

WHERE I COME FROM: Ten Years Hanover Youth Theatre

Dear Barbara,

When people ask me where I'm from—and they do ask; they're still asking—I always know what to say: *I come from the theatre*. This is something quite recent. I haven't always had the confidence to give such a straight answer to the question. But it's the truth. It may not be what people expect me to reply, but it's straightforward, it rolls off the tongue—and in many ways, I have you to thank for it. You, the Hanover Youth Theatre, our school workshops, your postcard-covered office in Prinzenstrasse, the little ante-room where I made my first German phone calls, clutching the receiver with sweaty hands and staring at the table, waiting for the people at the other end of the line to inform me that (a) they weren't interested in the school theatre project you'd asked me to organise and (b) they couldn't understand my German. It never came to that—or at least, I can't remember being found out as an impostor. But I certainly felt like one. I didn't know the word *impostor* at the time, but I was all too familiar with the feeling of having swindled my way into something I wasn't fit to do. I'd left school with no qualifications and no sense of where I might go in life. I'd decided not to live longer than thirty and to make a career as a boxer in the meantime. I wasn't bad—my coach at Kenpokan Boxing Club was training me for my first matches.

After my internship with you in 2001, I dropped out of school—don't worry, nothing to do with you. I announced to my parents with a shrug that I didn't want to do any of the things they'd planned for me when they came to this country. I wasn't going to be a doctor or a lawyer or a manager. I wasn't going to go into what is vaguely referred to as *biznes* in my mother tongue. I moved to Hanover to hang out on the pavements with other like-minded people and talk about films. We smoked joints and stuffed ourselves with coke and crisps from Aldi. My hair was orange and came down to my waist. Everything seemed possible and at the same time enormously difficult. It was great. The afternoon you rang, I was sitting on the floor in the station, by Platform 9. I've forgotten what I thought when you invited me to do work experience at the Schauspielhaus. It was a time when I did very little thinking, very little planning—or at least that's how it seems to me today. Looking back, I see myself as easy-going. I suppose that deep down inside I must have been crushed by the weight of adolescence, but on the outside I was a young wannabe hippie punk, sitting cross-legged on the station floor, pulling her phone from the jeans she'd slashed with the kitchen scissors and taking the call she would remember all her life. Afterwards, I would think of that call at least once at every stage of my career in the theatre—remember your

firm, slightly mischievous voice asking me if I'd like to do work experience. You were looking for someone for a theatre production at the Schauspielhaus and had thought of me because I hadn't been a bad intern. You might ask what was so great about it: someone was needed to do work experience and you called to see if I was interested—an unpaid job, nothing difficult. But for me it was a sign that someone believed in me, and when you're seventeen, with no school qualifications and no *biznes* plans, that's quite a big deal. I didn't have a smartphone in those days and couldn't google *work experience*. I had no idea what was expected of me. I had no idea who Sebastian Nübling was, or Bruno Cathomas or Händl Klaus. Were they stars of the theatre world or had I just agreed to help out at a student production? I didn't know. I didn't even know how to make a cup of coffee. But I learnt. I learnt to photocopy texts, to take notes during rehearsals, to think in terms of theatre. I wrote my first dialogues, scribbling them on the back of Händl Klaus's text. I soaked up everything going on around me, desperate to be a part of it. Although a notorious latecomer at school, I was always the first to rehearsals and would sit in the round, porthole-like windows up in what was then Rehearsal Stage 1 and is now the Cumberland Gallery where my play *Aristocrats* premiered last year. I sat, in true teenage style, with my feet wedged up against the frame, and waited for Bruno Cathomas to show up. Bruno called me 'Kishinöw' because I was the only one in the room who knew how to pronounce the eastern European name in Klaus's play *Wilde or The Man with the Sad Eyes*. 'You there, Kishinöw? You all right, Kishinöw?' You bet! I was having the time of my life. Roaming the catacomb-like corridors of the theatre, almost slicing off my fingertip at the cutting table in graphics, sitting in front of a tiny television with the entire production team watching Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* and then going home and watching *Funny Games* again—and again and again, desperately trying to understand it. Watching von Trier instead of Tarantino. Reading plays instead of the radical left-wing magazine *konkret*. A colleague pressed the collected Sarah Kane into my hand and said she thought it might be something for me. I read all the plays in one night. I still remember sitting trembling and huddled on my bed, my eyes so wide they felt lidless. I thought I'd never be able to close them again. Such feelings are so absolute in adolescence. It was suddenly clear to me what I wanted: I wanted *this*. I wanted to write. I wanted Sarah Kane. I wanted the rehearsal rooms. I wanted Sebastian Nübling's way of directing—the way he sat there in his shades and his Communist cap. (He still wears the same uniform; I've known Sebastian for sixteen years and I've never seen him in anything else: jogging bottoms, shades, Communist cap.) He was the coolest. And everyone was as un-normal, as crazy—today I'd say as *queer*—as me. When at last I mustered the courage to show you the sketches of dialogue I'd scribbled in Sebastian's rehearsals, you said, 'We'll submit these to some short play

competitions.' And that was how I won my first prize for a short play, aged seventeen. Still convinced that I was an impostor.

Your encouragement was often accompanied by criticism—harsh comments like, 'You write like Thomas Mann. How about writing the way *you* want to write for a change?' I don't know whether I took that as an insult or a compliment; I don't know if I understood what you were trying to tell me. And I don't know if you realised how terrified I was of being exposed as someone who couldn't speak a word of German. Someone who wrote in a language that wasn't her own, who still cursed in Russian when she dropped something on her foot, who had been told repeatedly at school that she was in the wrong world, a world she didn't belong in, a world she should expect nothing of—on and on until she ended up dropping out. I don't know if I ever told you this, but the reason I decided to leave was that my essay on the French Revolution (in history, a subject I adored) was handed back to me with a comment on the bottom which began, 'This is clearly not the work of a native speaker.' Then there was my maths teacher. 'You must be good at maths,' he told me in front of the entire class, 'you're Jewish.' And no one said a word, no one challenged him; I threw my book at him and he threw his at me and that was the end of it. I don't think I talked much about the things that happened to me in class and at break, because I wasn't ready to face up to them. Being ostracised cuts deep when you're young; you have no defence strategies. Everything is personal, everything is final. When things are going badly, experiences like that shape your personality; you are shaped by fear and distrust and the instinct to run away. But I was lucky. I had people like you. You never made me feel I might not manage to do the things you asked of me. And so I managed. When I was sixteen and still convinced I couldn't speak German, you gave me a list of teachers and asked me to ring them to arrange appointments for school visits. You didn't seem to care about my accent; you ignored the look of terror on my face. Before the internship with you, every phone call, every official appointment was torture; I was sure no one would understand me. (Though, with hindsight, I think my German was probably as good as that of any literate German teenager.) You said I could write. But you told me to write what I wanted and how I wanted. It took me a long time to work out what you meant. Maybe I'm still working it out today. Or maybe my first novel helped me to understand at last the many possibilities of writing—what it means to develop a voice of one's own and to use it.

You prepared the ground for that—and I'm not the only one you helped. You have shown so many young people how to be themselves. Young people—adolescents—still living at home, still struggling with their parents'

expectations, not yet able to say, 'Look, this is my life!' You made us feel it was all right to find out who we wanted to be. We could rebel, if we liked; it was part of the process. We could feel insecure—that was life.

But you never downplayed the difficulties of self-discovery. You never lied to us. When I said I wanted to study theatre directing, you introduced me to Nurkan Erpulat who was at the Schauspielhaus Hanover with you, directing *Home in the Head*. Nurkan had been the first Turkish student to graduate from the Ernst Busch Acting School in Berlin and he gave me a full report of the horrors involved. It didn't stop me from auditioning.

I hesitated for a long time before applying to study writing for the stage at the University of the Arts. I didn't think it was for me. I thought institutions like that were for a different sort of person—not the sort who takes one terrified look at the university building and thinks, *They'll never let me in. (And if they do, it'll be a matter of weeks before they realise I'm an impostor.)* It was all nonsense, of course, but how are you to know that when you're young and terrified of rejection? Or, to look at it another way: what is more heartening than to know that everyone is afraid of rejection? That there is no one who isn't plagued by doubts? No one who isn't waiting to be exposed as an impostor? I have come to realise that only genuine impostors feel no fear. Only the shameless know no doubts.

Some years later, you moved from the Schauspielhaus Hanover to the Deutsches Theater Berlin and then to Düsseldorf where you were given your own stage. You continued to make incredible theatre—I often came to watch. The singing flower I had once given you for your birthday moved with you wherever you went; it stood in your office, on the wall behind you and grew out of your shoulder when you sat at your desk. You invited Nurkan Erpulat and me to work on the big stage of the Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf. By then I had graduated from the University of the Arts and was a fellow at the Tarabya Academy in Istanbul, working on my first novel.

While I was in Istanbul I had a chance encounter which said so much about you. I was sitting outside a café in Karaköy, trying to read, when I was approached by a young man. Once we had established that I didn't want to marry him, we talked about Hanover which was where he happened to come from. 'Barbara Kantel?' he yelled and people on the street turned to look at us. 'Wallah, what are you saying, she's my theatre mama, she did everything for me—I mean, she made me who I am!' Murat is now a theatre and film actor. I have met so many people who have said similar things. A whole generation of theatre-makers react to the name 'Barabara Kantel' the way they might react if you said, 'Kendrik Lamar,' or perhaps the way people reacted to the words 'the Beatles' a generation ago. We shriek. You are etched into the memories of our collective adolescence. You are our superhero. We have made a legend of you; we remember you as the woman who did cool theatre stuff with

us. Stuff—what stuff? We don't know exactly. We can't quite work out what you did to stop us becoming boxers or dealers or bankers. But we are a generation of theatre people full of confident self-doubt who make theatre and make theatre possible. We continue to reinvent theatre because you showed us at a crucial stage in our development that we can be whatever we want. That we can write the way we want. That language—the stage—our bodies—are ours to do what we like with. That it's up to us to interpret our world.

There are people like me because there are people like you. Knowing that changes me. You made us possible. It's because of you that I now enjoy making theatre possible for others. I have the feeling that I get somewhere when I see others getting somewhere. I have that from you—from watching what you did. You never preached, never told us what to do. But you asked questions. You pushed us and challenged us and encouraged us—although we were still only sensitive, insecure adolescents.

I have known you for seventeen years, Barbara—more than half my life. We've drunk and rehearsed together—sometimes we've argued—and we hug each other at friends' premieres. It would be a lie if I said that we talk as much as we used to, but there's one thing I'd like you to know: when people ask me where I come from, I think of you. Because I come from the theatre and before that I didn't come from anywhere.

Today I write the way I want to, without having to prove to anyone that I can write like Thomas Mann. He never was a favourite of mine, to be honest.

And now we're celebrating ten years of Youth Theatre and you're here again, after a long Odyssey, only some of which I am familiar with. And I'm back in Hanover too, along with so many of the other people you made possible: Wera Mahne who has come to present her play *Girls Like Them*, Jakob Nolte, Tobias Herzberg, Branco Janak—and I'm sure Murat is floating around here too. We have come to celebrate this theatre and what it has meant for our careers—and we have come to celebrate you. *I* have come to celebrate you, Barbara—you, especially.