists or the revision of traditional gender roles but this, of course, does not cover ‘feminism’ comprehensively.¹⁵ My approach to analysing feminist theatre is not just about how the body is staged but about what it means to stage a body, to review this staging and to have several bodies share a designated space for a certain time period. I aim not to focus solely on the way ‘the woman’ is represented or absent or how ‘two genders’ interact with

¹⁵ I watched the following performances in Vienna to receive an understanding of the dominant discourse in Vienna, yet they are not further mentioned in this thesis due to its scope. Most of these performances however unite the inclusion of multiple media, ‘ruptures’ and the breaking of the *Fourth Wall*: *Calls of duty: Jeanne D’Arc* (Dittrich, 2024), *Der Ursprung der Welt* (Dietersdorfer and Hemmer, 2024), *Fugue Four: Response* (Scheucher and Reimann, 2023/24), *hildensaga. ein königinnendrama* (Bosse, 2023/24), *James Brown trug Lockenwickler* (Cervik, 2024), *Nosferatu* (Jacobs, 2024), *Notebook* (Bachzetsis, 2024), *Phädra in Flammen* (Lanik, 2023/24).

each other.

Concerning empirical audience research, I hope to fill a gap through my experience as an audience member, referring to Helen Freshwater's criticism in *Theatre & Audience* (2009), that the former has been "notably absent from theatre studies" (29) which, according to her, represents the mistrust towards audiences that has traditionally been inherent to their academic examination (4). Considering multiple perspectives, I pay attention to both feminist authorship and spectatorship and the relation that is created thereof. As Jill Dolan asserts, "feminism is an analytical system that gives us tools for seeing ourselves in relation to one another" (2013, 1). I am using her concept of feminist spectatorship as a basis for the methodology of this thesis.

I do not describe myself as a cultural critic, however. My analysis is exclusively dedicated to an academic project and is less intended to recommend/criticise the individual pieces discussed here to other people for economic profit or reputational value. I regard myself as a person somehow situated between the roles of spectator and critic and, like Snyder-Young and Omasta (2022, 3), use the language of meaningful *impact* carefully, with an awareness of "its neoliberal, quasi-positivist implications" as it, not rarely, requires artists "to demonstrate the value of [their] work on instrumental terms." Also, Dolan (1988, 121) notes the contradiction of this methodology, which she sees in the attempt to filter and analyse meaning as a spectator and critic whilst meanings of course "will vary endlessly. For a feminist theatre to dictate a proper meaning is as ideologically and politically suspect as any of the mystifications implicitly condoned by the dominant culture's theatre." Accordingly, the focus stays on the respective understandings of 'feminist theatre' rather than on 'success' in terms of subversion or reputation which would be highly subjective.¹⁶

My data offers a limited insight into the dynamics of directing-performing-spectating, as I did not conduct any interviews with the performers or the rest of the creative team. Therefore, it remains unclear to which degree the staging is a representation of the director's perspective or even a deviation from it.

To identify a feminist vision in these two Viennese theatres, I examine the elements of 'gender', 'space', 'costumes', 'casting' in the staging strategies, and the content itself, with its references to (feminist) theory and history. Both plays include various elements, not all of which this thesis can address. The selection of quotes from the interviews and from the plays are

¹⁶ It should also be said that many scholars focus on productions that are not labelled feminist to apply their feminist perspective and criticism on it.

subjective decisions and certain messages or meanings might have gotten lost through my translation from German to English (*Die Wand//Wandbefall* is performed almost exclusively in German; *KUWTP* is a mix of English and German). Since both plays are performed in rather unusual spaces, refer to popular culture, employ feminist theory, I tried to sensitise my gaze to notice costume (changes), the inclusion of performer-specific skills, the size of the room, proximity to the stage, number of spectators, room temperature, stage design, number of props and other media, etc.¹⁷

Due to the analysis for my master's thesis, I have recordings of both plays; I can stop them, reverse and zoom in (itself an alienation). The circumstances are of course different to the live experience which is another reason for the vignettes in between that are reflections right after my attendance of the performance. Analysing theatre based on a performance's recording is unnatural, because theatre is not designed for repetition, like a film. It is about one-off, situation-dependent performances whose primary characteristic would not be its documentation but its live phenomenological experience (Phelan, 1993, 146).

Regarding the interviews, it should be noted that one was with a director (*Die Wand//Wandbefall*), the other one with a dramaturg (*Keeping Up With The Penthesileas*), both lasting about one hour. This does not shift the focus on 'creatorship', however, as the Kosmos theatre's nature is about collaborative teamwork and refuses a single directing perspective, as will be discussed later on. I conducted the interviews in the participants' native language, German, recorded them on a Zoom H4N Pro recorder, transcribed and translated them myself. The selection of fitting passages for the analysis is a subjective decision and biased, yet I made sure to show the interviewees the chosen excerpts before submission.

Due to logistical reasons, I was only able to take the focus group to *Die Wand//Wandbefall* as the Kosmos play had already completed its run when I did my analysis. Also, this short performance run is characteristic of smaller and/or independent theatres, as will become evident throughout the analysis. I attended *Die Wand//Wandbefall* on 11 February 2024 alone and again, on 7 April 2024, with the focus group: four students (all under the age of 30) from the Gender Studies department at CEU, Vienna – only one of them a native German speaker, one with a B2

¹⁷ A list of questions that I considered regarding the different components of staging is included in the appendix (section 3), partly motivated by Jill Dolan's blog entries on the online blog *The Feminist Spectator* (2009, [2005-2024]). The interview questions, also in the appendix, overlap with further questions that I used for my spectator experience.

level of German, the rest not familiar with the language at all. We had one subsequent hybrid meeting of one hour discussing the viewing experience, conducted in English, transcribed by myself. Throughout my analysis, I reflect on their commentary on the play. Worth noting is that the corporeal, visible aspect, rather than the textual one, was central to the observation of the international participants, as most could not follow the German dialogue. It is also important to keep in mind that their background in gender studies might have sensitised them particularly to note certain feminist staging strategies that would not be immediately visible to a (feminist) spectator without such academic background. Besides the information on their academic background and knowledge of German, I made sure not to include any identifying participant information. Their answers have been anonymised.

The questions for the interviews were inspired by the literature review, centred on the terms body, gender, gaze and space, and are included in the appendix. The meetings did not follow these strictly, they were semi-structured and rather took the questions as an inspiration. The director, dramaturg and performers are mentioned by their names, as their work is public, yet neither the questions included anything linked to their private lives nor did they speak about the latter in our interview. The context of the German-speaking theatre scene is thus only indirectly linked to their feminist staging, perspective, and interview data.

Lastly, the analysis represents my own lens and perspective. The vignettes in-between show a process of my note taking during and after the performances, allowing an insight into the sensory experience, yet essentially, both analytical chapters are descriptions of my experience, coupled with theory. By examining stereotypical portrayals through the tools of artistic research, I aim to demonstrate the need for more thoughtful consideration of the arts and simultaneously of artistic research in dealing with socio-political realities.

4. *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas*

Before delving into the analysis of the play *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas*, I will give a brief overview of the Kosmos Theater where it was performed, since the latter is the only theatre house in Vienna that is explicitly feminist and therefore more likely to integrate feminist theory and perspectives into their productions. Being aware of the promotion and transparency of its mission is crucial as it signals which expectation the spectator is likely to have before attending a play.

4.1 The Kosmos theatre

The Kosmos Theater is located in Siebensterngasse 42-44 in Neubau, the Seventh district of Vienna. It has a size of 850m² in total, out of which 200m² form a flexible theatre hall. Founded in 2000 as kosmos.frauenraum, it replaced the cinema Kosmos Kino that had resided at this location from 1914 until 1998. The theatre developed out of the history and demands of the association *LINK.* Verein für weiblichen Spielraum* which was created in 1999 following the government's ignorance towards Austria's first women's referendum in 1997, signed by 645.000 people (Theißl, 2024). Under the headline *Frauen brauchen Raum* (women need space), the club's intention included the establishment of a cultural centre explicitly dedicated to female* creatives, which was then realised by the shareholders Barbara Klein, Krista Schweiggl, Ina Karrer and Felix Niederhauser (Ibid., 2024).¹⁸ Since 2002/2003, the theatre has been known as *Kosmos Theater* and first saw Barbara Klein as an artistic director, followed by Veronika Steinböck and Gina Salis-Soglio (†) in 2018/2019, joined by Galina Baeva in 2023.

The theatre states its position/ality thoroughly on its website (Kosmos, 2024c, my translation):

“The Kosmos Theater sees itself as a feminist house that promotes female* voices and thus gender balance in the theatre industry. Entertaining, irritating and encouraging, the Kosmos Theater deals with role clichés, breaks down stereotypical images of gender and sexuality and creates positive identification figures. Because we can only become what we can imagine.”

¹⁸ The theatre itself uses the gender asterisk/star. In the German-speaking context, the *Gendersternchen* has become a nonstandard typographic style/tool to mark gender-neutral language. It has historically been the case to use the generic masculine to include all genders, yet this excludes women and other genders from everyday language and discourse. The gender star makes it possible to refer to genders beyond a binary gender construct, including non-binary people. Whilst there is no scope in this thesis to provide details on gender in the German language, it is worth remembering that language has been a powerful tool to shape cultural discourse, also in terms of how we speak about gender quota in the theatre world, who becomes in/visible.

During my interview with dramaturg and curator Anna Laner, she defined feminist theatre and the Kosmos' position as follows:

For me, feminist theatre has above all to do with feminist action. [...] if you work together in a feminist way in a production, I think the practical processes or the work itself can be feminist [...] and on the other hand bringing feminist topics to the forefront in the program [...] we at the Kosmos Theater have set ourselves the goal of raising questions beyond binary gender orders and taking action against patriarchal hegemony [...] so above all we make sure that we enable a non-discriminatory, anti-racist working process. (Anna Laner)

She further emphasises the necessity for erecting a feminist theatre in the early 2000s due to the historic circumstances and points to its ongoing relevance:

I think, on the one hand, it's great that there is such a house, but on the other hand, it's also a shame that something like that is needed [...] that there needs to be an explicitly feminist theatre [...] you can see that there's still a bit of a prevailing quota, that there are still more male directors on the big stages. (Anna Laner)

A long list of former and current contributors, including artist biographies, is included on the website (Kosmos, 2024c). I see that this theatre pays strong attention to introducing their mission, position and workers. Its call for feminism and 'gender-balance' in the theatre industry is reflected in the profile of its team – the positions of artistic director, business director and curator have largely been taken on by female candidates, which clearly separates the theatre's gender profile from the big performance spaces in Vienna (Maus, 2023). Besides more diverse demographics, the theatre's focus has been on developing new narrative forms that break with patriarchal structures, dispensing with the classic, closed dramatic structure. It values audience participation and feedback (through discussion rounds after performances), cooperation with the *Freie Szene* (Independent/Off-scene) and bets on first showings/premieres, which offer more scope for experimentation than conventional theatres do (Kosmos, 2024c).

Examining the programme of the Kosmos, it becomes obvious that condensed and temporal performance runs are usually the case here, since there is no fixed ensemble. This means that one might easily miss a production due to its short performance period and tendency to be sold out. On the other hand, not many productions are shown simultaneously as is predominantly the case at big theatre houses. The season 2023/24 at the Volkstheater (2024c) has seen more than 20 productions with many ensemble members playing in multiple different ones. One could

assume that the emphasis on a few productions within one season in the Kosmos theatre is not solely due to budgeting constraints and less funding/spotlight than the big houses receive, but also allows a slower pace, foregrounding the work, preparation process and messages behind plays which aligns with a notion in feminist theatre practice on collaboration and giving and taking (up) space/time for development (Aston, 1999, 6).

An explicit space for feminist theatre certainly runs a risk of becoming exclusive and essentialist, as examples of radical-feminist performances have shown: Jill Dolan notes that many feminist artists and critics falsely “assume that subverting male-dominated theatre practice with a woman-identified model will allow women to look to theatre for accurate reflections of their experience” (1988, 83). When asked about the type of audience attending the Kosmos, however, Laner stressed that she does not see a huge difference to other “middle stages in Vienna [...] but of course there is predominantly a queer and female audience”. Having attended more than 15 productions on independent, middle and major stages since September 2023, I can confirm this observation (as far as one can ‘read’ female and queer subjects), yet would also say that this comes down to the marketing status and tourism industry, which exalts mainly the Burgtheater and thus creates a certain type of non-local audience in the biggest venues (vienna.info, 2024).

4.2 *KUWTP* – Background

The play *Keeping Up With The Penthesileas – from white feminism to neoliberal feminism* was originally written by Mateja Meded and Thomas Köck and premiered in Theater am Neumarkt, Zürich, on 11 May 2023, where it was performed 16 times over the course of one month. For the Swiss shows, Meded was writer, director and actress (playing Kim Kardashian). Eight months later, *KUWTP* was brought to Vienna, directed by Anna Marboe. Here, *KUWTP* had its first run on 13 February 2024 and was performed 12 times, spread across the second half of February, and the first two days of March.

According to the Neumarkt’s website, the central questions of the production are: “Is there a true feminism in a false patriarchy? Is there real empowerment beyond advertising and product placement in capitalism? What does visibility mean and for whom? What is the myth of self-made women & the survival of the fittest influencers [...]?” (Theater am Neumarkt, 2023).

The Kosmos adaptation summarises these issues as follows: “How much pink- and greenwashing can feminism tolerate and where does solidarity among women* end?” (Kosmos, 2024a, my

translation).

From these descriptions it is already clear that the themes of psychoanalysis and female writing, as identified by the still dominant feminist theatre studies of the 1980s as a characteristic of feminist theatre (see literature review), receive less inspection than the current role of theatre and flaws of feminism.

KUWTP merges two worlds of apparent matriarchy: that of German dramaturg Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea* (1992 [1808]), one of the most critically acclaimed treatments of the Greek myth surrounding the Amazonian queen Penthesilea, and that of the Kardashians', the (perhaps currently) most famous American celebrity family whose members' lives have been thoroughly documented in the reality TV show *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* from 2007 until 2021. The latter's reception allowed each of the Kardashians to engage in multiple businesses following their creation of personal brands and has seen Kris Jenner as *The Momager* of her five daughters, Kourtney, Kim, Khloé, Kendall and Kylie, whose highly sexualised, artificialised icon status has made them ideal representatives of modern capitalism - healthy lifestyles or feminist empowerment have been commercialised by the Kardashians to perfection (Theater am Neumarkt, 2023). This commercialised/capitalist feminism is criticised in *KUWTP* as an absurd shift in values, impacted by different eras of feminism and the indeterminacy of intersectionality's borders (Kosmos, 2024a).

In the Kardashians' world, men play a subordinate role. Rob Kardashian, the son/brother, does not really fit in with the trash glamour world – which has made him 'non-marketable' (Theater am Neumarkt, 2023). Caitlyn Jenner, Kris' ex-partner, is a transgender person, formerly known as Bruce Jenner. Kanye West, Kim's ex-partner, made several missteps and suffers a bad reputation. Yet, the Kardashian empire does not stop growing. None of these family members are part of *KUWTP*, at least not as a dominant figure on stage.

Taking inspiration from Greek mythology and the Amazons' legacy does not appear far-fetched to feminist eyes: A group of strong and intelligent female warriors whose society is closed to men (except during brief moments of reproduction), only raises daughters and discards its sons, their tale can be read as a radical inversion of patriarchy. Simultaneously, this does not make it automatically feminist; it has been argued that its myth status implies its illusion, only reproducing patriarchal values through female bodies (Tyrrell, 1982, 1215). Penthesilea is one of the Amazons, an assistant to Troy in the Trojan War during which she is killed by Achilles. In Kleist's

Penthesilea, however, *she* kills Achilles out of fury, then recognises her ‘mistake’ and dies herself (von Kleist, 1992 [1808]). *KUWTP* does not go into detail about the myth, which allows a focus on the symbolism of the female warrior image and how it can be taken as a sign of empowerment or a myth, a copy of patriarchy. Thereby it avoids dilemmas of historical/textual accuracy which much of the audience would most likely not be able to follow, given that this would require specialist knowledge. This simplicity adds power to the narration: Transitions between the Kardashians’ and Penthesilea’s worlds are fluid; as Amazons, as suffragettes, the performers speak in chorus, responding to the moderation, and wonder what other goddesses, ‘all these out of nowhere warriors’ of popular culture, ‘self-made Nepo babies’ or Beyoncé etc., actually *do* to deserve their title of strong, independent goddesses. At the same time, the play asks how the Kardashians’ self-proclaimed ‘wet dream of patriarchy’ can ever be considered a work of emancipation (Affenzeller, 2024b).

I will briefly compare the plays in Zürich and Vienna via their advertising since I was not able to attend the Swiss premiere in 2023. Ironically, the marketing aspect reflects the play’s message. Its reflection on branding (feminisms) matches with a central issue in feminist performing arts, namely the challenge to distinguish between representations for real social change and feminism pushed solely for reputation and profit, responding to a *zeitgeist*. Essentially, the play addresses the concept of *commodity feminism* (Goldman et al., 1991) and engages with a critique of *postfeminism* that identifies the media’s focus on female individualism and empowerment as causes for a contradictory blending of feminist and antifeminist narratives (e.g., resexualisation of women’s bodies through subjectification), motivated by neoliberal ideology (Gill, 2008). According to Laner, “sometimes it becomes a bit of a brand because it’s just *en vogue* to make feminist theatre or rather to act as if you’re making feminist theatre [...] to attract young people into the audience.” In that regard, also the Kosmos production may be part of a capitalist marketing economy but remains self-critical and self-deprecating. It is aware of attracting an audience due to centring the Kardashians and popular culture in its narrative (e.g., through creating a show character with audience reactions, popcorn, quizzes) whilst criticising both the family’s hypocrisy and (feminists’) backlash/double standards.

I believe that this comparison can be insightful as it sheds light on the different angles of feminism and interpretations that the playtext can hone. Laner told me that she was at the Swiss premiere, that the “trash glamour [...] the way it’s written [...] they’ve already done it very perfectly

in their options there and their house is about the same size as ours so in terms of budget it's similar." Whilst it is obvious that the Austrian adaptation was not produced independently of the original, certain deviations (mentioned in later paragraphs) reveal a Kosmos-specific feminist vision. This comparison of adaptations also allows a look at essentialist notions on staging gender and bodies.

Striking in the comparison of both adaptations is the similarity of advertisement. The Neumarkt website and the Kosmos website both provide space to feature several images and videos/trailers of the production, snippets from reviews and in Neumarkt's case, also a pdf of the *Abendspielzettel* (playbill) which has allowed me to compare it to the Kosmos playbill that I received during my visit. Both *Spielzettel* feature short explanations and information on the Penthesilea myth and the Kardashian family, as well as some clarifications on terms of feminist theory (see Figures 1 and 2). This demonstrates the commitment to accessibility and education, therefore theatre's socio-political relevance which, here, appears central to feminist productions. In our interview, Laner confirmed that the Kosmos team usually reads feminist theory before and during the rehearsal period whilst many members are already familiar with several aspects of it. She also pointed out that, opposed to conventional theatres, one can usually assume that the audience in feminist theatres has basic or advanced knowledge about the discussed topics, yet one should not take this for granted.

Regarding costumes and stage design, it is interesting to see that the Neumarkt production opted for a 'trash glamour' style where the Kardashians' personal touch (their high ponytail, exaggerated make-up) is rather obvious (see Figure 3), whilst Kosmos emphasises the warrior/wrestling element (see Figure 4):

For Anne Marboe and for me too, sport is a reference we like to work with and somehow the idea soon came to mind to include the wrestling [...] that also suits the Kardashians who somehow have to do with fitness but on the other hand, this also relates to the fight with the Amazons and yet it is all just a show. (Anna Laner)

I am fairly certain that if I had not known what the play referred to, I would not have recognised the Kardashians immediately in the latter production as here they look like participants in a wrestling show with some 'unusual' attributes of sports clothing, e.g., a glitter jacket, a dress (see Figure 4).

keeping up with the penthesileas – from white feminism to neoliberal feminism

Eine quasymythologische Remythifizierung von Maja Meda & Thomas Köck

Im neuen Stück von Thomas Köck und Maja Meda treffen die Kardashians auf Penthesilea und ihren Amazonenstamm. Auch die Suffragetten suchen das ästhetisch aufgepolierte Reich der Show-Amazonen heim. Gibt es einen richtigen Feminismus im falschen Patriarchat? Gibt es wahres Empowerment jenseits von Werbung und Product-Placement im Kapitalismus?

glossar

Amazonen sind ein legendärer Stamm von Kriegerinnen aus der griechischen Mythologie. Dem Mythos zufolge waren die Amazonen eine Gesellschaft von gefürchteten Kriegerinnen – geschickt im Bogenschüssen und Reiten –, die in der Region um das Schwarze Meer lebten. Sie waren offenbar eine matriachale Gesellschaft → **Matriarchat**.

Antiope ist der Name einer Amazone und einer Göttin, die in der griechischen Mythologie vor allem wegen ihrer Schönheit beschrieben wird. In einer Version wurde sie vom Helden Theseus entführt, der sie als seine Frau nach Athen brachte. In einer anderen wurde sie von Zeus begehrt, der sich als Satyr verkleidete, um sie zu verführen. Er vergewaltigte sie, und sie wurde schwanger mit den Zwillingssöhnen Amphion und Zethos, die später von einem Hirten aufgezogen wurden.

Astoria ist der Name einer Amazone und einer Sternengöttin, der Tochter des Titanen Kotos und der Titanin Phoebe, Schwester von Leto. Nebst ihrer Sternenkundigkeit soll sie die Kraft der göttlichen Vorsehung und Prophezeiung besitzen haben. Zeus soll sie bedrängt haben, worauf sie sich in eine Wachtel verwandelte. Als er sie in Gestalt eines Adlers verfolgte, fiel Astoria, in einen Stein verwandelt, ins Meer und wurde zu einer Insel.

Black Fishing ist ein Begriff, der ein Phänomen beschreibt, bei dem nicht-Schwarze Menschen ihr Aussehen verändern, um Schwarz oder nicht-weiß zu erscheinen. Blackfishing wurde dafür kritisiert, dass es schädliche Stereotypen über Schwarze Menschen aufrechterhält und sich Aspekte der Schwarzen Kultur aneignet, ohne deren Herkunft zu würdigen oder anzuerkennen.

Calabases ist eine Stadt in Los Angeles County. Sie ist bekannt für ihre wohlhabenden Viertel und prominenten Einwohner:innen wie Mitglieder der → **Kardashians**, Drake oder Justin Bieber.

Cluster Fuck (dt. **Riesendurcheinander**) ist ein Slangausdruck, der eine chaotische Situation beschreibt, in der alles schiefgeht, verursacht durch Inkompetenz und Kommunikationsversagen.

Cultural Appropriation (dt. **kulturelle Aneignung**) ist die Übernahme von Elementen aus einer anderen Kultur und deren Verwendung ohne entsprechendes Verständnis, Respekt oder Erlaubnis. Dies kann Mode, Musik, Kunst, Sprache, Symbole und andere Aspekte einer Kultur umfassen.

Empowerment (dt. **Ermächtigung**) bezieht sich auf den Prozess, der Einzelpersonen oder Gruppen in die Lage versetzt, ihr Leben selbst in die Hand zu nehmen, Entscheidungen zu treffen und Massnahmen zu ergreifen, die ihr Wohlbefinden und ihre Lebensqualität verbessern.

Female Solidarity (dt. **Frauensolidarität**) beschreibt die Idee, dass Frauen sich gegenseitig unterstützen und fördern, oft angesichts gemeinsamer Herausforderungen oder Unterdrückung.

Greenwashing (dt. **Grünfärberei**) ist die Praxis von Unternehmen, Organisationen und einflussreichen Einzelpersonen, falsche oder irreführende Behauptungen über die Umweltvorteile ihrer Produkte oder Dienstleistungen aufzustellen, um umweltfreundlicher zu erscheinen, als sie tatsächlich sind.

Keeping Up with the Kardashians ist eine amerikanische Reality-Fernsehserie, die zwischen 2007 und 2021 ausgestrahlt wurde und sich auf das Privat- und Berufsleben der Kardashians-Jenner-Familie konzentriert.

Kardashians und Jenners sind eine der berühmtesten Familien der Popkultur und so etwas wie ein moderner, kapitalistischer Frauenstaat (→ **Matriarchat**), empowerte (→ **Empowerment**) Amazonen (→ **Amazonen**), die sich eine massive Follower:innenschaft auf Social Media aufgebaut haben, wo sie als Influencer:innen Lifestyles, Fashion- und Beautytrends mitprägen und verkaufen, und ihren eigenen Brand stärken.

Kris Jenner (*1955), Mutter und Managerin, kurz die Momagerin, begann ihre Karriere als Flugbegleiterin bei American Airlines, wurde aber später Hausfrau und Geschäftsfrau. Sie kümmert sich um die Karrieren ihrer Kinder, und hat erheblich dazu beigetragen, die Familie zu einem Brand zu machen.

Kourtney Kardashian (*1979) schloss ihr Studium an der University of Arizona mit einem Abschluss in Theater und einem Nebenfach in Spanisch ab. Kourtney hat auch eine erfolgreiche Karriere als Geschäftsfrau gemacht und ihre eigene Lifestyle-Marko «Poosh» gegründet, die eine Reihe von Produkten und Inhalten zu den Themen Gesundheit, Wellness und Schönheit anbietet. Kourtney hat 219 Millionen Follower:innen auf Instagram.

Kim Kardashian (*1980) erlangte zunächst als Freundin und Stylistin von Paris Hilton und später durch ihren Auftritt in einem Sex-Tape, das 2007 durchsickerte, Berühmtheit. Im selben Jahr als das Sex-Tape geleakt wurde, begannen Kim und ihre Familie, in der Reality-Fernsehserie → **Keeping Up with the Kardashians** mitzuspielen. Kim hat seither eine erfolgreiche Karriere als Geschäftsfrau gemacht und ihre eigene Make-up-Linie, «KKW Beauty», und eine Shapewear-Linie, «Skims», herausgebracht. Mit dem Rapper Kanye West hat sie vier Kinder. Kim hat 353 Millionen Follower:innen auf Instagram.

Khloé Kardashian (*1984) hat auch in verschiedenen Spin-offs der Kardashians-Serie mitgewirkt. Sie hat ausserdem ihre eigene Radioshow «The Mix Up With Khloé Kardashian Odom» moderiert und ihre eigene Jeansmarke «Good American» gegründet, die eine Reihe inklusiver und körperbetonter Kleidung anbietet. Khloé hat 304 Millionen Follower:innen auf Instagram.

Kendall Jenner (*1995) begann ihre Modellkarriere im Alter von 14 Jahren und hat sich seitdem zu einem der erfolgreichsten Models der Welt entwickelt. Kendall hat ihre eigene Hautpflegemarke «Moon» auf den Markt gebracht. 2017 löste sie einen Shitstorm aus, weil sie für eine Pepsi-Werbung in der Protest-Asthetik der Black-Lives-Matter-Bewegung einem Polizisten eine Pepsi überreichte und das Ganze dadurch in eine fröhliche Party verwandelte. Die Shitstorms,

die unter anderem den Vorwurf der → **Cultural Appropriation** und der faken Solidarity eines weissen Feminismus erhoben, bewirkten, dass Pepsi die Werbung mit einer Entschuldigung zurückzog. Kendall hat 286 Millionen Follower:innen auf Instagram.

Kylie Jenner (*1997) ist die jüngste Tochter von Kris Jenner und Caitlyn Jenner. Sie hat ihre eigene Kosmetiklinie «Kylie Cosmetics», unter anderem die «Lip Kits», ins Leben gerufen, die sehr erfolgreich ist und sie zu einer der jüngsten Selfmade-Milliardäre gemacht hat. Sie hat 388 Millionen Follower:innen auf Instagram.

KREAM ist ein Song von 2018 der australischen Rapperin Iggy Azalea feat. Tyga, Ex-Freund von → **Kylie Jenner**. KREAM ist eine Interpolation von C.R.E.A.M. («Cash Rules Everything Around Me») vom Wu-Tang Clan. Somit gelangt der Song zur Aussage, dass Gold («cash»), Ärsche («ass») und Handtaschen («bags») die Welt regieren.

David Letterman (*1947) ist ein amerikanischer Komiker und Talkshow-Moderator. Nach seinem Rückzug aus dem amerikanischen Fernsehen feierte er 2018 auf Netflix mit der Talkshow «My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman». Eine der Gäste war → **Kim Kardashian**, die 2020 in der Show vor allem durch einen tränenreichen Auftritt in Erinnerung blieb.

Matriarchat bezieht sich auf ein soziales System, in dem Frauen die wichtigsten Macht- und Autoritätspositionen innehaben und eine zentrale Rolle bei der Führung, Entscheidungsfindung und Verwaltung der Gesellschaft spielen. Weder im Patriarchat noch im Matriarchat sind sich anders identifizierende mitgedacht, somit bleiben beide Systeme binär in ihrem Verständnis.

Mental Health betrifft die mentale Gesundheit und hat in den vergangenen Jahren – auch dank Social-Media-Plattformen – an «Popularität» gewonnen. Dabei scheint das wachsende Bewusstsein rund um Themen der mentalen, geistigen Gesundheit auch einen immer weiter wachsenden Markt an Produkten und erstrebenswerten Lifestyles als erwerbbarer ästhetischer Lebenswelt zu produzieren.

Meruo ist eine Stadt des antiken Kusch (Kush), deren Ruinen sich am Ostufer des Nils etwa 6.4 km nördlich von Kabūshyah im heutigen Sudan befinden. Meruo wurde von Schwarzen Pharaonen regiert.

Neoliberalismus ist eine Ideologie, die den Wettbewerb als das bestimmende Merkmal der menschlichen Beziehungen betrachtet. Er definiert die Bürger:innen zu Verbraucher:innen um, deren demokratische Wahlmöglichkeiten am besten durch Kaufen und Verkaufen ausgedrückt werden, ein Prozess, der Leistung belohnt und Ineffizienz bestraft. Der Markt sorgt dafür, dass jeder bekommt, was sie verdient. Oder in den Worten von → **Kim Kardashian**: «I have the best advice for women in business: Get your fucking ass up and work. It seems like nobody wants to work these days.»

Penthesilea, Königin der → **Amazonen**. Nach der griechischen Mythologie ist sie die Tochter des Kriegsgottes Ares und der Nymphe Otrera. Penthesilea war eine mutige Kriegerin und soll im Kampf unschlagbar gewesen sein, wurde aber schliesslich vom griechischen Helden Achilles getötet. In Kleists Version der Penthesilea ist die Geschichte der Amazonenkönigin und des Amazonenstaats → **Matriarchat** ein bisschen anders. Penthesilea stirbt nicht, sie opfert Achill dem Gesetz ihres Amazonenstaats.

Pseudoaktivismus, auch bekannt als Klick-Aktivismus, bezieht sich auf eine Form des Aktivismus, die nur minimalen Aufwand oder Engagement von Seiten des Teilnehmers erfordert. Pseudoaktivismus umfasst oft oberflächliche oder symbolische Handlungen, wie das Liken oder Teilen eines Beitrags in den sozialen Medien oder das Unterzeichnen einer Online-Petition.

Skythische Kriegerinnen waren nomadische → **Amazonen**, die vom 8. bis zum 3. Jahrhundert v. Chr. in der riesigen eurasischen Steppenregion lebten. Sie waren als geschickte Reiterinnen und Kriegerinnen bekannt und wurden von ihren Nachbarn wegen ihrer militärischen Fähigkeiten gefürchtet und respektiert.

Suffragetten, aus dem Englischen «suffrage» (dt. Wahlrecht), waren Mitglieder einer Frauenbewegung, die im späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert entstand und sich für das Wahlrecht der Frauen und die gleichberechtigte Teilnahme an politischen Prozessen einsetzte. Suffragetten galten als Pionierinnen im Kampf für die Rechte der Frauen, zugleich gibt es Kritik, da sie eine weisse Frauenbewegung war, die sich nicht intersektional für Frauenrechte einsetzte. So blieben sogenannte Minderheiten aussen vor.

WAP (Akronym für «Wet Ass Pussy», dt. verdammt feuchte Muschi) ist ein Song der amerikanischen Rapperin Cardi B feat. Megan Thee Stallion von 2020. Wegen seiner sexpositiven Botschaft und des → **Empowerment** von Frauen gelobt, ärgerten sich viele Konservative über den expliziten Text und die offen zur Schau gestellte weibliche Sexualität.

Weiss/Weissein bezeichnet ebenso wie «Schwarzsein» keine biologische Eigenschaft und keine reale Hautfarbe, sondern eine politische und soziale Konstruktion. Mit Weisssein werden dominante und privilegierte Positionen verbunden, die z.B. den Zugang zu Ressourcen betreffen. Eine kritische Reflexion von Weisssein → **Critical Whiteness** besteht in der Umkehrung der Blickrichtung auf diejenigen Strukturen und Subjekte, die Rassismus verursachen und davon profitieren. Anstatt hierfür waren die politischen Kämpfe und die Kritik von People of Color.

Wendy Williams (*1964) erlangte mit ihrer Talkshow «The Wendy Williams Show», die 2008 erstmals ausgestrahlt wurde, landesweite Aufmerksamkeit. Sie ist u.a. auch eine lautstarke Fürsprecherin für psychische Gesundheit → **Mental Health**.

Critical Whiteness (dt. **kritisches Weisssein**) entwickelte sich aus der Perspektive der afro-amerikanischen Frauen- und → **Empowerment**-Bewegung, die sich mit dem Weisssein aus einer Schwarzen Perspektive beschäftigten. Dabei kritisierte sie die vorherrschende Dominanz von weissen feministischen Perspektiven.

White Passing bezieht sich auf einen Begriff, der verwendet wird, um jemanden zu beschreiben, der nicht weiss ist, aber eine körperliche Erscheinung oder einen kulturellen Hintergrund hat, der es ihm ermöglicht, in der Gesellschaft als weiss wahrgenommen zu werden oder als weiss «durchzugehen».



Figure 1: Spielzettel, Theater am Neumarkt, 2023.

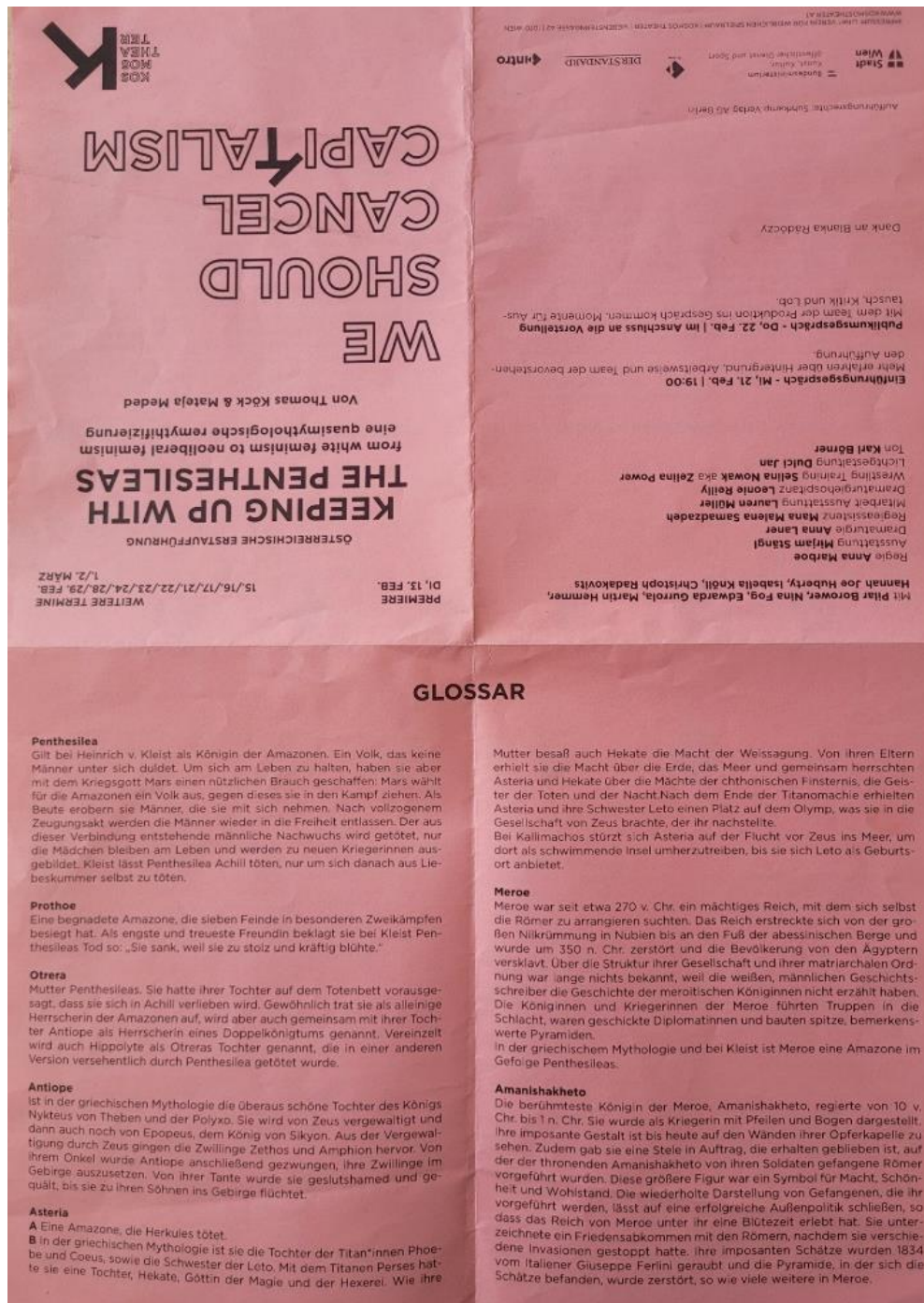


Figure 2: Spielzettel, Kosmos Theater, 2024a.



Figure 3: *KUWTP*, Theater am Neumarkt, 2023.



Figure 4: *KUWTP*, Kosmos Theater, 2024a.

4.3 Feminist themes in *KUWTP*

Upon entering the building, I already notice a difference to most other theatre buildings in Vienna. Firstly, the localities are underground, I have to walk down several steps to get to the reception area, the wardrobe, the main room. Drinks are allowed in the latter. The main room is not a traditional theatre space but a flexible hall, with two movable seating areas of several rows on opposite sides facing each other. For this play, a boxing ring was set up in the middle. Music is playing when I enter and two performers, already in costume, serve free popcorn to the audience, made fresh. The play starts, actor Martin Hemmer enters the room in a bathrobe. In the style of show moderation, he announces (in German) what is going to happen and invites us to actively join the play by cheering, clapping, booing, sighing in-between. We even rehearse these expressions. He leaves and enters again, this time dressed in black and white, his head decoration resembling the crown of the statue of liberty. In English language, he calls the ‘Kardashians’ on stage: First off, “the momager, aka Oberpriesterin (principal priestess) Kristen Mary Jenner” (Isabella Knöll) who walks in confidently in glitter costume and joins the moderator in the wrestling ring. “The hardest working one, Penthesilea Kimberley Noel Kim Kardashian” (Edwarda Gurrola) follows with a confident walk, then “the anxious one [...] Kendall Nicole Jenner” (Christoph Radakovits) walks in hesitantly and stiffly, followed by “the billionaire...Kylie Kristen Jenner” (Nina Fog) in a very dramatic, gymnast-like manner (Carl Orff’s Carmina Burana plays in the background). “Khloé Alexandra Kardashian” (Pilar Borower) joins them, accompanied by marching music and the last one to be called in is “the least exciting one...Kourtney Mary Kardashian Barker” (Hannah Joe Huberty) who enters with rap music, bored, wearing sunglasses and a big coat.

A central theme in this production is commodity feminism, supported by the show and marketing character (see vignette above), which is related to the question of how feminism/a feminist is defined. Some scenes use a two-people/binary-gender-/one-vs-group constellation to stress that being a woman does not necessarily mean being a feminist, especially considering the contradictory, objectifying marketing of body (consciousness) and feminism that the Kardashians represent:

a) In one scene, the Momager, Kris/Knöll, and the presenter/Hemmer talk about “so many accusations, you know, black fishing, corn rows, cultural appropriation” (Marboe, 2024, my translation). They both stand outside of the ring whilst the rest of the performers pose in the middle, at times break out in uncomfortable laughter. The presenter/Hemmer states the issues he sees with

the family's marketing strategies whilst Kris/Knöll shrugs it off, distracts, tries to gain the sympathy of the audience. We are told to cheer when the topic circles around the inventions of Kylie's cosmetics lip kit, her hard work and 'future billionaire status'. Whilst Kris/Knöll struggles to find good explanations for flying to Japan just to plant trees and gets clearly uncomfortable, the rest of the Kardashians still poses with strained smiles on stage. This staging of discussion (between Kris and the 'educated' presenter) and the posing and eye-contact with the audience have the effect of making the viewer both uncomfortable and critical of what is debated here.

b) In another scene, Kris/Knöll and the presenter/Hemmer enter the room 'drunk'. Kris/Knöll mumbles something to herself while the presenter/Hemmer takes the spotlight on stage and angrily and desperately denounces the Kardashians' actions. "You pay women to carry your babies!" (Marboe, 2024, my translation). At some point, Kris/Knöll enters the ring and ends his monologue by knocking him down. She says, seeming almost sober, "I would like to quote Jesus Christ at this point. Let him who is without sin cast the first...pretence (Schein), eh stone (Stein)" (Ibid., 2024). What is interesting here is that it is the presenter/Hemmer, whom we read as a man, who is so upset about various double standards of modern feminism, especially the one practiced by the Kardashians, and how 'the woman' does not have anything to add to this, is rather blinded ('drunk') herself. It marks the play's message that being a woman does not automatically mean being feminist and concurrently recognises 'the man' as a potential ally rather than enemy of modern feminism (Schöpfer, 2023).

c) 'The Kendall scene' is probably one of the most memorable of the play. Kendall/Radakovits dances in front of a video clip from *Live for Now* (2017), a Pepsi commercial starring Kendall Jenner that, due to its staging and capitalising on known Black protest images, underwent harsh criticism for promoting police brutality and trivialising the *Black Lives Matter* movement (Hobbs, 2017). It is one of the few times where a real reference/medium is actively used. But Radakovits comments on the video here, less in his role as Kendall and more as an outsider. I clearly perceive him as an actor, or rather I perceive him as a person who comments here but does not act. He talks about Kendall's spot in a critical and ironic way. The light turns on. Only Kris/Knöll is still nearby. Radakovits is Kendall again and calls out to her: "What the fuck mum, what about my brand now?" (Marboe, 2024, my translation). Both act as if they were being called and imitate telephone noises, which triggers laughter, especially since a mother-daughter relationship between these two performers seems unrealistic due to them not looking alike.

Kendall/Radakovits: “Nobody thinks about my mental health...”. Kris/Knöll: “Baby girl, I’ll take care of it...” (Ibid., 2024). Everyone else comes in, the light changes and they are ‘the Amazons’ again, criticising advertising (also by the company Amazon itself) and its myth and problems: “...because we don’t have a body, we have a brand. [...] Why are men actually not desirable in advertising?” (Ibid., 2024). References are made to the male gaze, which they also ‘smell’ in this room. Whilst there is a predominantly queer, female audience, the male gaze is associated with every person present. In the end they summarise however: “We should condemn capitalism! Fuck capitalism, drink Pepsi” (Ibid., 2024). This slogan aptly demonstrates the paradox of feminists’ motivations in a capitalist economy: canceling capitalism is itself a form of branding that underlies neoliberalism.

An ‘apology’ video is then made by Kendall. Radakovits lounges theatrically on the stage, to dramatic music. Judging by the number of laughs, it is the funniest scene, yet also demonstrates that the audience knows how to spot this hypocrisy. Things are said without anything actually being said: “I think [...] you should experience things [...] experience things” (Ibid., 2024). All the other performers are standing on the sidelines nodding, ‘crying’. Another moment of alienation/reporting follows when Kourtney/Huberty breaks this ‘illusion/fakeness’ by storming the stage with a screwdriver that she holds like a pistol. “Everything is so toxic here...this whole family is the fucking problem...a curse...I can’t stand this anymore” (Ibid., 2024). She starts the drill and holds it up. There is a lot of laughter. On the sidelines, the other performers are not too impressed. Kourtney/Huberty is not understood when she gives a monologue. The audience expresses its pity, as encouraged from the ‘rehearsal’ at the start. Ultimately, everyone is asked to repeat Huberty’s sentence: “The quality of your relationship is the quality of your life” (Ibid., 2024).

d) Again, a quick cut and suddenly Kourtney’s/Huberty’s mood has lifted: “That’s why I started a new brand” (Ibid., 2024). This scene is a reference to Kourtney’s invention of *Lemme Purr*, vagina gummies, supposed to make the vagina smell better (Simpson and McLaren, 2023). Kourtney/Huberty explains that there is still a lack of knowledge about the vagina and orgasm (which is justified), but she questionably links this to the nature of a vagina, and therefore to a woman’s responsibilities. The woman is asked to make her vagina conform to society’s desires to adapt to a man’s needs through a market product, which is sold as a feminist act. Kourtney/Huberty is shown to have misread feminist empowerment, health and body positivity in the critical eye of

the feminist and gynecologist, also hinting at the discourses on health and the risks of influencers' 'education' and distribution of 'knowledge' (Caulfield, 2016).

These scenes (a-d) can be summarised by the following dialogue: Kris/Knöll: "We created a brand -". Presenter/Hemmer: "...and some people confuse that with empowerment" (Marboe, 2024, my translation). The piece shows the legitimacy of both positions. As a viewer, I do not have the feeling that I always want to agree with the presenter (perhaps because I cannot *not* read him as a white, straight man), I also feel turned towards the other characters because I, too, am a victim of marketing traps – otherwise, I would not have felt entertained. I feel empathy towards them, both the performers and reference figures, arguably reading through the lens of my gender('s historical oppression). *KUWTP* reserves the right to describe the dualism and paradox of market-oriented feminism and therefore does not judge. Hence, the audience actually has the biggest role. The thinking is left to us all. We are assigned responsibility rather than blamed for the situations discussed - not in a forceful way, but with care. We are treated as allies, granted breaks, which aligns with principles on community and ethics, salient in the feminist theatre understanding of audience interactions (Harvie, 2019).

In another scene, Kim/Gurrola presents a monologue; "I have the best advice for women in business, get the fucking ass up and do the work. It seems like nobody wants to work these days. You have to surround yourself with people who want to work. Such a good work environment where everyone loves what they do because you know you just have one life so show up and do the work" (Marboe, 2024). She repeats this three more times and turns to both sides, getting louder. Kim/Gurrola drops face down on the mat and sings something in Spanish, takes off her armour. Just when this scene gets 'too serious', the light changes and there is loud music, she dances. The audience claps, in line with the upbeat music. The others enter again. What is particularly remarkable about this scene is how quickly the atmosphere changes between silence and laughter, both of which appear uncomfortable at times, especially since this monologue on success at the workplace is ironically presented *at* a workplace, the theatre. Considering the dominant understanding of the arts as a non-utilitarian, non-economic endeavour and the marginal status they receive in terms of respect towards the profession (Becker, 1982), this scene has a sarcastic and bitter taste to it, particularly when it comes to 'a good work environment' that is not necessarily granted in the (male-dominated) arts scene. Who are we to judge what is good work and what is bad work (including an influencer's and a theatre-maker's work), what counts as work in the first

place and how are these questions still a mirror of a gender division of labour? Again, however, being a woman does not mean automatically being a feminist, just as understandings of feminism vary – for instance, across time and generations: In one scene, Kim/Gurrola is confronted by the rest of the performers dressed in black, white, red clothes with individual words printed on their shirts which together spell out *Vote for Women* (a suffragette reference). They sing: “Who did the work, who did the work, who?” (Marboe, 2024).

Following this scene, everyone accuses Kim/Gurrola of labeling her skin colour as ‘not white’ and using make-up to make it darker (= blackfishing). The replies by Kim/Gurrola and the accusations quickly fall into a contradiction. She answers: “White women who behave like white men or women who belong to minorities and who behave like white women who behave like white men.” Kylie/Fog: “That’s too binary for me in cross-section.” Kim/Gurrola: “You have no idea what kind of racism I experienced.” Others: “Yes, but you’re white...” Kim: “White women simply have no culture.” Kim/Gurrola accuses the suffragettes of their blind eye to intersectionality and reminds us of capitalism’s contribution to progress in feminism. The suffragettes answer: “We are not for sale...” Kim/Gurrola: “Everyone is for sale” (Ibid., 2024). She gives another monologue, this time about the advertising industry, which has historically been characterised by voyeurism and placed the white (house)wife in the foreground, based on (Hollywood’s) beauty standards (Redmond, 2003). She points out the disadvantage of other women and minorities in this business and asks again, to no one in particular: “Who did the work?”

Throughout the play, references are made to racism triggered by the marketing strategies of the Kardashian empire. As Aston asserts (1999, 133), addressing racism as a predominantly white group, is a sensitive field as it risks “colonising the Black voice”. *KUWTP* acknowledges this issue by spreading the dialogue fittingly across the ensemble, respecting the international background of its cast. Alienation strategies of doubling/multiplying characters and reporting techniques allow a distance to the reference figure and topic, thus also an informed reflection on racism, e.g., it remains open whether the audience should see Kim here, or Gurrola, or something/someone entirely different. Hence, the commitment to intersectionality that the Kosmos states on its website and is central to many feminist theatre productions (see Aston, 2016), is visible here. However, it should also be noted that no cast member is Black which also has to do with the lacking perspectives on diversity in German-speaking theatre and the sign a Western white audience reads on stage (Marschall et al., 2022). Similar to the questions on gender fluidity one is

confronted with, one must consider notions on racial fluidity, especially in a Western context. Man, to whom? Woman, to whom? White, to whom? Black, to whom?

4.4 Feminist staging in *KUWTP*

Considering my vignette/impression from chapter 4.3, one sees immediately that the creative team has paid attention to the acting background and skills of the individual performers, as Fog shows off her dancing whilst Gurrola's long-term acting experience in Mexican telenovela shines through. In our interview, Laner highlighted that they made sure not to cast the oldest team members necessarily as the oldest sisters. This shows that not only gender is a fluid component in feminist theatre practice but various further intersections, here, for instance, age and race.

The cast of this production is multilingual/international – which is not usually the case in the big theatre houses that emphasise German-speaking *Sprechtheater* productions (Sharifi, 2018a). The decision to insert other languages, e.g., Spanish and English in-between (the latter also due to the English-speaking thematic content), signals the recognition of the position of language in the theatre which concurrently reflects its status in a culture's postcolonial and migrant discourses: Many German-speaking theatres' support for monolingualism risks, cross-read with Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the *habitus* – a “society written into the body, into the biological individual” (1990, 63) –, an exclusionary political ambition to maintain a symbolic order of patriarchal power that controls the marginalised, colonised subject in the respective culture (Sharifi, 2018a, 328). Theatre, being a place where culture is performed and shaped, must thus receive serious inspection, especially in countries with rising nationalism, like Austria.

Regarding the aspect of gender, it is worth examining that Christoph Radakovits, who self-identifies as a man, is cast as Kendall Jenner. In the original at Theater am Neumarkt Zürich, Kendall was played by a woman, yet Kris was played by David Attenberger (they/dey). Cross-gender casting and cross-dressing is certainly nothing new in theatre (Dreysse, 2021), yet should receive a closer inspection in feminist theatre practice and here, in its real examples in popular culture. What does it mean to cast the opposite gender for a character that, here, clearly references a real-life person and does not, initially, offer scope for gender subversion? Does it risk reproducing gender stereotypes and imposing notions of masculinity or femininity on the real-life characters or is this less a question of representing (as a performer) and more one of reading (as a spectator)?

Laner explained that Radakovits was cast as Kendall for several reasons that do not solely relate to ‘gender’. Due to his height, he was most suited for portraying a model, for instance, which then rather responds to the standards of the fashion industry. It should also be remembered that, especially in smaller theatre houses and cooperations with the independent *Freie Szene*, the possibilities of casting are severely limited, due to budget constraints, availability, etc. (Matzke, 2013). Whilst Radakovits’ performance attracts a lot of laughter and was heralded by critics as a standout (Harter, 2024), the comedic element is not intended to mock the character. For Marboe, it was important that the play outlines how feminism affects/should affect anyone, including and especially the male population.

[...] everyone has to be able to play everything, there are of course certain topics where it’s called something different when a male person stands on the stage for a female character, that’s tricky [...] but in this case it was important to us that all people are somehow part of the patriarchy and can suffer from the patriarchy, so it was also important to Anna that it wasn’t just people who read as female [...] gender can be fluid anyway and I think it’s more about an attitude or an identification or an identity that you ascribe to yourself and it was important to Martin that he wasn’t parodying a woman and I think he does it well and that was actually the same for Christoph [...] but we would have paid special attention to it anyways [...]. (Anna Laner)

From this quote, one can see that a lot of communication between the creatives took place during the rehearsal period. The Kosmos team thus reflects on its position/ality, as stated in its mission (2024c). Here, outside of portraying Kendall, Radakovits can act as an identification figure for viewers that seek to identify with a male actor on stage. This facilitates not only identification but also the communication of the message: Feminism is for everyone, including *you*, the *male* spectator. What is noticeable, however, is that Radakovits aka Kendall is the rather inferior ‘warrior’ of all the sisters, he/she hesitates to attack at first when it comes to a group fight and, in contrast to the others, initially wears a more ‘feminine’ costume, a floor-length skirt/dress, which is eventually stripped off to reveal a more combative, tight-fitting costume (see Figure 5). My understanding of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ clothing reflects a binarity that is dictated by the contemporary fashion industry (which can also deconstruct it), so this aspect might be particularly noticeable to me because a person who reads as male wears an outfit that I consider to be more feminine (Evans and Thornton, 1991). This reading is supported by a social construct that even appears backwards from a historical perspective: In the early modern period, i.e. in Shakespeare’s time and theatre, it was natural for men to wear skirts and dresses on stage; yet this also only

happened parallel and due to a woman's inferior status in social spaces (Howard, 1993). Here, in *KUWTP*, however, it makes sense to portray Kendall in a more feminine way, as it references the paradoxes of representation in the modeling industry in which this sister made a name for herself, rather than specific expressions of gender.



Figure 5: Kris/Knöll and Kendall/Radakovits, *KUWTP*, Kosmos Theater, 2024a.

In one scene, Kim/Gurrola and the presenter/Hemmer talk alone on stage about the family's popularity, while making eye contact with the audience. This talk gives an overview of the family's history without being visual. When he asks a question about the problem of women-murdering men (and references the O. J. Simpson trial, in which the family father, Robert Kardashian, defended the murderer and Kris Jenner stood by her murdered friend Nicole), Kim/Gurrola says: "we always had to be ready to fight" (Marboe, 2024). The 'we fight' element offers a smooth transition from the Kardashians' egocentrism to the Amazons' community activism. Everyone jumps onstage, the scene gets dark, threatening music plays and the group speaks in chorus about the interconnectedness of capitalism and feminism. Similar rapid scene changes, where the group suddenly turns into 'one' (Amazonian/suffragette) myth, leaving their Kardashian character, happen frequently throughout the play and enable a preventive measure against a 'historicisation',

thus fixation, of the character – in Brechtian terms, the “body is not a fixed essence but a site of struggle and change” (Diamond, 1988, 89).

Through chorus moments, reinforced by a change of lighting and music, the viewer does not perceive individual characters, and therefore fewer aspects of costumes and individual self-presentation, lastly breaking down a fixation on gender and other markers of social identity. From a feminist linguistic, stylistic perspective (Mills, 1995), the chorus situates these markers outside of the text whilst demonstrating their relevance in its integral structure (Youssef, 2023, 111). The chorus in the ancient Greek tradition functions as an additional actor, a spectator/commentator, referring to the general population’s mindset, and usually matches the gender of the individual hero of the play (Montgomery, 1942). Its meanings for the position, the community aspect and visibility of women in Greek tragedy have been studied extensively in feminist scholarship (see Rabinowitz, 1993), as they offer an insight into how female communities develop or strengthen solidarity amongst each other in the context of male hegemony. Female choruses in these plays often sympathise with an isolated female protagonist and thus direct the audience’s gaze and emotional response towards the latter whilst simultaneously delineating the mechanisms of exclusion in their communities due to the rather homogenous character of choruses in the Greek tradition (Jaqua, 2022).

Choral speaking has a particular function in this play. Besides simply catching the attention of the audience, it represents feminist ideas of ‘stronger together’, ‘speaking up’, ‘having a voice’, and hence the principles of collective organising and reclaiming language that underlie feminist agendas (Mills, 1995, 9). The chorus usually always features a serious message in *KUWTP* whilst the individual monologues and dialogues in between range from fact-based to ‘speaking without speaking’ – the latter mixture also important in order to prevent a mocking of individual characters. Since *KUWTP* is text-heavy and theory-focused, these chorus moments serve as moments of ‘digestible’ summary that transform text and structure into condensed messages and performance. Employing a chorus in a feminist play, especially one that makes use of Greek mythology but includes mixed genders, can be understood as a subversion of that tradition, suggesting non-binary ways of relating. It also posits female/feminine/feminist (script-)writing not necessarily as a style (of writing) but as a position (in staging) (Mills, 1995, 43). Whilst in *KUWTP*, the chorus represents the ‘mythical’ and (counter-)patriarchal nature of the different groups (Kardashians-Suffragettes-Amazons), facilitating a distinction between them, the script lets characters fall out

of the rhythm/melody individually. At the end, during a long chorus scene, the performers alternately dedicate their piece to different women in history, real or fictional or representative, who were affected by abuse under capitalism, including abusive conditions in the theatre scene. “Fuck off, no more” (Marboe, 2024). They do not embody anyone specifically nor do they support the notion of a hero/ine in their story. They speak representative for anyone feeling addressed by this piece: “This is for everyone who was there, who is still there, who will be there. Do you hear her? Do you hear her? Do you...hear?” (Ibid., 2024). The silence that follows implies an impressed audience yet also ironically symbolises that we do *not* (yet) hear or see ‘her’. Our chorus/mainstream thinking limits our senses whilst offering ways to enliven them. Before the silence gets too long, Hemmer interrupts the scene, back in his role as presenter. He addresses the audience cheerfully: “Make sure you’ll be there for next season...” (Ibid., 2024). Then he puts an imaginary gun to his head and pretends to ‘kill’ himself. It is the end of the play.

Thus, whilst the Kardashians are often presented as a homogenous group with different careers but similar mindsets, this play lets each of them have an outsider-perspective too. The latter shifts constantly throughout the play (especially for Hemmer as a presenter, an Amazonian, a suffragette, or ‘Rob’) and between characters. Such doubling/multiplying of characters is characteristic of materialist-feminist theatre (see Churchill, 1982), going against the norms of method-based acting and “performer/character identification” (Aston, 1999, 136). The fluidity of inside/outside narration resembles a Brechtian style of reported narration that allows both the audience and the performers to distance themselves from the narrative (Ibid., 65): “The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on” (Brecht, 1964, 92).

Depending on one’s sitting position, a theatre viewer only sees outlines/silhouettes rather than details. This also means that clothing/costumes, a medium through which individuals have historically constructed and expressed their gender (and sexuality), are less perceived (Barners and Eicher, 1993; Butler, 1990; Clarke and Turner, 2007). Since one sits relatively close to the action in this production, this observation is not all that applicable. However, in a traditional large theatre it would be extremely important, as a distant seating position impacts one’s visual habits and thus also understanding of the play - one would pay more attention to the voice and the outline of a person than to facial expressions and costume (Lehmann, 1999, 285).

Considering psychoanalytic and feminist theory’s insights on how the woman, due to the

construction of ‘femininity’ as being precarious and ‘other’, alienates herself from the latter



Figure 6: Cast/costumes, *KUWTP*, Kosmos Theater, 2024a.

process, “it is hardly surprising that women should use the idea of masculinity, in the form of shoulder pads [...] etc., to get credibility in a man’s world, and, indeed, hardly fair to criticize women for engaging in this form of power-dressing” (Evans and Thornton, 1991, 57). *KUWTP* manages to address both aspects by employing combat clothes that are neither too conventionally masculine by being ‘armour-like’ nor too feminine by being ‘sexy’ (see Figure 6). This ‘not but’ style - there is “no ‘writing the body’, but rather a foregrounding of the apparatus that makes the writing impossible” (Diamond, 1989a, 262) -, prevents the viewer from focusing too much on the performer’s body, yet in other regards, the proximity makes impossible not to see *a paradoxical, absolute body* right in front of us (or even between us, e.g., during one break) and therefore sidelines the meaning of its gestures (Lehmann, 1999, 164).

By changing/adapting the costumes throughout the play, the production employs feminist/Brechtian and postdramatic strategies of miming and alienation. The team behind *KUWTP* addresses the notion of femininity as masquerade and embodies it, yet also deconstructs it. The performers copy the copy, e.g., during Radakovits’/Kendall’s dramatic

lamentation/apology video responding to the Pepsi scandal. As a spectator, one laughs about this performance, including the ‘unrealistic’ mother-daughter constellation that Radakovits and Knöll embody. Yet – why does it seem unrealistic? Because we cannot read Radakovits as a ‘daughter’? *KUWTP* invites reflection on more than just the masculine/feminine binary in terms of expression but considers questions of cross-gender identity and fluidity. This resembles Luce Irigaray’s idea of “miming the miming imposed on woman, [her] subtle specular move [...] to undo the effects of phallogentric discourse simply by overdoing them” (Moi, 1985, 140). Irigaray’s mimetic strategy (1985) resubmits the (feminist) spectator to stereotypical, heteronormative and cisgender perspectives on ‘women’ to put these views themselves under scrutiny. As Aston (1999, 64) points out, this overplaying of femininity risks affirmation of the conventional sign of the feminine, rather than undoing it, which is why alienation strategies are crucial. Since the performers do not stay in one state/sign of the feminine throughout the whole play, e.g., by changing costumes, speaking in different voices, they make clear the critical perspective on their own staging. Whilst being a parody of our conceptions on (selling ourselves through) fashion, the production also highlights the importance of facilitating (gender) expression through it. Further, it is a question of practicality – the costumes are made for use in sports whilst not being entirely realistic due to their material (leather and glitter hinting at the Kardashians’ style) which also demonstrates a consideration of the performers’ sense of comfort and thus a feminist ethic in the preparation process (Aston, 1999, 44).

In one scene, Kim/Gurrola and Kourtney/Huberty, the two eldest sisters, who are often enemies in real life and the reality show, fight – with their bodies, not just with words. The situation follows the accusation that Kourtney does not work enough (Kim: “It seems like nobody wants to fucking work these days”, Marboe, 2024); they attack each other in the ring, accompanied by dramatic music. This scene is very physical, it does not skimp on representations of violence. One can, however, identify safety considerations due to the meticulous work of choreography (wrestling coach: Selina Nowak aka Zelina Power), thus, again an ethical, collaborative preparation process characteristic of feminist theatre (Aston, 1999, 39). Attributing this type of physical struggle to both the (mostly female) performers and their real-life references by staging a boxing competition instead of a verbal argument can be understood as a subversive strategy to break down gender stereotypes in sports, on social behaviour, violence, communication patterns as well as the spectator’s viewing habits (Briton and Hall, 1995).

The wrestling image is used to centre the female body's worth, its physical power and ability to keep up with the male body yet does neither imply that every physical fight is unethical or political (e.g., in sports it can be empowering) nor that the only way to fight patriarchy is through reproducing the latter's tools (as it parodies them). It also takes up the critique on feminism about the paradoxical nature of competition and lacking solidarity within feminist communities. In one scene, everyone curses each other. It escalates into them alternating the sentence: "No you shut the fuck up..." Khloé/Borower states: "We reproduce this curse again and again and again. This matriarchy, this women's state is at least the chance to do something different. What is the point of women in this world that is run by men designed for men...?" (Marboe, 2024, my translation). The room is quiet. Yet, the play, just as modern feminism, does not have a (simple) solution to this question. Again, this is followed by a direct change to another scene.

After another (more physical) group fight, the presenter/Hemmer says: "You never know whether this was staged or not staged by the momager" (Ibid., 2024). This hints at various levels of staging. That of the Kardashians staging in 'real' life (their reality show is somewhat a recorded theatre performance), that of this theatre's staging and lastly, the staging that happens through the spectator's eye.

Another scene presenting a show element and highlighting 'the body', thus challenging the spectator's viewing habits, is a 'dance' performance with music, *Work Bitch* by Britney Spears (2013). Everyone dances, cheered on by the audience. The performers do not necessarily have the 'standard model' body – this production is not about fetishising or feeding the male gaze. I notice that the audience's cheering is less based on the desire for spectacle, but rather on pure solidarity, which is encouraged by the performers. Arguably, this level of solidarity or willingness to cheer would not be reached in non-feminist spaces. Therefore, this interaction, this call from the performers to the audience to participate, can also be seen as a strategy that offers the performers a certain level of self-protection and would counteract objectification initiated by the audience. Essentially, it makes a reference to the feminist reading of dance theory, too, as dance, like theatre, has been a field populated by women whilst not being female-dominated and has further offered a rich basis for delineating and critiquing viewing habits and the visual (Albright, 1991). The message is, *It's okay that you cheer me on while I dance*, and gives the performers a certain amount of power and agency that would possibly be denied to them in more conventional theatres.

The boxing ring does not only have an entertaining value or signals a mode of female

empowerment. Referring to the Penthesileas myth, the Kardashians can literally box the men out of their space and keep it exclusive but also throw each other, despite their apparent shared marginalisation, again and again off-stage, into the world they are refusing. Overall, it emphasises that the spectator, especially in a feminist theatre, is in an awkward position – through the show element, we are asked to engage with the play but also reminded of the dilemma behind our ways of viewing the experience, especially of ‘cheering on’ or ‘booing’ a body. Whom do we interact with here? The performer or the image they represent (thus essentially ourselves)?

One sentence stands out to me as I immediately think more conventional stages would have done differently with it: “And your sexy body is not going to make any money if no one sees it” (presenter/Hemmer; Marboe, 2024). A reference is made to Kim Kardashian’s 2002 sex tape that became public in 2007 and made her famous overnight (even though her family had been in the public eye since the O. J. Simpson trial). To this day it is rumored that the sex tape was deliberately published and used strategically by Kris Jenner (Halperin, 2016). Just a few months after the scandal and the renewed interest in the Kardashians, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* was launched. Accordingly, the ‘sale’ of bodies would have been used as a business strategy, by a combative, confident woman, but for questionable purposes of self-empowerment. This event is mentioned in *KUWTP* because it addresses the different ideas of feminism and feminist action, yet also the inspection of and societal expectations towards the female body that Marboe and Laner denounce in their production. It also hints at the risk of objectifying a (female) body on stage as there is some truth in that sentence: In a theatre, one literally pays to see something/someone in presentation – whether that is a ‘sexy body’ depends on at least three levels, of creating, performing, viewing, all of these socially constructed processes. Dramaturgically, this scene could have been staged differently, more graphically. One could have shown the sex tape, one could have recreated the scene. The fact that I come up with these ideas demonstrates to me personally that I might have expected something like this due to a certain normalisation of these representations which have made me both a victim and producer of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1992 [1975]). But *KUWTP* does not employ this form of staging, only retells it, by which it opposes a simplistic binary reproduction of perpetrator and victim roles assigned by the media through (Brechtian) reporting techniques (Aston, 1999, 137). This also spares the performers and spectators from experiencing something that may have been traumatic and/or potentially retraumatising. Such sensibility to alternative staging can be seen as a characteristic of feminist theatre (Aston, 1999, 178), especially

considering the background of current accusations against large, conventional stages that consciously disregard the well-being of their performers for the sake of success and realistic interpretation (Schmidt, 2019).

Worth mentioning is the lack of props on stage. Whilst the Pepsi commercial scene features some cans, Kourtney's/Huberty's moment of frustration a drill and the break/'dinner' scene some plates, there are many more moments that could have visualised the rich content in the form of objects – a question of budget, safety and practicality certainly, yet also an opportunity to appeal to the viewer's imagination and to represent the message on the paradoxes of consumerism. At times, one is already overwhelmed by the number of references to feminist theory and popular culture that additional visual content would become an issue of overstimulation. 'Weapons', other than the drill, are not employed, foregrounding the physical, intimate fight of the performers. Such absences can also be read as symbolising the 'invisible' powers a woman uses and is confronted with in a patriarchal society, or as an impossibility of representation (Aston, 1999, 134).

Rather, a focus lies on 'memory props', an appeal to our memory through referring to events/moments in popular culture or 'standard childhood memories' that most viewers would be familiar with (Aston, 1999, 186). One of these memory props scenes includes Kim/Gurrola sitting alone on stage, shrunken like a child, there are cries of pity from the audience. The sentence "You know...everything begins in the schoolyard" invites some laughter. Yet when she gets up and continues, the room falls silent. "Ja, because the boys in the break...they take up 80 percent of the Schulhof by playing football." Gurrola uses the space on the stage, draws the percentage lines, speaks to us directly. "...and us, the girls, we sit in a corner, we take 20 percent of the schoolyard and we swap...stickers" (Laughter from the audience). "Yes, we learn from an early age not to play as a team but rather against each other" (Marboe, 2024). I notice how it becomes very quiet around me. Here, the imagination and experiences of the audience are played with, including memories of the schoolyard, probably universal for everyone, regardless of social background. The schoolyard is a metaphor that is both reinforced and broken up by the production, as Gurrola paints it through her words and gestures, but no real schoolyard is shown. It represents the space enabling indoctrination and socialisation, determining which person receives which share of public areas.

Speaking to Laner about her perspectives on space and the position of the viewer, she highlighted this scene:

That was somehow important that there are different sides [of seating areas] and I also think that you can

somehow show that certain people, when you are in a certain place, you don't notice certain things, [...] and it also plays a role in the content of the text, i.e. with the schoolyard image [...], the fact that women always take up too little space, that we are taught that way, that we don't feel like we are allowed to spread like men [...]. (Anna Laner)

'Not being allowed to spread like men' is shown here as impacting the woman her whole life, in her career, in her strategies of adaptation to or rejection of the space she receives from society. This space metaphor that simultaneously functions as a time metaphor connecting childhood and adulthood demonstrates further how 'having too little space and time' is a direct contributor and outcome of capitalist understandings of the relationship between self-worth, competition and productivity in which the woman is both oppressed and liberated (Davis, 2000). The memory prop is also employed during a 'break' that features a reordering of the stage, shows thus the advantages of the flexibility that the space offers and makes the viewers aware of their relation to the topic, as shown in the following vignette:

There is a break with an audience quiz. We are asked whether we are familiar with the Penthesileas myth and/or the show Keeping Up With The Kardashians. The boxing ring is dismantled by the performers whilst Martin Hemmer asks some trivia questions. If one answers correctly, they receive a drink. The performers take down the boxing ring, posts and ropes until only the white raised platform remains. Meanwhile, Kourtney/Huberty keeps asking where her earring is without helping. A spectator finds it and gets a drink. When the break is over, the presenter/Hemmer puts on a sweater with 'Rob' on it. The rest are back in their combat clothes from the beginning. The music suddenly stops and everyone is standing around the platform that serves as a table. They hold hands and essentially say a prayer: "If you want to make it anywhere, you need to make it here. A-Wo-man." The spotlight is on the table, there is silence and occasional clapping. Kendall/Radakovits slowly cuts a cucumber. Rob/Hemmer pushes plates across the table in a comical manner, which are then passed on. People laugh until everyone has their plates.

Certainly, such moments of audience interactions contribute significantly to prevent the creation of an illusion on stage, to prevent agreeing with only one side of the issues discussed or to identify too much (or too little) with each performer. The fluidity of the staging, not only demonstrated here due to the movable stage/ring, but through the costume changes, casting decisions,

multimedia-aspect, rapid scene changes, etc., allows for constant reflection and questioning of stereotypes, identification, entertainment and a touch with reality.

4.5 Conclusion

As this analysis has shown, the production is very rich with theory and topics. First and foremost, the piece portrays many contemporary issues in feminism. Through reflections on the paradoxes of commodity feminism, it highlights that one is not automatically a feminist when one ticks certain boxes of marginalisation. The thematic content alone does not make this play feminist. This is when the dimension of the behind-the-scenes processes come in that are inextricably linked to the economic, institutional characters of theatres, the reputation politics tied to marketing strategies and the ethics of feminist theatre-making that arise from marginalised biographies, connected to structural issues and instances of abuse in the wider theatre landscape (e.g., the Kosmos has less budget than major theatres, thus less possibilities for outreach, staging, casting, etc.). The way this piece is portraying feminist issues enables a conclusion on how the Kosmos [*KUWTP*] defines and/or depicts feminist theatre. It seems that this theatre regards the following as essential: the implementation, close-reading of feminist intersectional theory, a collaborative, ethical working process that considers the skills and opinions (on safety, etc.) of the individual performers, the potential background of the audience (e.g., through portraying issues sensitively), the employment of interactive staging strategies (e.g., through humour, breaking of the *Fourth Wall*), alienation (multiplying characters, outsider narration, playing with time, space and gender stereotypes), references to popular culture and history (also theatre history, e.g., Ancient Greek traditions), breaking binary ways of performing and spectating (e.g., through a performative, body-centred approach that raises questions on representation, visibility and the moral dilemmas behind the gaze). To summarise, feminist theatre, according to the Kosmos, is current, informed, critical, collaborative, ethical, and reflective of real-life situations *behind the scenes*, whether that be popular media narratives or its own team's biographies. This message is brought across by the specific staging strategies which, due to my literature review, I can link broadly to the fields of postdramatic and Brechtian theatre. However, not every staging component is supposed to be analysed to the smallest detail – this production, after all, also foregrounds entertainment and joy which should not be forgotten.

5. *Die Wand//Wandbefall*

Die Wand//Wandbefall, a play by director Olivia Axel Scheucher has regularly been performed in the *Dunkelkammer* of the Volkstheater Wien since its premiere on 17 November 2023 (Volkstheater, 2024a). Originally, *Die Wand* is part of a short drama by Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek (2003) which has been performed in at least seventeen other languages/countries, besides German-speaking countries, and received its world premiere in Berlin (Director: Hans Neuenfels) and Hamburg (Director: Laurent Chétouane) in 2002.¹⁹

Scheucher kindly shared the script with me which allows me to compare the adaptation, including Scheucher's continuation, to the original text by Jelinek. This has been useful as the original text features stage directions and poses questions on which issues are 'readable' and 'presentable' in 'body' and 'text' which adds to age-old debates on the respective role of both elements in culture and knowledge systems (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, 26).

Interesting about both the original text and its adaption *Die Wand//Wandbefall* is, besides their exploration of women's writing and the popularity/myth of feminist figures, that they themselves examine space and spatiality critically, as the title already suggests (= *The Wall*). The text addresses the claim that walls are omnipresent, one is constantly confronted with them (Strigl, 2006). This image is further strengthened by *the wall's* textualisation in former female literature, e.g., Marlen Haushofer's *Die Wand* (1963), Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* (1971) or Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963).

Firstly, I am giving a short overview of the Volkstheater's history and Scheucher's approach to theatre. I am then going to provide an overview of the literary context behind *Die Wand//Wandbefall*, followed by the analysis of Scheucher's staging, including audience observations and interview data. It is worth mentioning that I saw the play before reading the original drama text to which it referred.

5.1 The Volkstheater

The main building of Vienna's Volkstheater is located at Arthur-Schnitzler-Platz 1 in Vienna's Seventh district, Neubau. In addition, the theatre maintains 15 other venues which have supported

¹⁹ Currently, it is shown in three productions - in France (Théâtre des Îlets, Montluçon), in Germany (Theater Chemnitz) and in Austria (Volkstheater Wien) (Rowohlt, 2024).

the ‘Volkstheater in den Außenbezirken’-series (Volkstheater in the outskirts) since 1954 (Volkstheater, 2024c). When it opened in 1889, it constituted a bourgeois counterpart to the state-run Burgtheater and now brands itself as focusing on accessibility, proximity, topicality and exchange: “A place for the city and everyone who lives in it” (Volkstheater, 2024c, my translation). An attention towards contemporary relevance has both produced and fought the issue of cut funding for theatre houses through supporting overproduction, pedagogisation and ensembles constantly getting younger (Obexer, 2010). Whilst there are striking differences between the Burgtheater and the Volkstheater, they both, as big theatre houses, have not incorporated a feminist vision fundamentally and thus represent a conventional white, male-dominated German-speaking theatre tradition. Aligning with the current criticism on the hypocrisy of large German-speaking theatres (Leucht et al., 2023), Scheucher observes the same issue regarding big institutions in Vienna:

[they] invite women, as if they were a minority, even though they actually represent more than half of the population, and it is basically just treated like a topic, but it doesn’t go into structures at all or is reflected in the trades or management level or in what is done on the stages [...] I think if you want to portray who lives in this city, then all of these big houses fail on a very grand scale, [...] 44 percent of the Viennese population has a migration background [...] Over half are registered as female, I don’t see it. [...] And then of course the independent scene [...], whether consciously or not, simply provides more perspectives. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

This is not to say that the Volkstheater’s programme has not been open to experimental and modern formats – on the contrary, as this play shows. The latter impression is also left on the participants from the focus group. As one of them, Participant T., notes:

I like these [...] really old impressive buildings and they stand for so much [...] history and [...] old values or conservative things or something but then inside of the Volkstheater they play more progressive things.

Yet, as Laner from the Kosmos Theater pointed out, it seems *en vogue* to do feminist theatre for profit and popularity and must, especially considering the history of theatre, be remembered. Scheucher, who stages productions from a queer-feminist perspective, describes their relation to conventional theatre and the thereof resulting working process as follows:

I think that, because I see myself as non-binary, I can’t work much with [...] binary gender roles [...] I try to deal with [the history of the theatre] very specifically and to disrupt reproductions and I work a lot with

it, how should or can violence be translated on the stage and how is criticism really practiced and not affirmative. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

Die Wand/Wandbefall does not take place on the main stage, but in the *Dunkelkammer*, a small, dark room under the roof with a capacity of approximately 50 people, which can be accessed through a side entrance to the house. There is no traditional stage, hence, no clear separation between the performance space and the audience room. The spectators are arranged in a semicircle on two stepped platforms, similar to an arena stage (see Figure 7). The straight stretch is formed by a dark wall/curtain that shields the backstage area. It is understood and promoted as a laboratory in which young artists particularly are featured to experiment with new texts and formats (Volkstheater, 2024b).



Figure 7: Dunkelkammer, Volkstheater, 2024b.

Yet, this association with ‘experimental’ leaves the impression that non-normative stagings are ephemeral. Since Scheucher is young and new to the Volkstheater, it does not seem far-fetched that this space, as opposed to the main stage, has been made available to their first productions and should therefore also not be treated as a dubious measure per se. Nevertheless, if one considers the historical disadvantage and allocation of female and/or queer bodies to marginal spaces, this aspect deserves attention, especially since the *Prinzessinnendramen* had been performed in the Volkstheater before, in 2005 under the direction of Alexander Kubelka – on the main stage. According to Scheucher, “the fact that women, queer people or generally marginalised people are kept away from big spaces and from big money naturally leaves the impression that small stages simply fit your topics and that is of course not the case.” Simultaneously, they highlight that this

does not limit, but rather shapes creativity:²⁰

Of course you adapt to the circumstances and if the room only has four square meters, then you just have to work with the fact that you only have 4 square meters [...] I also think the room has very specific advantages, which we tried to use and which also make the room attractive...in general, the proximity to the audience is also interesting and good. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

In terms of their own and public perception, Scheucher's staging can be considered a performative approach. Yet, there are hardly any public reviews available. Whilst Scheucher's and my personal environment praise it, the major, and perhaps, only coverage, published in the newspaper *Kurier*, calls it 'disappointing', 'banal' and seems to fixate unnecessarily on Scheucher's reference to Sado-Maso practices (Zobl, 2023). Comparing the interest of theatre critics to other plays, it is worth mentioning that most plays, including those at Kosmos, receive more attention. Reasons for this can only be assumed yet do imply that certain perspectives and spaces receive less spotlight than others. Scheucher mentions one aspect that seems to be misread by many critics. The aspect of portraying criticism and resistance as a quiet, non-violent process, Scheucher sees as one that distinguishes a modern/performative, often feminist, approach from conventional perspectives:

I was given the feedback that [...] 'everyone loves each other and it's actually cheesy and I don't understand how that's an opposing position to Jelinek' and it's interesting because that position exists, it's the opposite of how Jelinek deals with criticism...but it is not read that way because criticism in the theatre is thought of as screaming, raised fists, bare breasts, middle fingers, swastikas [...]. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

5.2 Die Wand//Wandbefall – Background

Considering the engagement with the topic of female and feminist writing by Jelinek and the latter's close-reading by Scheucher, the textual structure of both the original and the adaptation receives particular weight as it sets the conditions for its physical representation. Jelinek's text and her references to Bachmann, Plath, Haushofer, describe literary work that has for long been examined closely by feminist literary studies, especially from a philosophy of language approach that attempts to conceptualise 'Weiblichkeit' [femininity] (Pankarter, 2016).

²⁰ Certain feminist productions 'go big' intentionally to refer to the dominance of patriarchal structures that are visible in (urban) landscapes. As Scheucher told me, one of their former stagings, *Highway of Heroes*, pays particular attention to the massiveness of the stage set to mirror the presence of the military, yet to realise its translation into the theatre is ironically dependent on the budget and space one receives from decision-makers in the industry. Austrian performer Florentina Holzinger, whose production *Ophelia's Got Talent* was invited to the 2023 *Berliner Theatertreffen*, last shown in Vienna in autumn 2023, relies on largeness and visibility, yet also a certain form of sensationalism that grants her success and more budget – her productions however diverge radically from a traditional theatre understanding and must rather be described as performances centring the body (TQW, 2023).

Scheucher's *Die Wand/Wandbefall* is an interpretation and continuation of the fifth *Dramolett* (short drama) *Der Tod und das Mädchen V (Die Wand)* from the work *Der Tod und das Mädchen I–V: Prinzessinnendramen* by Elfriede Jelinek (2003). In all five short dramas Jelinek rewrites the myths of fairytales and popular media:²¹ *Der Tod und das Mädchen I (Schneewittchen)* is a dialogue between the Hunter and Snow White. *Der Tod und das Mädchen II (Dornröschen)* shows Sleeping Beauty as a small, fat, pretty, innocent, harmless 'object', kissed awake by Prince Haider. In *Der Tod und das Mädchen III (Rosamunde)*, Jelinek explores the existence of the female writer through the character Rosamunde. In *Der Tod und das Mädchen IV (Jackie)*, Jackie Kennedy drags her dead loved ones behind her. In *Der Tod und das Mädchen V (Die Wand)*, two poets, Inge (Bachmann) and Sylvia (Plath), slaughter a ram and put it up an (invisible) wall. The five short dramas ought to be read together, representing the development of 'the woman' as a tragedy where 'she' continuously takes in the role of a dead princess. Jelinek explores a female myth she considers moribund: This tragedy does not primarily stem from external (male) pressure but largely from female self-perception in the forms of vanity and victim mentality (Pankarter, 2016, 64). The fifth drama, *Die Wand*, is the inspiration for Scheucher's play.

I regard it important to provide an overview on the original text, in order to make visible which elements are foregrounded or cut out in Scheucher's adaptation, thereby to see how they have read and staged the message/s.

Jelinek employs a complicated writing style whose interpretation, to many scholars and critics, must be automatically obsolete (Neuenfeldt, 2005, 149). This was also pointed out by Scheucher who admits "having barely understood anything" during their first reading (Stöckler, 2023, my translation). However, much would be understandable on an emotional, affective level as the staging plays strongly with images and the body (Ibid., 2023).

Jelinek mixes the worlds of the writers and the protagonists of their works. The drama lives from its dialogue between Sylvia and Inge which essentially describes the question of the female position within symbolic systems of Western society and literature. The only 'action' taking place is the slaughter of the ram whilst they are talking in abstract sentences about their lives and works: References are made to Bachmann's *Malina* (1971) where the 'wall' is the last escape of female existence, whereas in Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) it functions as a symbol of depression (Strigl, 2006, 79). Through this symbolism, this fifth drama can be read as the

²¹ Die Wand = The Wall; Der Tod und das Mädchen = Death and the girl; Prinzessinnendramen = princess dramas.

description of the woman's catastrophe, failure and lastly death (both real and metaphoric) at *the wall* (Pankarter, 2016, 52).

The original text dispenses with a strict division of roles when assigning dialogues to the main characters. According to the stage directions, the protagonists can "also double or triple, the paragraphs only indicate paragraphs in speaking, they do not serve to differentiate between the two people Sylvia and Ingeborg, both stand for many others" (Jelinek, 2003, 103, my translation). Nevertheless, the first names are sufficient in giving the authors contour within the text surface. As female writers slaughtering a ram they turn into caricatures of their biographical clichés and address each other as such (Strigl, 2006, 73).

Jelinek's *Wall* can be considered a place of surface, trick, enemy, border and/or disappearance (Strigl, 2006). Thereby, it displays the point of reflection for the woman, a mirror for her position in society, the split into two worlds/genders, the limitations of her imagination (rather than material borders), her suffering and thereof resulting mental illness. The characters discuss how *The Wall* is an invisible border, separating women from a place of critical speaking in society. Yet, it remains an open-ended exploration whether the woman has made herself an ally in the patriarchal order: "Does that mean that the woman in particular can't see anything? Probably. She has cleaned this wall until one could no longer see it" (Jelinek, 2003, 113, my translation).²²

The describing, writing woman is held back by her fight against an invisible wall whilst men fight visible enemies, thereby receive the reputation as heroes more easily (Strigl, 2006, 81): "Heroic personalities? We are not. Advantageous warfare? We can't do." (Jelinek, 2003, 106).²³ Nevertheless, the woman is mocked for desiring heroisation through victimisation.

At the end of Bachmann's *Malina* (1971), the female nameless first-person narrator disappears symbolically in the crack of a house wall, silenced by a patriarchal society. In Jelinek's text that *No-Place* is questioned, simultaneously held as a truth and a lie, when Sylvia confronts Inge: "Wasn't it you who said that you once disappeared in one of these cracks? You lied then. The wall is still there, and you are still there too" (Jelinek, 2003, 108, my translation).²⁴

Ironically, the process of disappearing as a female (writer/artist) is simultaneously an act

²² Original: "Heißt das, daß die Frau ganz besonders nichts sieht? Wahrscheinlich. Sie hat ja diese Wand geputzt, so lang, bis man sie nicht mehr gesehen hat" (Jelinek, 2003, 113).

²³ Original: "Heldenhafte Persönlichkeiten? Wir nicht. Vorteilhafte Kriegsführung? Können wir nicht" (Jelinek, 2003, 106).

²⁴ Original: "Warst du es nicht, die gesagt hat, daß du einmal in einem dieser Risse verschwunden seist? Da hast du gelogen. Die Wand ist noch da, und du bist auch noch da" (Jelinek, 2003, 108).

that makes her more visible, including Jelinek herself (Strigl, 2006, 83). Applied to its theatrical interpretation, this becomes an act in a doubled sense. *How* she disappears forms her posthumous image which might foreground her death rather than making her life work discernable.

Another of Jelinek's *No-Places* includes the *private versus public spaces* whose juxtaposition has, since second-wave feminism, brought a clear political agenda about, *the personal is political* (Landes, 1998). The description of household chores which the woman has historically been linked to receives much scrutiny under Jelinek's inspection. Rather than a peaceful occupation, it is the producer of female anger and aggression: The woman drowns in her misery, further keeps this wall up and should not be pitied: "Even this wall should love you! So that you may be! You are insatiable. It serves you right for being eaten by it" (Jelinek, 2003, 110, my translation).²⁵

Sarcastically, the text relates the protagonists' deep pain to their housewife position: "Now I have this beautiful gas oven and I can stick my head in it in peace until it cooks. Don't forget: turn on the kitchen timer beforehand!" (Ibid., 129).²⁶ Whilst this is a reference to Plath's suicide, Jelinek does not trivialise mental illness experienced by women under patriarchy (Strigl, 2006, 88), but criticises self-legitimation through suffering and thus denounces society's and literary critics' romanticisation of biographical myths (Pankarter, 2016, 57). Following this, the invisible wall also symbolises the invisibility of these feminist 'icons' as 'normal people' and our inability to accept their (dignified) death. Jelinek's complex language might just try to stop our doomed attempt to make all these writers' biographies readable, logical and pleasing.

The topic of a (dignified death) brings forward Jelinek's focus on animality and 'the flesh'. Whilst the killing of the ram has an animalistic element, delineating a historical, exploitative, imbalanced human-animal/nature relationship which has been explored extensively in feminist theory (see, e.g., Cudworth et al., 2023), the element of flesh (which dies first, before the bones) receives particular weight: The sarcasm of the piece describes a 'tearing' and 'scraping up' of patriarchal conditions (sarkasmos, greek: sarx/sarkos: the flesh) which makes sarcastic parody a suitable rhetoric strategy for feminist theatre. The flesh also acts as a symbol of transience which the woman has been subjected to (Strigl, 2006, 89).

²⁵ Original: "Sogar diese Wand soll dich lieben! Damit du seist! Du bist unersättlich. Es geschieht dir recht, dass du von ihr gefressen wurdest" (Jelinek, 2003, 110).

²⁶ Original: "Nun habe ich diesen schönen Gasofen und kann in Ruhe meinen Kopf hineinstecken, bis er gar wird. Nicht vergessen: vorher die Küchenuhr einschalten!" (Jelinek, 2003, 129).

References to mythology, to Uranos and Kronos in the first sentences, have been interpreted by Strigl (2006, 83) as a linkage between the female desire of the father's sex and the female writer's wish to have 'the phallus', thus the power of/over language. Concurrently, a connection to psychoanalytic and Lacanian theories of the phallus is given, including the symbolism of 'speaking whilst not speaking' as a woman, represented by the invisible wall.

Further, the reference to the blind seer Teiresias (in Greek mythology both male and female) is employed to show that even the one whose attributed specialty is invisibility and blindness, who can see 'differently', does not see (Strigl, 2006, 90). Teiresias is "way too late, as always, so she is running straight into what is coming and what she should be predicting, and smashes her forehead" (Jelinek, 2003, 136, my translation).²⁷ Generally, the 'shadow' element receives much attention in mythology; ironically, the shadow existence of the woman becomes visible in the underworld, myths, death (Strigl, 2006, 91). The reference to climbing a wall, up towards the sun, corresponds to the search for truth more generally, especially in Homer's *Odyssey* (Pankarter, 2016, 60). "The shadows didn't come to us, so we come to them now (134) – Yet, maybe we are the shadows?" (Jelinek, 2003, 126, my translation).²⁸

In contrast to *Odyssey*, the women are not successful; they fall back into their housewife existence with their only own possession – the cutlery. Taken further, this symbolises the paradox of mutual accusations of blindness between women/feminists and a further form of the invisible wall – that which the woman feeds herself (Tanenbaum, 2011). Jelinek demonstrates that, to her, female visibility/subjectification is impossible in a world of black-and-white thinking. The invisible wall has developed into a "masochistic fetish object" that the woman denounces but obsesses over, like a toxic relationship through which she stabilises her submissive role in patriarchy (Pankarter, 2016, 57).

From all this emerges the question how one could stage such *No-Places*. The focus of Scheucher's queer-feminist perspective can arguably be found in the presentations of body and space and the creative engagement with the *Dunkelkammer*. Furthermore, it is also visible in their continuation where a 'Raum der Schwäche' (*a room of weakness*) that questions the status of (female) powerlessness is created.

²⁷ Original: "[...] viel zu spät, wie immer, sodaß sie in das, was kommt und was sie voraussagen sollte, direkt hineinrennt und sich die Stirn zerschmettert" (Jelinek, 2003, 136).

²⁸ Original: "Die Schatten sind nicht zu uns gekommen, also kommen wir jetzt zu ihnen" (Jelinek, 2003, 134); „Ob etwa wir die Schatten sind?“ (Jelinek, 2003, 126).

5.3 Feminist themes in *Die Wand*//*Wandbefall*

The themes of Scheucher's production are largely congruent with the original; the text, except for the beginning part, is not altered much in its chronology, but interpreted through special staging strategies (see 5.4). However, Jelinek's original is divided into two parts; the first one focusing on the linguistic obstacles of visualising the wall, the second foregrounding the corporeal, material manifestation of it - which is also obvious in the sudden lack of the term 'Wand' (Pankarter, 2016, 59). Scheucher extracts the first paragraphs from the second part to put them right at the beginning, thus conveys a focus on the body. The body and a performative approach are main themes in this production. Interesting to see is Scheucher's interpretation of Jelinek's stage directions. As can be seen later, it demonstrates somehow what Kristeva's concept of the 'true-real' points out: that (script)writing (by Jelinek) gives "the body axiological (truth-telling status), but [has] made it impossible for that body to tell the truth", therefore requiring a 'gap' between the performer and the text (Diamond, 1989b, 69).

Scheucher's adaptation features three performers (Evi Kehrstephan, Nick Romeo Reimann, Claudia Sabitzer) instead of two. At first, this seems surprising, considering that the drama's stage directions refer to Inge (Bachmann) and Sylvia (Plath). Yet, looking at the title *Die Wand* (= The Wall) through which Jelinek indirectly refers to Marlen Haushofer's work (1963), it becomes clear that Scheucher adds a third person intentionally. This constellation does not only represent a Bachmann-Haushofer-Plath trio but includes references to Jelinek herself and to various other figures. Whilst Jelinek mentions this in her stage directions (*both stand for many others*), the performers themselves can be considered prototypic – that is, the viewer reads them as people with individual histories on stage, but they also convey the message of not regarding themselves relevant – "they are speech but they do not speak", as Jelinek says (2004, 9, my translation). In the original text, "Marlen [Haushofer]" is present as an absentee, called by both women alternately with "Therese", the female version of the blind seer Teiresias. In this adaptation, she is an additional real, but also not fixed, character.

As Daniela Strigl notes (2006, 73), the less obvious reference to the writer Marlen Haushofer and her work *Die Wand*, has been missed by most receptions of the play in other places. Ironically, this confirms its message – the invisibility of 'the woman' behind real and imagined walls – not because of 'her' absence but because of the public's superficial looking and unwillingness to discover 'her'. This blind gaze can, like the male-connotated 'voyeuristic gaze'

(Mulvey, 1992 [1975]), “be appropriated by any subject” (Mathes, 2001, 107), potentially causing “men to find themselves in a ‘female’ position”, but also anyone, regardless of their gender, to miss those signs of female absence. Certainly, this blindness is also generated by the ambiguity and complexity of the text as well as by many peoples’ lack of knowledge on Austrian literature.

During the focus group discussion, it became very obvious to which extent familiarity with the writers plays a role. The participants could not identify anyone on stage, as they neither knew nor understood that the roles were not clearly assigned. They resorted to fixating on the outer appearance, rather than the dialogue, but since these elements resisted a clear definition under Scheucher’s direction, they would not have been able to see that this play was about female writers, had they not read a few words on it beforehand. Accordingly, a very specific dimension of the wall is present here - one of language barriers - that are not, in first line, gendered like Jelinek’s notion of a wall that indirectly conceptualises the existence of a feminine/female language.

In the adaptation, Scheucher foregrounds Jelinek’s elements on mythification and iconisation of the wall (e.g., through references to Greek mythology or popular culture), especially when the performers make poses exploring the question on “das Ding” (the thing): “Do we have it or not?” (my translation). It remains unclear what exactly this ‘thing’ could be about and potentially represents Jelinek’s parody on the woman’s desire to overcome the wall whilst not being interested in its nature and structures itself (Pankarter, 2016, 58). ‘The thing’ could also be compared to Lacan’s *mirror stage*. As Case (1989, 130–131) asserts, “‘she’ also sees in that mirror that she is a woman [...] [she] cannot appear as a single, whole, continuous subject as the male can because she senses that his story is not her story”. Scheucher’s approach decentres complex psychoanalytical questions on the ‘writing woman’, by, for instance, excluding Jelinek’s references to ‘the father’ (which are salient within Plath’s and Bachmann’s work). A dilemma of representing these biographies is partly avoided, as well as a too sophisticated, complex exploration of phallus symbolism with which the viewer would not be familiar with.

It is the continuation that shows a specific kind of feminist theatre, in how Scheucher questions, continues and in a certain way queers the original, since the main essence of the latter’s interpretation of feminist theatre seems to be its commitment to current discourses that question the still very prevalent messages of (Austrian) second-wave feminism (e.g., the impossibility of female subjectification and agency within a patriarchal system) and the position of criticism and narratives in (traditional) theatre which Scheucher does not consider as having to be linear, loud,

clear, etc. Regarding their continuation they note:

At the end of Jelinek's text, the question for me was: What now? [...] What happens when the powerless, defenseless position becomes productive, especially in sexuality?

(Olivia Axel Scheucher in Stöckler, 2023, my translation)

In our interview, they added:

Jelinek also said in one or more interviews that there can't be a female language of desire because if you're in a passive position you can't usually formulate it [...] and I think that this position can very well formulate a language, not in relation to a patriarchal system or a sexist system, but in principle it works and I also think that this claim to rule, to master the language, to dominate others, that it shouldn't be taken over. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

In my second vignette, I read their thematic focus as an invitation to non-binary ways of relating, questioning conventional notions on agency in sex/uality:

*At the beginning of the continuation, Kehrstephan and Sabitzer stand/dance opposite each other. Reimann sits and narrates. Whilst they perform, one also gets the impression that the narration is more personal. Reimann's voice is different/serious, everything seems less staged. A focus on speech and literal complexity has declined significantly as Jelinek's prose is absent now. Reimann is dressed in white, the others in black. He narrates the (intimate/sexual) encounter of two people in first narrator perspective: "[...] when you ask me to tell you out loud, what you should do with me. My whole body is fighting with it [...] your face is close to mine, waiting." He watches the others while Sabitzer sings about wanting someone else "to take everything from her." When Reimann sings *In Your Room* by Depeche Mode (1994), everyone is quiet. One of them brings a box. Sabitzer starts reading about BDSM practices and from other book excerpts, *The Piano Teacher* by Elfriede Jelinek (1983). The performers appear as friends, open the box, put on stickers (of 'ropes'). They whisper, smile, all seems very natural.*

The fact that Reimann is the one narrating and Kehrstephan and Sabitzer portraying the couple is not accidental.

In the second part, being a woman or gender really didn't play any role at all anymore [...] of course there are certain constellations, so if [Reimann] and [Sabitzer] were to do this dance, for example, it would be read differently [...] That's also intentional [...] but not because I want to show a lesbian couple, but because I don't want to show it as a heterosexual couple... [...] so that no cliché is confirmed. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

Including other work of Jelinek (*The Piano Teacher*, 1983) shows that an author *does* have other positions – authorship is not a fixed entity, stuck in time, nor normative (Dolan, 1988, 106). Jelinek herself criticises this public understanding of an author-work tension by mixing references to the writers’ biographies and work, thereby creating her own language. Scheucher adds:

I had this need to do it too, but because I’m looking at Jelinek in this production, I also look at it from a certain distance, so I don’t see everything the way she does, I also think that a lot of things have changed, I don’t know if she still sees everything like she wrote there [...]. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

In the continuation, Scheucher argues that the position of (sexual) submission can develop a subversive potential which turns around questions of the second-wave feminism that the discussed authors represent. To Scheucher, “in the second part [where the performers] treat each other with tenderness, [...] there is no conflict in the sense that is inherent to us in the theatre, [... such conflict] doesn’t exist, [but this depiction] still works theatrically.” Thereafter, a sensual exploration of our relationships with agency can happen quietly, it does not have to produce feelings of control, etc. Throughout the continuation, the performers treat each other as friends/lovers, exploring questions on dominance/submission/agency collaboratively, testing the boundaries of walls, private versus public spaces, violence/subjugation. The continuation makes clear Scheucher’s understanding of feminist theatre – explorative, performative, intimate/collaborative, non-binary and critical of conventional narratives:

[The continuation is] a juxtaposition of the concept of “home”; this place that is still so strongly attributed to women, but which also acts as a protective space and offers the opportunity to try things out and thus change role models. The authors Bachmann, Haushofer and Plath, to whom Jelinek refers, hid in their homes and were stylized by the reception as victims of a patriarchal cultural industry. Jelinek criticizes both the reception and the behaviour of the authors themselves, which she hardly classifies as feminist, and makes fun of it.
(Olivia Axel Scheucher in Stöckler, 2023, my translation)

At its end, *the wall is visible* in the stage design (through tape) and indirectly asks (see Figure 8): What, if anything, do you see, now? *Can* the submissive person gain power from their position in a construct and comply with it? Reimann, is taped *into the wall*, gives consent to this action while the audience watches, thereby demonstrates that consent and agency are possible, even when confronted with a (voyeuristic) gaze. Reimann explains what this continuation represents (Scheucher, 2023/24, my translation):

The very word ‘submission’ contains a paradox of wanting and not wanting, because Submitting is an active act, but it aims to be completely passive. [...] Our political system cannot understand a concept of power without privilege. SM promotes the erotic underpinnings of our system to the surface – and strives to completely reclaim it.



Figure 8: Reimann ‘inside’ of the wall, *Die Wand/Wandbefall*, Volkstheater, 2024a.

Reimann is wrapped up, the women lie on the floor. Sabitzer’s character feels bad, ill, exhausted. The dialogue leans more towards Jelinek’s writing style, although the conversation seems rather natural: “Is there a female language? Do you think that writers are looking for truth? Do you want to be considered talkative? [...] I don’t want to be considered anything. But I won’t be granted that” (Scheucher, 2023/24, my translation).

They play drunk/high, ‘fall asleep’ and Reimann, who has been silent the whole time, speaks:

What you asked me isn't easy, but I'll tell you anyway. It's the most beautiful sentences that have ever been spoken. That's why I expressly ask for silence (Scheucher, 2023/24, my translation):

I know I may come off quiet, may come off shy

But I feel like talking feel like dancing

What's practical? What's logical? What the hell, who cares?

All I know is I'm so happy

I'm a slave for you

A reference to Britney Spears (*I'm a Slave 4 U*, 2001) concludes the play and deviates clearly from the original. In Jelinek's eyes, the female/feminist mission of overcoming the wall must end with "the most awful sentences ever spoken [...] Whom of the mass of the dead you now allow to approach the blood, will tell you the truth. But whom you forbid, will leave in silence" (Jelinek, 2003, 140, my translation). Scheucher thereby reverses an image of the 'trapped woman' (in her private/household space) into one of submission, but with agency and consent.

5.4 Feminist staging in *Die Wand*//*Wandbefall*

As mentioned earlier, the writers' lives are decentred through doubling/multiplying of characters, preventing performer/character identification (Aston, 1999, 136). Costumes that do not allow for a fixed identification with a biography aid this process. The only moment where a performer clearly takes in the role of a particular writer is during a 'break' where the performers sit down in the audience while a TV clip, recorded by the performers themselves, is played, an interview with 'Jelinek', embodied by Sabitzer. Besides offering more clarity on Jelinek's message, perspective and life story, this break bridges the performers' and the audience's space, not only physically through them sitting between the viewers, but also through the redirection of the gaze itself – the performers now also watch their own performance on screen. Like in *KUWTP*'s show/reporting moments, the "audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on" (Brecht, 1964, 92). The historicity of the writers is both acknowledged and questioned, and their legacy, due to this discussion, visible in the present. Simultaneously, Scheucher can distance themselves from the text by giving the original writer, Jelinek, a face with Sabitzer. The end of this re-enacted, partly invented interview is symbolic of the theatre's impossibility of being realistic (Dolan, 1988, 106): "And are you really Elfriede Jelinek? – Yes." (Scheucher, 2023/24, my translation).

Regarding this performer/character identification Scheucher notes:

It was clear to me that we weren't doing it chorally, it was also clear to me that we weren't talking about two of Jelinek's characters alternately, but that we were dividing it up among three people and then we experimented during reading together, where do we separate the text, what rhythm do we follow [...] I wanted a kind of polyphony, and that it was spoken from one another, but sometimes also against one another, so that it wasn't one voice, but there weren't any figures either, and there wasn't a choir, there is no one body from which people speak, there is no group in that sense [...]. (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

This focus on the direction (and hence, our reflection) of speaking takes up Jelinek's criticism on the paradox of competition amongst women/feminists and lacking self-assessment. It further prevents us from fixing a (gender) binarism which Jelinek introduces through her emphasis on the plurality of voices, but which Scheucher actively translates into more than two characters. This refusal of binarism corresponds to Roland Barthes' ideas of *The Neutral*, "that which outplays the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles paradigm" (2005 [1977]), through which he refers to the attempt and need of deconstructing binaries in various areas of society, including language and sexuality. As can be seen from the playbill's reference to this work (see Figures 9 and 10), Scheucher takes Barthes as inspiration for their adaptation and continuation where the deconstruction of binarism plays an even larger role. This can further be read as a resistance towards being clearly defined, and also shows the theory-informed aspect of the preparation process that is characteristic for feminist theatre (Aston, 1999, 15). Since the text is split quite evenly among everyone, a particular sentence, association or concept is not assigned to a specific performer/gender (we read) and does not support the notion of a male dominance on language/speech (Lakoff, 1975). This could be read as a subversion of the phallus symbolism that Jelinek sustains/cannot *not* reproduce due to criticising it (in)directly.

Regarding the spatial elements/strategies, my vignette highlights the following:

I attend Die Wand/Wandbefall alone on 11 February 2024 [and again, with a focus group on 7 April 2024]. Although the Volkstheater itself has a huge main entrance, accessing the location of tonight's performance requires me to go around the building in order to find the small door with a small sign above it that tells me I am in the right place. Many steps later I find myself in a cramped cloakroom, waiting. A quick look at the other visitors tells me that we are a young audience, we are mainly white. I am surprised how dark and small the space is. The audience sits on two steps in a half-circle, closing in a floor space to be used by the actors/actresses. We are

approximately 40-50 people – the performance is sold out. I look at the ‘stage’, there is a construction with transparent ‘curtains’ which will eventually divide the space into three parts. I sit close to the entrance/exit, right next to the prompter and the technology desk, and, throughout the performance, see only one of these three sides in full.

Thus, in the beginning, the performers divide the space into three parts, separated by transparent curtains, which gives the viewer a challenge to see two of the three performers respectively. Thereby the staging reflects Jelinek’s message of invisibility and a theatrical strategy to challenge the audience’s viewing habits (Aston, 1999, 57). The performers, during their reflection on the invisible wall, look at nothing essentially, only points above the audience. This can be read as a natural outcome of the space’s limitations or an invitation to the viewer to spot the invisible wall. The separation is broken up throughout the play and lastly gone in the continuation or rather, restructured. The fact that the performers change the construction themselves both assigns them and the writers/narratives some agency, yet also parodies their blindness towards the fluidity of these invisible walls which they partly ‘create/construct’ themselves. When the performers speak in their respective, self-designed spaces (which they defend against each other), questioning the existence of the wall, a competition and comparison element (characteristic to feminism itself) becomes visible to the spectator, in a form that the reading experience alone could not do. Members of the focus group and I expressed our frustration of not being able to see everything; it almost felt like being in competition with the other viewers - also we could have accused each other of seeing and not seeing particular things.

Man rennt mit dem Kopf gegen die Wand.

Man verschwindet. Aber man kann sich nicht einschreiben. Ich maße mir das trotzdem immer wieder an.

„Du sollst frei sein. Doch aber meine Fesseln bestimme ich selbst.“

„Sei gutes Mut! Ich bin nicht wild. Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen.“

„I’m a slave for you / I won’t deny it, I’m not trying to hide it, baby“

„The floor seemed wonderfully solid. It was comforting to know I had fallen and could fall no farther.“

„Es gibt keinen Ausweg aus der Arroganz als das Zurückhalten der Interpretation, die Susinnes des Sinns.“

„Ihr Denken riss ab, und dann schlug sie, schlug mit ganzer Kraft ihren Kopf gegen die Wand in Wien und die Steinquader in Gizeh und sagte laut, und da war ihre andre Stimme: Nein. Nein.“

„Manchmal, schon lange ehe es die Wand gab, habe ich gewünscht, tot zu sein, um meine Bürde endlich abwerfen zu können.“


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VöT

CHRISTIAN LICHT, Art, Becoming an Object Among Objects
ELFRIEDE JELINEK, 2002
ELFRIEDE JELINEK, 2004
ELFRIEDE JELINEK, Die Komplexionen
DEFECHE MOORE, In Your Room
MARTINUS CHURCHILL, Die Roll und das Mädchen
BRITNEY SPEARS, I’m a Slave 4 U
SUSAN STUYKER, Dungeon Heinnicks
ROLAND BARTHES, Das Haus
SVETLANA, The Fall
INGEBORG BACHMANN, Das Buch Fraute
DANIELA STRÖM, Gegen die Wand. Zu ELFRIEDE JELINEKS Letzte von MARTIN HANSDORF und Thomas in Der Tod und das Mädchen V

Figure 9: Playbill of *Die Wand/Wandbefall*, Volkstheater, 2024a.

Die Wand ist eine mögliche Anschauung, das heißt, sie wäre es, wenn man sie anschauen könnte. Sie ist jedoch durchsichtig. Kein Echo, kein Garmichts. Die Frau ist drinnen, alles andre bleibt draußen.“



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DIE WAND// WAND-BEFALL

Der Tod und das Mädchen V von ELFRIEDE JELINEK mit einer Fortsetzung von OLIVIA AXEL SCHEUCHER Regie OLIVIA AXEL SCHEUCHER

mit

Regie OLIVIA AXEL SCHEUCHER

Bühne & Kostüm JULIAN SCHOCK

Sounddesign NICK ROMEO REIMANN

Videodesign LISA HAAKE

Dramaturgie MATTHIAS SEIER

Regieassistent LISA HAAKE

Abendspiel LISA HAAKE

Ausstattungsassistent MORITZ SCHEUCHER

Studio KUDLOCH

Abendspiel LISA HAAKE

Ausstattungsassistent MORITZ SCHEUCHER

Premiere 17. November 2023

Aufführungsdauer ca. 85 Minuten

keine Pause

Ausführungsorte Rostow Theater, Hamburg

Figure 10: Playbill of *Die Wand//Wandbefall*, Volkstheater, 2024a.

Regarding costumes, whilst Jelinek imagines two women whose clothes become “unusable” after their slaughter of the ram which causes Inge to change into a “Dirndl and mountain boots” and Sylvia into a swimming suit from the 1950s and boots, Scheucher, together with Julian Schock, decides to give the performers outfits that are not supposed to be realistic (see Figure 11).

From the beginning, I wanted to work together with the costume and set designer to go against stereotypical representations of women and at the same time, to explore femininity in an unusual way [...] Because Nick [Romeo Reimann = actor] is there, I don’t have the feeling that he does [not] automatically play a certain woman and becomes immediately readable, but I have the feeling that this rubs off on everyone else, so that no one appears to be a certain woman, because obviously there is no one-to-one logic.



Figure 11: Nick Romeo Reimann, Evi Kehrstephan, Claudia Sabitzer, *Die Wand//Wandbefall*, Volkstheater (Marcel Urlaub), 2024a.

The male-presenting thus wears white, light clothes whilst the female-presenting performers are dressed in black. When they are told by a voice from the radio to slaughter the *male animal*, loud rock music and strobe lights come on; they take fur coats from the stage construction, fight with them, until they put them on. Rather than losing their initial clothing, like in the original, they ‘win’ new clothes, aka the ‘skin’ of their ‘enemy’ (which could be read as the patriarchy more generally) but also ‘wear’ it and ‘take it off’ throughout the play.

As Scheucher stated in a previous interview (Stöckler, 2023, my translation), also the stage design corresponds to this metaphor:

Since the text describes the slaughter of an animal at the beginning, we decided to address this in the stage design. This is evident in the transparent plastic curtains, which you may know from farms or even slaughterhouses [...] they also refer to the theatre curtain, and the opportunity to perform and to go off.

The following observation by Participant T. shows that this idea works out:

I was also wondering: If we want to overcome certain gender roles, if we use then more this linkage to animals or something...so I was from the beginning thinking about that because of these big coats that they were wearing [...] They played all the time with this binary of human and animal [...] that the distinction is more maybe between animals or humans or there's maybe not even a distinction.

It seems that the costumes offer a chance to break with conventional notions on clothing and gender markers – the abstractness of them does not necessarily have to do with gender; in fact, they could be described genderless. Yet, as the focus group discussion shows, the link between reading costumes and the wearer's gender still remains a strong one:

[...] so the colour, for example, they didn't use red or blue colour [...]
– Participant T.

[...] the costumes of the two female assigned actors were more similar to each other and then the third person had its own way and I guess 'cause like they had this really high heels [...] it was quite...extravagant [...] probably it's also because of the gender, that they want to [...] make it more extravagant...meanwhile the other two actors were more aligned with each other [...] they had not super simple costumes but simpler [...]
– Participant A.

Yet, as Participant T. mentions, do “we only see it because we still have certain gender roles in our mind to look at these people, so we might see the male part or the male costume as more extravagant because he wore high heels or something and the others not?” The question arises as to whether this type of exaggeration is denaturalising or affirmative. Butler asserts that there are “limits of denaturalization as a critical strategy” (1993a, 93); there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalised status of heteronormativity, operating through a lens of heterosexuality which does not unilaterally determine but stabilises gender norms, will lead to its subversion (1993b, 27).

Considering the observations of the focus group regarding gender roles and subversion, the

latter is not automatically achieved by the strategy of doubling/multiplying characters.

I thought that one or two times that when the scene was more ascribed to female writers, then he [Reimann] as the male read person, he did not play that scene, so it was all the time, like they kind of stayed in their gender norms [...] even though [...] they tried to overcome them in their performances in general. (Participant T.)

Yet, I see this discussion trapped in binarity, if subversion is understood as making us believe *an opposite* (thereby distinguishing between, e.g., masculine and feminine). In this work, I rather see a strategy of subversion in non-binary perspectives, e.g., in splitting the dialogue between the characters to prevent performer/character identification and refusing to employ ‘realistic’ costumes. Whilst Reimann wears high heels which are conventionally understood as being ‘feminine’, it is neither possible to assign nor take this marker from him. The high heels themselves do not correspond to the narrative - neither Plath, Haushofer, Bachmann, nor Jelinek are particularly known for a public image based on looks, clothing or a ‘trademark’.

At one point, when Reimann turns off the music, a monologue follows about “Only women describe something like that, the invisible wall...Men wouldn’t bother with something you can’t see” (Scheucher, 2023/24, my translation). Although Reimann (male-presenting) receives this text, other times, Sabitzer is inspecting the invisible wall, Kehrstephan manages to cross it confidently twice. This does not necessarily mean it is suddenly not there anymore – rather it reflects the paradox and temporality of the text and its relationship to the material. *Die Wand//Wandbefall* plays with the dimensions of visible/invisible as representable elements, as opposed to many contemporary theatres’ focus on non-representability (Eiermann, 2010).

The focus group’s perspectives on this staging are essentially the intended outcome of alienating the spectator from the narrative. It shows that the spectator becomes aware of their viewing and reading behaviour which always offers an opportunity to reverse it. Whilst the impossibility of illusion by means of cross-dressing entails the risks of reproducing the norms of femininity that one might want to criticise, it also unmask the construct of femininity and gender structure to the audience (Dreyse, 2021, 41). I do not see the denaturalisation of gender constructs as the main intention in this adaptation. Employing a male actor for this narrative, can also, like in *KUWTP*, show a message that feminism is for *everyone, including you, the male performer/spectator who can also suffer from patriarchy*. Navigating an interplay of dominance

and submission and its intersection with violence and empowerment is not portrayed as a female issue per se. Whilst this play offers many points to analyse the staging of gender and whilst female writing is the topic of Jelinek's writing, Scheucher's adaptation does not make the variable a focus itself. Since the costumes are rather 'genderless', the viewer is identified as the one applying a gendered marker to the performer's body.

All this is also a question of the performer's comfortability. Whilst an obvious discomfort with the clothes can support conveying the message that 'outfits of femininity' can deform the body, the consideration of the performers' well-being stands in first place (Aston, 1999, 138). It also seems that Scheucher, through their performative approach, does not necessarily have a strong aim to achieve either subversion or to prevent affirmation of stereotypes. Perfection on stage is not as relevant to them as making the viewer think and they also indicate that they have no single authority over the performance and message (similarly to a rejection of the genius image, Eagleton, 1976).

We simplified things because they [the performers] then said that it was bothering them, they would just get rid of them [the costumes] I, or Julian, have a different approach, for us it's [...] not that important, we want to see how things work on stage...and that's just such a performative approach [...] (Olivia Axel Scheucher)

The viewer's gaze is played with constantly throughout the play, through breaks, slow motions, etc. Scheucher seems to foreground audience interaction, awareness, and perhaps even discomfort in their understanding of feminist theatre. For instance, during a 'break', the performers leave the stage, change costumes. The viewer is left with nothing to watch for a few minutes, rather incomprehensible voices play in the background (arguably symbolic for the in/visibility of 'the wall'). People do not know where to look. Such moments of silence and 'nothing' reveal the position of the spectator's ideology in the ideologies of performance (Blau, 1983, 447), yet feminist criticism stresses that these ideologies are not passive or fixed (Dolan, 1988, 41).

Another time, the performers start dancing, parodying moves inspired by Britney Spears. It is a simple choreography that they all perform towards their respective side of the audience. They present themselves in an almost ridiculous way, stare right at people in the audience. Some laugh, some seem confused, others uncomfortable. The slow-motion of the performance attaches a certain surreality to the moment - an alienation strategy that represents the 'slow progress' in feminist matters and/or links to Kristeva's notion of a female body's nonconformity with linear temporalities (1982, 35). A performative approach might have risked a reproduction of

objectification, but the obvious parody in this adaptation (e.g., the absurdity of poses, dance-moves) can be considered a strategy to overcome this paradox. Also, the mythification of the wall comes true in these abstract poses and choreographies. Before the discomfort gets too long, such moments are broken by quick scene changes (similar to *KUWTP*), e.g., through a loud cracking sound or changes to the construction.

Whenever there is no parallelism or simultaneity in these dances, I read them as reflecting the idea of comparison, imitation and ignorance between women. Whilst Jelinek addresses the issue of beauty standards (between women, particularly), interestingly, Scheucher does not touch upon this by defining their idea of beauty through particular decisions on costumes or make-up, as these are, in their words, “not realistic”. Because such room for fetishisation is not created, Scheucher’s gaze disappears behind their staging. Naturally, the ‘genderless’ aspect is a marker itself, yet does not allow the viewer to detect Scheucher’s idea of beauty or normativity.

The employment of other media is worth to note and corresponds to the multimedia-aspect of postdramatic theatre and its awareness of popular culture/politics. In one scene, Reimann turns on a TV/video of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989).²⁹ Scheucher’s association of a children film’s message to Jelinek’s study on female writing receives a second mention in their continuation and is therefore also representative of their generation and personal touch. The notion of the woman as a ‘silent object’ is demonstrated, which *The Little Mermaid* arguably both criticises but also reinforces as a product of early socialisation (Estrem, 1997).

Further, a speech by Herbert Kickl, current leader of the Austrian right-wing populist party FPÖ, addressed to Austria’s women, functions as a reminder to the audience that the issues stated by Jelinek are still very present nowadays: “Dear women, [...] you manage the household, you do the shopping, you organise the daily meals, you take care of childcare and raising children. You, dear women, are the ones who have the men’s backs at home” (Schäffler, 2024, my translation).³⁰ Together with the performers we shake our heads when this clip is played. Scheucher emphasises

²⁹ Ariel: “But without my voice, how can I...”/ Ursula: “You’ll have your looks, your pretty face. And don’t underestimate the importance of body language!” [singing] Ursula: “The men up there don’t like a lot of blabber / They think a girl who gossips is a bore / Yes, on land it’s much preferred / for ladies not to say a word / After all, dear, what is idle prattle for? / Come on, they’re not all that impressed with conversation / True gentlemen avoid it when they can / But they dote and swoon and fawn / On a lady who’s withdrawn / It’s she who holds her tongue who gets her man.” - *The Little Mermaid*, 1989.

³⁰ Original: “Liebe Frauen, [...] Ihr managt den Haushalt, ihr besorgt die Einkäufe, ihr organisiert die täglichen Mahlzeiten, ihr übernehmt die Kinderbetreuung und Kindererziehung. Ihr, liebe Frauen, seid es, die den Männern daheim den Rücken freihalten.“ - Schäffler, 2024.

this housewife metaphor, lets it materialise in the objects on stage (see Figure 12) whilst juxtaposing it with media from the ‘outside world’:

[...because] these women were able to lock themselves up at home and could also be housewives, [...] it’s also something privileged [...], that means you don’t have to go out, you don’t have to walk through the streets and take part in demonstrations [...] This removal from the public is something that this production tries to negotiate by having them in these small chambers on stage, by having this radio play in from the outside world, or by showing what’s happening on the television [...] so these fights against structures didn’t just take place at home at the desks, but for the most part outside [...] (Olivia Axel Scheucher)



Figure 12: Stage construction/costumes/props, *Die Wand/Wandbefall*, Volkstheater (Marcel Urlaub), 2024a.

Scheucher thus indirectly addresses the privileges of these writers - all white, middle-class, heterosexual, educated in universities. While the writers doubt the hero and genius status assigned to their men, socks are scattered out of a pot, a clothesline is stretched between them. The soup pot becomes something like the source of knowledge, something mixed together, not clear. The authors are desperate, one of them almost strangles themselves. The assigned roles, represented by everyday objects, are a blessing and a curse for them, make them blind, yet also critical. Basically, every object, including the wall, is now a symbol of their confinement. Since the original text is largely symbolic and it is not clear whether Jelinek really imagines the object’s physical manifestation on stage, it is interesting that Scheucher chooses to use so many objects to visualise the content, *invisibility*, literally. Through a physical/material interpretation, the play loses part of its message, but remains remarkable in the viewer’s memory and represents the reality of these concepts. Yet, when the viewers leave the theatre, they overcome what the writers cannot

overcome – they leave the wall. They parody the play themselves, unintentionally.

Concerning the performance's place itself, the *Dunkelkammer*'s size and location under the roof and its rather uncomfortable sitting environment have created different sensory experiences for me every time I watched a play there. The *Fourth Wall* is not necessarily only broken by direct interaction between the performers and the audience, but a break is already given by the proximity. The focus group participants stressed that they were “constantly aware” of being in the theatre, “it’s too close” (Participant Z.). “The intimacy with the actors” was noted several times; it was even feared. “I got really scared, because sometimes the actors broke the Fourth Wall [...] In the beginning, one of the actors was looking at me and I was thinking, oh no, not me” (Participant A.). The *Dunkelkammer* thus provides ideal conditions for alienation effects. Here, the viewers turn from passive recipients into active participants of the storyline. Participant Z. noted, “all of the seats are good but at the same time all of the seats are bad.” The frustration expressed about not being able to see everything, but also about not being able to have a break or leave one’s position easily, corresponds to Jelinek’s message of being closed in by wall(s). Visitors are subjected to a similar invisibility as the female writers, and, if they are open to it, can reflect on such perceptions and feelings of exclusivity from a certain space. An illusion on stage is further not achievable due to the proximity of the performance (see Lehmann, 1999, 164). It necessitates alertness and thus, a certain compliance to reflect or be educated – unless one does not fear to be surprised or ‘embarrassed’. Participant T. emphasised: “I felt kind of overwhelmed sometimes in terms of the space [...] there were so many things going on and there was this separation of the space in different parts and [...] I was like, ok, where do I have to look now [...]” According to Diamond’s feminist reading of Brecht (1988, 90), “the historical subject” (which is not only the performer but also the stage) “splits the gaze of the spectator, who, as a reader of a complex sign system, cannot consume or reduce the object of her vision to a monolithic projection of the self [...]”. Sitting not in the dark [...] the spectator still has the possibility of pleasurable identification.” Despite the overwhelming amount of scene changes and props which can be read as representing the claustrophobic female experience that Jelinek describes, the participants enjoyed their experience; arguably, due to a possibility of ‘pleasurable identification.’

Regarding the space/stage design in the continuation, there are at first no ‘visible walls’, but a dispensation of ‘dominance’ from the four, fixed walls of a ‘home’, and later the wall is made visible through tape, created by the performers themselves. I read this as a way of queering a space,

breaking with conventional understandings of theatre stages. The following vignette demonstrates the awareness of the room a spectator might have had (here it is mine), and especially of the change to intimacy that is foregrounded in the continuation:

Towards the end of the play, Sabitzer approaches the technology desk next to me and asks loudly whether they have any tape left. The performance seems 'paused' – I look around the room, people seem confused. With red and white adhesive tape, Reimann is literally taped to the construction in the middle. This takes so long, that I become extremely aware of 'time', of movements and positions of other audience members, the condition of the air, the effects of sitting for so long without back support. Reimann starts talking: "When I was 5 years old, I had my first erotic dream..." A reference to Disney is made again. "But not the lovely main character Ariel was the one who attracted me, but Ursula, the sea witch." The audience is addressed directly: "And I don't know which of you has seen Ariel...". I can see that he improvises here. Meanwhile, Kehrstephan and Sabitzer have stuck him into 'the wall'.

The continuation therefore feels very intimate, breaks the *Fourth Wall* many times and employs various strategies to make (here especially Reimann's) experience relatable, e.g., through improvisation. Whilst a performative approach is connected to 'the body' (Aston, 1999, 17), in Scheucher's continuation it crystallises further in 'speech', an "almost private way of speaking" (Scheucher), and thereby reclaims conventional notions on the limitations of German-speaking *Sprechtheater*. Arguably, Scheucher transforms the message that the woman cannot speak freely anywhere – perhaps 'she' can, in *her* 'space'.

5.5 Conclusion

The original text indirectly reflects both on notions that an *écriture féminine* exists, that it exists not necessarily as 'femininity' but as the *semiotic* in a pre-oedipal maternal time (Kristeva, 1980) and on its critique, that such maternal experience does *not* exist and woman writing has always been part of a phallogentric discourse (Butler, 1990). It is not clear to which extent Jelinek believes in the message she conveys (the impossibility of female subjectification) or whether she rather invites reflection on it in order to trigger a systemic change. She is a successful female writer, arguably deconstructing this notion herself. Scheucher's continuation can be seen as a work of writing refusing an exclusive allocation to either of these categories – not only because the

director's identity refutes the gender binary but also because the powers and violence of patriarchy are questioned as being one-dimensional, as either 'right' or 'wrong', 'male' or 'female', 'dominant' or 'submissive'. Thereby one is invited to question the pessimistic view on (female) powerlessness outside (and within) a symbolic framework. An image of powerlessness is reversed into one of strength and optimism and offers room to think about the in-betweenness of the former oppositions, for non-binary ways of relating. Scheucher, like Jelinek, turns away from the question of solving the dilemma of female subjectivity and also parodies the search for it, which has not only occupied psychoanalysis and literature of second-wave feminism to this day, but concurrently the latter's reception in theatre criticism and studies. Wanting to determine the success of subversion, as has been attempted in such scholarship, remains contradictory, which is also confirmed by the discussions in the focus group (*they kind of stayed in their gender norms [...] even though [...] they tried to overcome them in their performances in general - Participant T.*). Subversion has accordingly been related to a form of illusion that strives to make us believe *an opposite*, but subversion is, arguably, more about making us *think* about an opposite (e.g., of the current political state, gender norms, etc.). Illusion, as postdramatic and Brechtian theories suggest, is neither attainable nor desirable – or framed differently, it exists just as much as social constructs exist and solidifies in both a real and imaginary sense. Scheucher seems to associate subversion regarding our reading of other bodies and spaces less with an illusion on the performance level than with a constant invitation to the audience to question established thought patterns. We are not asked to read the performers as an or *the* other gender, but through the parody, the constant sensory stimulation and proximity to the body, we are asked to what extent we can imagine something different outside of binary thinking, and if not, why not. Paradoxically, questioning why one cannot think beyond binarism, constitutes already a way to do so. While Jelinek parodies the writers' search for their purpose and subjectivity, which is defined in clear contrast to the world of men, she leaves it open whether there really, to her personally, is no alternative (the text paints it as doomed to failure). Scheucher demonstrates that there can be one that is not strongly defined via the subject of 'woman', therefore does not drown in reproductions. They picture feminist theatre as a place of alternatives, perspectives and *the non-binary*, a place that is read as male and white due to spatial, historical, and institutional conditions and is certainly restrictive, but can also be queered, just like its narratives. Like for *KUWTP*, it should be highlighted that not every staging strategy needs to be examined in detail. Many effects are only produced on the level of individual

reception and are not necessarily representative of the director's thoughts. Whilst the former will shape the latter's understanding of their work and thus of feminist theatre, a large part of directing, performing and spectating entails 'just' entertainment (anyways central to performative approaches).

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I reflected on former and current scholarship on feminist theatre (in Vienna) and looked at the ways theatre-makers engage with the marginal position of feminist perspectives in a Western theatre context, thereby defining their own version(s) of ‘feminist theatre’. My research has been impacted by a stagnancy in scholarship which struggles to develop a vocabulary for discussing feminist staging/topics beyond the concept of ‘woman’, which I also relate to dominant readings of ‘feminism’ in the major theatre houses that, e.g., centre literature of second-wave-feminism.

The conditions of the respective performance spaces (a feminist versus a conventional theatre) have shown that the creative freedom of theatre-makers is tied to various factors, ranging from audience expectations to decisions on an institutional/managerial level. Just looking at the original inspirations (established, second-wave-feminist Austrian literature versus modern-oriented, multilingual original), one notes that the choice of topics and the selection of voices at major theatres still follow patterns of former success. In contrast, *KUWTP* is rather independent thematically, thus also manages to convey topics in a (simple, accessible) language the creators can *choose*, rather than must adapt to. One can assume that for theatre-makers in conventional houses (at least for those employed there - not necessarily those invited for a ‘short’ performance run), a larger limitation in terms of political messages/criticism, on and off stage, is posed by repertoire, historical, structural and institutional conditions than is the case for more independent productions. Scheucher’s staging itself is a deviation from traditional theatre perspectives and its author-work fixation/genius cult and offers a queered/modernised understanding of private/public spheres that questions second-wave feminism’s generalising notion of a woman’s fixed/doomed position of weakness. At the Volkstheater, Scheucher can, in principle, stir up more when it comes to direct confrontations with the fundamental structures of the male-dominant theatre landscape, also by, perhaps, not always *preaching to the converted*, which is certainly reproduced in explicitly queer and/or feminist theatre. Both productions’ version of feminist theatre is current, (quietly) critical, queer/non-binary, non-linear, (ideally) accessible.

Both plays, by adding a personal touch (e.g., emphasising the ensemble’s individual skills) respond indirectly to feminist notions on positionality and ‘the personal is political’. Congruent with Leucht et al.’s study (2023), contemporary feminist theatre in Vienna is thus not only to be

understood as a ‘feminist aesthetic/gaze’ but also as a ‘feminist way of working’, manifested in cooperation and consensual communication.

Yet, none of the productions is dedicated solely to activism or a political agenda; there is also their own desire to simply tell stories, and not everything is aimed exclusively at the viewer and at methodologies/languages of *impact* with its “its neoliberal, quasi-positivist implications” (Snyder-Young and Omasta, 2022, 3). Understanding feminist theatre as primarily didactic would foreground the opinion of the creator, an outdated genius cult, yet here, the collaborative thought and various interpretations are encouraged. After all, feminist theatre also wants to simply entertain. If one were to overlook the last component, one would understand feminist theatre as reactive, tied exclusively to traditions that should be opposed, and less than an artform that can create and direct narratives on its own. Further, performative approaches, salient in postdramatic and feminist theatre, are not automatically subversive, also because audience experiences vary greatly. For that, any theatre is too much of a paradox, marked by intended and unintended effects of mimesis, illusion and reproduction (Menke, 2018). One should refrain from viewing productions or interpretations as fixed and perceive the theatre space, along with its paradoxes, above all as a place of simultaneities, of heterotopias (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986). If we talk about subversion, we should concentrate more on how a change in thinking is created through theatres’ own narratives, and not just by focusing on the paraphrasing of old narratives. While *KUWTP* embodies the former, *Die Wand//Wandbefall* mixes both and shows a way of breaking with old traditions.

A commitment to intersectionality and diversity remains hampered by language barriers and conditions of making the training for performers and theatre-makers accessible to various social groups. Discontent about this has been clear to me during the interviews, but if one pays close attention, one can read/see it between the lines and staging strategies of both productions, e.g., *KUWTP* stays very self-critical due to its reflection on whiteness, *Die Wand//Wandbefall* centres a non-binary aspect and includes references to international popular culture (still Western-centric, however).

It is worth questioning to what extent art only exists/is created when it is viewed and analysed, by a scholar, theatre critic, the audience. Most spectators come to be entertained or to learn. Very few are critics/scholars. What is the ultimate position of the spectator? To which extent do they play a role? Certainly, scholarship/criticism remains essential, not only at the level of

analysis, which is still based on old patterns of mere text analysis and may not yet have the appropriate vocabulary for performance analysis, but it is all the more important when it comes to maintaining a discourse that enables creators to work in the future, which also includes the study of working/institutional conditions and ultimately the attractiveness of a theatre and satisfaction of the audience (after which studying their reactions is equally crucial). Connected to this, the analysis of content is again fundamental.

Concluding, it is impossible to identify one form of feminist contemporary theatre in Vienna; many approaches are somewhat situated between examining/criticising (the limitations of) former discourses of first- and second-wave feminism and their impact on (feminist) theatre studies and redefining/queering the latter. Audience interaction as well as parodies and critical self-reflection (thus Brechtian, postdramatic, performative strategies), are central, besides a creative examination of the possibilities of non-conventional spaces and the queering/incorporation of psychoanalytic theories. Most plays that I watched for this study highlight that feminism is/should be for everyone and entails responsibilities, ethics and solidarity; not every woman, not everyone criticising neoliberalism/patriarchy is automatically a feminist.

For future studies, I suggest a revision of scholarship that connects on- and off-stage-dimensions, approaches in theatre and theatre studies between different countries and political contexts (starting with cross-reading the Eurocentric and Americentric contexts and looking beyond them) and recognises how contemporary theatre-makers have responded to not only feminist issues generally but in theatre as a workplace specifically. Whilst we see an increase in feminist productions and perspectives, what do we still not see? And how do we know what we do not see yet? Are the walls of the theatre as restrictive as we think? To which extent do the affected theatre-makers have/perform agency despite their marginalisation? Such questions could/should inspire upcoming scholarship, still keeping in mind that there exists not one single definition/discourse of 'feminist theatre'. After all, theatre studies must remain current. This not only concerns an eye on feminism or gender, but also studies on migration, class, ability, etc., and generally a socio-cultural awareness of the respective society, thus a holistic incorporation of intersectional perspectives from various disciplines, also so that feminist plays are not only discussed within a feminist 'bubble'.

APPENDIX

1. Interview questions

1.1 Interview Kosmos Theater with dramaturg Anna Laner

1. Your staging is an interpretation of the original play by Thomas Köck and Mateja Meded. Merging the worlds of Penthesilea's Amazons and the Kardashians was their idea. What ideas do you personally see represented in this storytelling?
2. Have there been particular challenges in the adaptation to Vienna's Kosmos Theater, e.g., did you have or want to change, depart from the original? If yes, why?
3. The production takes in a critical perspective on the lifestyle of the Kardashians but also criticises the media hype and backlash they receive, especially with regards to comments on their bodies and the hypocrisy/greenwashing of advertisement and fashion industries. What roles have feminist theory and scholarship taken in during the process of staging and rehearsing?
4. The main 'stage' is a boxing ring. How did you make the decisions on the stage set?
5. As part of my research, I am particularly interested in how "gender" is portrayed on the stages in Vienna. To what extent do you play with this concept, its constructs and stereotypes in your production, e.g., through the selection of costumes, instructions to the performers and assumptions about the opinions of the audience?
6. Should you know and want to share more about the following: What challenges did the performers encounter when it came to things like spatial perception, audience proximity, gender roles, costume?
7. How would you define feminist theatre and what role does *KUWTP* or your perspective take within that definition?
8. The Kosmos Theater is a feminist theatre which clearly represents feminist values. How different is the process of staging a play in and for such a space to the process at conventional theatre houses (in case you are familiar with them)?
9. What opportunities and challenges are behind having a separate space for feminist theatre in Vienna, also considering the, I assume, different audience you reach?

10. The Kosmos Theater does not have a traditional stage like the big traditional theatre houses in Vienna. It is flexible and adaptable, thus gives multiple opportunities to engage and interact with the audience. Is the latter crucial for feminist theatre?
11. Considering that there are currently a lot of debates in German-speaking countries and in theatre studies about gender quotas, gender orders and binaries, feminism, MeToo and abuse of power: What (political and/or social) role do you ascribe to theatre, be it in theory, practice or to theatre as an institution?

1.2 Interview with Olivia Axel Scheucher, Volkstheater Vienna

1. Both in the original version and in this production, biographical snippets from Ingeborg Bachmann, Sylvia Plath and Marlen Haushofer (indirectly) mix with criticism of Western history and thought. The performers do not each represent one person consistently or directly and also the metaphor of an invisible wall seems almost impossible to represent. To what extent was Jelinek's text a challenge in terms of translating various allusions to life works and thought patterns into something as temporary, material, physical as what is happening on stage?
2. Your production is not only an interpretation of Jelinek's drama, but also a continuation in the second part, which you wrote yourself. How did this decision come about and what topic do you see being presented in the continuation?
3. The Volkstheater website states that your work deals with the body and different forms of violence from a queer-feminist perspective. To what extent did this perspective and focus influence the work on *Die Wand//Wandbefall*?
4. The stage design is both simple and abstract, the respective props are rearranged several times over the course of the piece and are interpreted and reused in different ways. Depending on their seating position, the spectators have more or less the opportunity to see what is happening. What role do space, props, videos/music play in your productions, especially considering that the Dunkelkammer is narrow and dark, does not have a traditional theatre stage, but that the audience is very close to the action?

5. To what extent did the spatial circumstances of the Dunkelkammer influence, limit, foster your creativity and perhaps also your queer-feminist perspective, taking into account that people, depending on how they are read and “classified”, are allocated or denied certain spaces in our society?
6. What roles do interacting with the audience and breaking the Fourth Wall play for you?
7. Should you know and want to share more about the following: What challenges did the performers encounter when it came to things like spatial perception, audience proximity, gender roles, costumes or Jelinek’s very complex text?
8. As part of my research, I am particularly interested in how “gender” is portrayed on the stages in Vienna. To what extent do you play with this concept, its constructs and stereotypes in your production, e.g., through the selection of costumes, instructions to the performers and assumptions about the opinions of the audience?
9. Do you stage plays with a clear message? If so, what message do you hope you gave the audience with this production?
10. Considering that there are currently a lot of debates in German-speaking countries and in theatre studies about gender quotas, gender orders and binaries, feminism, MeToo and abuse of power: What (political and/or social) role do you ascribe to theatre, be it in theory, practice or to theatre as an institution?
11. In your opinion, does theatre (or art in the broadest sense) have a transformative potential for positive social change, especially in relation to feminism?
12. Since you are often on stage yourself, I will ask a somewhat abstract question that you can interpret and answer however you want: What does it mean to you to stand on a stage in front of (often strangers) people, to present and/or to represent something?

2. Selected interview excerpts

(translated from German, by me)

2.1 Interview Kosmos Theater with dramaturg Anna Laner

Kosmos theatre and feminist theatre:

For me feminist theatre has above all to do with feminist action [...] if you work together in a feminist way in a production, I think the practical processes or the work itself can be feminist [...] and on the other hand bringing feminist topics to the forefront in the program [...] we at the Kosmos Theater have set ourselves the goal of raising questions beyond binary gender orders and taking action against patriarchal hegemony [...] so above all we make sure that we enable a non-discriminatory, anti-racist working process.

I think, on the one hand, it's great that there is such a house, but on the other hand, it's also a shame that something like that is needed [...] that there needs to be an explicitly feminist theatre [...] you can see that there's still a bit of a prevailing quota, that there are still more male directors on the big stages.

[...] there is predominantly a queer and female audience.

[...] sometimes it becomes a bit of a brand because it's just en vogue to make feminist theatre or rather to act as if you're making feminist theatre [...] to attract young people into the audience.

Swiss show:

[the] trash glamour [...] the way it's written [...] they've already done it very perfectly in their options there and their house is about the same size as ours so in terms of budget it's similar.

Staging:

For Anne Marboe and for me too, sport is a reference we like to work with and somehow the idea soon came to mind to include the wrestling [...] that also suits the Kardashians who somehow have to do with fitness but on the other hand, this also relates to the fight with the Amazons and yet it is all just a show.

[...] there are of course certain topics where it's called something different when a male person stands on the stage for a female character, that's tricky [...] but in this case it was important to us that all people are somehow part of the patriarchy and can suffer from the patriarchy, so it was also important to Anna that it wasn't just people who read as female [...] gender can be fluid anyway and I think it's more about an attitude or an identification or an identity that you ascribe to yourself and it was important to Martin that he wasn't parodying a woman and I think he does it well and that was actually the same for Christoph [...] but we would have paid special attention to it anyways [...]

That was somehow important that there are different sides [of seating areas] and I also think that you can somehow show that certain people, when you are in a certain place, you don't notice certain things, [...] and it also plays a role in the content of the text, i.e. with the schoolyard image [...], the fact that women always take up too little space, that we are taught that way, that we don't feel like we are allowed to spread like men [...]

2.2 Interview with Olivia Axel Scheucher, Volkstheater Wien

Interpreting Jelinek and continuation:

I was given the feedback that [...] 'everyone loves each other and it's actually cheesy and I don't understand how that's an opposing position to Jelinek' and it's interesting because that position exists, it's the opposite of how Jelinek deals with criticism...but it is not read that way because criticism in the theatre is thought of as screaming, raised fists, bare breasts, middle fingers, swastikas [...]

Jelinek is inaccessible, even for German speakers. You can't understand it the first time, I think [...]. And in the second part, things happen in such a short time, such different ideas collide with each other, that I think it's somehow difficult to keep up with it the moment you find out about it [...] I don't think that's necessary at all. I don't expect it to be possible at all.

[...] Jelinek is looking at a generation [...] of literary predecessors [...] of role models that she might have looked to as a young woman [...] she is also somehow arrested in this female

authorship and I think that on the one hand she distances herself from it and on the other hand develops it further and develops her own language [...] and I had this need to do it too, but because I'm looking at Jelinek in this production, I also look at it from a certain distance, so I don't see everything the way she does, I also think that a lot of things have changed, I don't know if she still sees everything like she wrote there [...]

Jelinek also said in one or more interviews that there can't be a female language of desire because if you're in a passive position you can't usually formulate it and that's also what *The Piano Teacher* deals with and I think that this position can very well formulate a language, not in relation to a patriarchal system or a sexist system, but in principle it works and I also think that this claim to rule, to master the language, to dominate others, that it shouldn't be taken over. I no longer find that interesting or productive from a feminist perspective and that's why in the second part I wanted to concentrate on this weak position and what can be productive about it.

The only thing I would definitely say, which was clear from these three names, is that it's about specific women...all three of them are white, they were all middle-class, they all studied, they were all in relationships with men, were married or even had children, lived heterosexual to the outside world, were all either here in Austria or in the USA, so very Western [...] and I believe that this image of the housewife is also an inherently Eurocentric white one [...] I thought for a long time about whether I should really go into this and then decided against it, so I would say that the fur coats, for example, or this whole outfit, the aprons and so on, make that clear, but it's actually not a mark, because white people are not marked, i.e. they are white women from the middle class, so that doesn't necessarily become visible. Because that's exactly how it is in the source text, I think that I rather queered it in the translation [...] I would say that [...] because] these women were able to lock themselves up at home and could also be housewives, or not, [...] it's also something privileged [...], that means you don't have to go out, you don't have to walk through the streets and take part in demonstrations [...] This removal from the public is something that this production tries to negotiate by having them in these small chambers on stage, by having this radio play in from the outside world, or by showing what's happening on the television [...] so these fights against structures didn't just take place at home at the desks, but for the most part outside [...]

And of course, I also pursue a political agenda, because if I consider certain images of women to be political or sexist or whatever and then work against them, then of course there is a certain message that I want to convey. I think there are a lot of different messages in there.

In the second part [where the performers] treat each other with tenderness, [...] there is no conflict in the sense that is inherent to us in the theatre, [...] such conflict] doesn't exist, [but this depiction] still works theatrically [...]

Later in the second part, home is [also shown as] someone else's room and you can try out certain things there, so it is also a room that should offer possibilities and does not only have a negative connotation [...]

We simplified things because they [the performers] then said that it was bothering them, they would just get rid of them [...] and I, or Julian, have a different approach [...] we want to see how things work on stage...and that's just such a performative approach [...]

It was clear to me that we weren't doing it chorally, it was also clear to me that we weren't talking about two of Jelinek's characters alternately, but that we were dividing it up among three people and then we experimented during reading together, where do we separate the text, what rhythm do we follow [...] I wanted a kind of polyphony, and that it was spoken from one another, but sometimes also against one another, so that it wasn't one voice, but there weren't any figures either, and there wasn't a choir, there is no one body from which people speak, there is no group in that sense [...]

I wanted this natural, almost private way of speaking, you just tell something about yourself [...] deal with text in a completely different way.

In the second part, being a woman or gender really didn't play any role at all anymore [...] of course there are certain constellations, so if [Reimann] and [Sabitzer] were to do this dance, for example, it would be read differently, as if [Sabitzer] and [Kehrstephan] were doing that now.

That's also intentional [...] but not because I want to show a lesbian couple, but because I don't want to show it as a heterosexual couple... [...] so that no cliché is confirmed.

From the beginning, I wanted to work together with the costume and set designer to go against stereotypical representations of women and at the same time, to explore femininity in an unusual way [...] Because Nick [Romeo Reimann = actor] is there, I don't have the feeling that he does [not] automatically play a certain woman and becomes immediately readable, but I have the feeling that this rubs off on everyone else, so that no one appears to be a certain woman, because obviously there is no one-to-one logic.

I think that, because I see myself as non-binary, I can't work much with [...] binary gender roles [...]

Space:

The fact that women, queer people or generally marginalised people are kept away from big spaces and from big money naturally leaves the impression that small stages simply fit your topics and that is of course not the case.

Of course you adapt to the circumstances and if the room only has four square meters, then you just have to work with the fact that you only have 4 square meters [...] I also think the room has very specific advantages, which we tried to use and which also make the room attractive...in general, the proximity to the audience is also interesting and good.

Feminism in theatre:

That's still like a peripheral phenomenon, or like something extra that the house also does, or you also invite women, as if they were a minority, even though they actually represent more than half of the population, and it is basically just treated like a topic, but it doesn't go into structures at all or is reflected in the trades or management level or in what is done on the stages [...] I think if you want to portray who lives in this city, then all of these big houses fail on a very grand scale, even if they always act as if they were making theatre for all [...] 44 percent of the Viennese population has a migration background; I don't see it. Over half are registered as female, I don't see it. [...]

And then of course the independent scene [...], whether consciously or not, simply provides more perspectives. [...] I think accessibility is a key word anyway, not only in the sense of language barriers, but also physical limitations and so on.

I try to deal with it [the history of the theatre] very specifically and to disrupt reproductions and I work a lot with it, how should or can violence be translated on the stage and how is criticism really practiced and not affirmative.

I believe that [abuse of power is] a problem in all large institutions, but in the theatre or the artistic field it has escalated through a cult of genius [...] you are simply much more dependent on individual people in your career, which makes abuse of power easier [...]

From other interview, Stöckler, 2023, translated by me:

In terms of staging, it should be a juxtaposition of the concept of “home”; this place that is still so strongly attributed to women, but which also acts as a protective space and offers the opportunity to try things out and thus change role models. The authors Bachmann, Haushofer and Plath, to whom Jelinek refers, hid in their homes and were stylized by the reception as victims of a patriarchal cultural industry. Jelinek criticizes both the reception and the behaviour of the authors themselves, which she hardly classifies as feminist, and makes fun of it.

At the end of Jelinek's text, the question for me was: What now? In the second part, I wanted to pursue an idea that I had as a continuation: What happens when the powerless, defenseless position becomes productive, especially in sexuality

Since the text describes the slaughter of an animal at the beginning, we decided to address this in the stage design. This is evident in the transparent plastic curtains, which you may know from farms or even slaughterhouses. On the other hand, they also refer to the theatre curtain, and the opportunity to perform and to go off. It was also important that these spaces could be created flexibly.

3. Questions for the feminist spectator

(inspired by Jill Dolan's blog entries on *The Feminist Spectator* (2009):

“How does the play's/performance's structure and form help to deliver its content? What kind of spectator is assumed to make the text ‘fully’ intelligible? Is full understanding ever truly possible, with any text, by all spectators? Why do some plays ‘succeed’ and others don’t? What is it about specific production contexts and modes of production (meaning the way performance practices intersect with economic, social, geographical, and political issues) that facilitate ‘success’ on what terms?”

“How salient is identity in which production contexts? Can we assume that the identity of the playwright is a sufficient (or even partial) lens through which to ask questions about form, structure, content, address, and modes of production?”

GLOSSARY

(see also Aston, 1999, 198-200)

Alienation effect/Brechtian theatre “A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (Brecht, 1964, 192). The “A-effect consists in turning the object [...] from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected” (Brecht, 1964, 143). Regarding gender critique in the theatre, the idea of *alienation* effects is particularly insightful as it delineates and challenges iconicity and mimesis in acting, unraveling the resemblance between the performing body and its object/body of reference. As Diamond puts it, the “decentered subject implies the dismantling of the self-reflecting cogito/self, whose inferior other has been traditionally gendered female” (Diamond, 1997, vii).

Bourgeois feminism/liberal feminism, least radical of feminist positions, calls for an improvement of women’s lives, yet usually with a minimal amount of change to systems of power.

Cultural feminism/radical feminism, considers/criticises gender biases, binaries, models of social and cultural organisation, but does not recognise intersections with class and race, like **materialist feminism**.

écriture féminine “proposed by French feminist Hélène Cixous [...] is the call for ‘woman to write herself’; to find her own voice or ‘language’ out in the margins of the male symbolic order. To find her voice she must be re-located in the pre-Oedipal imaginary [...] and return to the ‘body’ from which she has been driven away in the realm of the symbolic” (Aston, 1999, 198).

Fourth Wall is an invisible, imaginary wall that separates performers from the audience. In traditional theatre, performers acknowledge it as present in the play, but do not/rarely pass through it. In contemporary theatre, many performers fall out of character, interact with the audience and break the *Fourth Wall*.

Lacan (1977) relies on Ferdinand de Saussure’s *science of linguistics* that emphasises the evolvment of subjectivities under linguistic sign systems, especially from the moment a child enters what Lacan terms the ‘mirror stage’, the world of language and self-identification. Lacan (1977, 254) employs ‘the phallus’ as the prime and powerful signifier, yet insists that this may not be conflated exclusively with the biological penis, thus with ‘the male’.

Materialist feminism/socialist feminism, links the oppression of women to historical and material conditions of class, race and gender. As Dolan (1993, 47-48) points out, materialist feminist theory “considers the entire apparatus that frames and creates [...] images and their connection not just to social roles but also to the structure of culture and its divisions of power [...] placing a woman in representation – the site for the production of meaning in theater- is always a political act.”

Naturalism includes **Realism** but additionally seeks to show the underlying causes (e.g., the environment) that trigger the subjects’ actions, from a scientific angle. See also: Benedetti, 2012.

Performativity is “a concept based on speech-act theory, and reworked by feminist theorists such as Judith Butler to explain how identities are constructed through frequentative and complex

citational processes that negate the possibility of the freedom to ‘choose’ gender” (Aston, 1999, 200).

Postdramatic theatre According to Lehmann (1999), theatre is not so much about text re/presentation (*drama*) but a multimedia, destructured process of *presence rather than representation*. His definition remains ambiguous, however, which is why his theories have been taken rather as a framework to rethink, teach, practice, criticise theatre than as a clear marker of specific plays.

Realism aims to recreate a facsimile of real life on stage, to paint subjects as they really are, without romanticisation. See also: Benedetti, 2012.

Symbolic “derived from the Lacanian opposition between the imaginary and the symbolic, the term symbolic has been widely adopted by feminists to refer to our dominant systems of communicating and writing as male or patriarchal. Kristeva [...] replaced ‘the imaginary and the symbolic’ with ‘semiotic and the symbolic’. In this psychoanalytic framing, those subjects on the margins of society, like women, will be driven towards the semiotic in the desire to escape alienation and oppression in the symbolic” (Aston, 1999, 200).

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