

## FEELING SPOKEN TO

### Laudatory speech for Jens Hilje and Shermin Lanhoff, winners of the Foundation for Prussian Sea Trade Award 2016

In his short story 'Vibration Background' Selim Özdoğan writes with enthusiasm about the neologisms that are born when children mishear words. As a little boy, he always heard 'civil courage' as 'civil garage' and imagined a garage full of policemen in civvies. Now, in his short story, his daughter comes to him and says, 'Dad, my teacher says I have a vibration background. What is that?'

Özdoğan spends the rest of the story explaining vibrators to his daughter. He tells her they are things people have fun with, but that they are also embarrassed by them. Because of this, they hide them at the back of their drawers and only get them out when they want to have fun. Özdoğan compares immigrants with vibrators and decides that his daughter has hit the nail on the head: you can have fun with us, we're a bit embarrassing, you take us out when you need us—and we vibrate.

When I was asked to give this speech, I was in Selimiye on the Aegean coast. The entire village seemed to be inhabited by Communist dropouts from Germany—people who had gone to West Germany in the seventies to earn money in the factories so that they could retire to the coast in their old age. Now I was visiting them in their seaside houses. They had bookshelves full of Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Nazim Hikmet. And they all knew Shermin.

The man I had dinner with the day I heard that Shermin and Jens had won the Prussian Sea Trade Award slammed his hand down on the table and yelled, 'Shermin! Of course I remember her! She was the one who was always arguing. Every time our association met, she stood up and complained about the under-representation of women on the board. She made us reconsider all our decisions. Really, all of them. If she didn't like something, she wouldn't let it pass. I loved her for that.' He took a large swig of raki. 'What's she like today?' he asked. I looked at him and smiled. There was no need for me to reply. He knew.

I met Shermin in 2008. Early one evening—this was when I was at the University of the Arts in Berlin, studying writing for the stage—I got a call: there was a new theatre opening in Kreuzberg, I should come along and have a look, maybe I could write about it for *freitext*—the magazine where I was drama editor. So off I went, hungry and in need of a shower, to this little backyard theatre in Naunynstrasse. Luckily my companion knew the barman and the barman fed us a bottle of red wine so that by the time I was sitting in the auditorium, watching

Nuran David Calis's *Café Europa* I was feeling very, very happy. But it wasn't just the wine; something happened in me that evening. At the time, I couldn't have put a name to it; I just felt very much at ease. But when I look back on those first evenings at Ballhaus Naunynstrasse today and try to work out what was going on inside me, I think it was that I felt spoken to. You can't drink yourself into feeling that. Seeing the reality of my life on stage was new to me.

Some years before, when I was doing work experience at the Schauspielhaus Hanover, I had to listen to the dramaturg Johann Kresnik tell me that he'd cast a Russian actor to play Woyzeck because his 'otherness' made him instantly recognisable to the audience as an 'alien element', an odd man out who couldn't fit in even if he wanted to. When I heard that, I thought: it will always be like that. I accepted it as given that people like me were used to represent 'foreignness' when it was required. I thought it was normal. All that started to shift as I left the auditorium of Ballhaus Naunynstrasse and stumbled to the bar. The first-night party for *Café Europa* was just getting going and that was different too, more like the kind of party I was always escaping to, to avoid the strained, formal affairs that pass for parties in the theatre. I stood at the bar next to a beautiful woman I didn't know, but who struck up a conversation with me as if we'd known each other forever—as if we'd been talking for years and she'd only been gone a minute to get drinks. We talked about the politics of visibility, representation in the theatre, the need for new role models and new plays—plays that portrayed *our* reality. We talked about acting techniques.

We soon agreed that assimilation was fatal, that we must be active, that the revolution must be permanent. I was already in love. When the woman went off to dance, my companion said, 'By the way, that's the new artistic director here, Shermin Langhoff.' I fell straight off my barstool onto the dancefloor.

Jens Hillje has been in my life for a long time too—longer, in a way, though I didn't realise that until later.

I'd heard his name, of course, while I was a student at Hildesheim. What I didn't know back then was that he'd almost single-handedly created the club behind Hildesheim Station where I went dancing every weekend. Nor did I know that this Jens Hillje who had founded the sensational 'Baracke' studio theatre at the Deutsches Theater and gone on to internationalise the German theatre scene at the Schaubühne had studied the same as me at Hildesheim. I met Jens at one of those legendary parties at Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, but it was only afterwards that I understood how much he had influenced the way I thought about theatre. So thank you, Jens. And thank you from me and all the students in Hildesheim for Löseke. I don't need to tell you that it's the only place in or even near town where young people can go for a good time.

A Communist with a vibration background and a gay anarcho-syndicalist—it isn't easy to explain what the two of you mean to a whole generation of young theatre-makers. But I'm not here to reel off your CVs—there's the internet for that.

I'll tell you what you mean to me.

Without you, I wouldn't have finished studying writing for the stage at the University of the Arts. I'd have got sick of playing foreigners and returned to my original plan of becoming a probation officer. I'd have written the theatre off as an elite, self-serving institution and been swallowed up by a group of political extremists or become a doctor to please my mum. (Yes, Mum, Shermin and Jens stopped me from training to be a doctor. But don't be angry with them; I believe that what we do here can save and heal too. I've seen it.)

What *do* we do? Theatre. Theatre that sees itself as a network—as a platform for the damaged and indignant. For those who are searching for something. For those who never stop being sceptical. For those who refuse to accept the norms. For the 'question marks', as a reviewer recently called the characters in my play *Meteorites*. For those who aren't used to feeling spoken to. When you are a young person resigned to the idea of being an 'alien element' in an otherwise sound organism, 'feeling spoken to' can save you from giving up, from becoming aggressive or despondent.

The devil's trick, after all, is not to let us believe that he doesn't exist. The devil's trick is to let us believe we are alone. We need each other to know that we are not mad or weird or exotic—that we don't have to adapt in order to survive or make a show of our 'exoticism' in order to get anywhere.

After looking at the jury's statement, I thought about my own reasons for celebrating you. One reason I admire you is that you put into practice what you are. Belonging to a marginalised group has never made anyone any better. Being female or Circassian or gay doesn't make people wiser or give them more right to speak than anyone else. If you don't organise your knowledge into structures and find points of entry, you remain a quota. You remain an exotic and, in the worst case, a showpiece that allows the majority to proclaim victory over structural disadvantage.

Your approach at the Gorki is practical rather than theoretical. That is motivating. It makes us feel welcome. You haven't copped out and said, 'If you don't come to our theatre, it's because you don't want to.'

We know from experience that people come if they feel welcome. If they don't come, it isn't because they don't want to. We all want to feel welcome. We all want to feel spoken to. Various things can make us feel welcome

or unwelcome at a theatre: the faces on the posters, the ticket prices, the gender signs on the toilet doors and, most important of all, whether or not we can identify with the issues being dealt with on stage.

No one wants to invest time or money in a play that depicts a distorted version of them—or doesn't feature them at all. I remember you, Jens, complaining about TV licence fees, saying, 'They expect me to pay full price when life as I know it doesn't even feature on public broadcasting!' It was the same impulse, the same anger that drove you and Shermin to transform the responsibility of receiving public funding into a mandate to welcome everyone. You asked the whole city to come—and the city came. Kreuzberg came. Now Kreuzberg and Charlottenburg are drinking mates in the Mitte canteen.

Shermin, Jens, do you remember discussing the look—the new corporate identity—of the building you had taken on, that unspeakable neoclassical edifice reconstructed by the Soviets? We quoted Maxim Gorki: 'It isn't enough to depict what exists; we have to imagine what is possible.' We thought about putting the slogan *imagine what is possible* on the foyer walls—and never got round to it. But I don't think it's necessary any longer. There have been—and still are—attempts to put a label on the Maxim Gorki Theatre. You hear words like 'postmigrant'. But the Gorki under your direction isn't a postmigrant theatre. It's a twenty-first-century theatre that stages contemporary versions of the classics from Shakespeare to Chekhov and curates festivals on flight and persecution, Armenian genocide and the Arab Spring. It's a theatre that challenges gender constructions—and hosts amazing parties.

The Gorki is a prism. A metaphor for a way of thinking. For inclusion that is sexy—not the result of some enforced quota. It's a commitment to democratic action.

Jens, Shermin, you two anarchists are the greatest democrats I know.

You said, 'We're getting a city theatre, so the city is what we'll represent on stage.' You made a careful study of the cultural scene to find out who didn't feature—or only as a sort of ornament—and as well as putting plays 'for' those people on the programme, you actually incorporated them into the structures.

I remember the speculations back then. What would become of the Gorki under the new direction? Wild theories circulated in the theatre canteens. A kind of durational performance was under way; everyone seemed to agree that something was about to happen in Berlin and that you had to be kind of weird to take part.

Colleagues at the Gorki who had no visible markers of 'difference' were often asked what they were doing there.

I think it was then that I first heard the accusation that immigrants are given preferential treatment in Germany.

Since working with Jens and Shermin, I have been able to forget that I am regarded as an immigrant and that

my work—our work—is concerned with minority issues. That sort of thing is easily forgotten when you work at a place like the Gorki. And quite right too. You can hardly be expected to produce art if it isn't. I know I can't.

You asked me to head the Conflict Zone Arts Asylum at Studio Я and gave me free rein to put together a programme I believed in. It was only afterwards that I realised how rare it is to be trusted like that.

You didn't try to stop me when I objected to gender-designated toilets in a public institution and took down the man and woman signs on the toilet doors. You helped me fight for funding so that we could install a lift in the studio for wheelchair users. (A big thank you here to Jürgen Maier, the first boss I've ever had—and probably ever will have—whose office I always come out of in a good mood.) You came to discussions and parties at the Conflict Zone Arts Asylum. The barman who had filled me up with red wine back on the opening night of Ballhaus Naunynstrasse became our barman in Studio Я and continued to feed us red wine because we never made it to dinner.

It isn't that we never argue, or that I accept all your decisions. It isn't that I believe we're doing all the right things and marching into a glorious future. I don't. I believe we're an ordinary city theatre, grinding slowly along and chronically underfunded. We type till our fingers bleed, argue till we're hoarse, neglect our partners, sleep too little and smoke too much. But since working with the two of you, I've never stopped to question that. At any other theatre I would have done. That's why I'm not at any other theatre. I wouldn't want to be anywhere where people with vibration backgrounds are cast as foreigners like in Kresnik's *Woyzeck*.

When I ask myself what's so special about working at the Gorki and why I wouldn't want to work anywhere else, the first thing that comes to mind is the lack of fear. No one at the Gorki is afraid to talk stuff through or argue it out. Marginalised people are often held back by their anxieties; it's so easy to get bogged down in fear—to stick fast, set hard, become a cliché. If you don't move, you end up a caricature of yourself; you go on and on repeating the same old mantra about how disadvantaged you are. I never wanted to be like that.

When Shermin told me that we were 'going urban theatre' I was sceptical. I was already sceptical about the success of the 'postmigrant' concept at Ballhaus Naunynstrasse; all it seemed to mean was that theatregoers from Charlottenburg now drank all my red wine at the bar and complained that there was no one in the cloakroom to keep an eye on their coats. I was afraid it was all just hype and that we vibrators were once again being used for somebody else's purposes. Certainly, reviewers' readings of Nurkan Erpulat and Jens Hilljes' *Crazy Blood* diverged wildly from the artists' intentions; Nurkan and Jens could explain as often as they liked that the play wasn't a straight portrait of immigrant youths, but a play about the racist picture people painted

of them—it didn't make a blind bit of difference. I was afraid that we were being instrumentalised—that people were thinking, 'Well, if *they're* saying it, it must be all right.'

And I can't, of course, put my hand in the fire and swear that the Gorki's success is entirely innocent. I can't swear to it that we aren't also, to a certain extent, being used to prove a 'truth' that has nothing to do with the reality of our lives.

We're still a long way off a dialogue between equals, and as long as we're passed about like a sex toy from one debate to the next, we're never going to solve the dilemma of appropriation. But I've learnt that it's best to get on with my job and not bother too much about the question of who's buying whom and for what purpose. You can't work on your self-image until you've had a chance to sketch a first draft. For that you need space. Ballhaus Naunynstrasse was one such space. Today, that space for me is the Gorki.

In the Gorki, I can be what I am: Sasha, Marianna, queer, Jewish, gender fluid, bad-tempered, euphoric, angry, desperate. I can be all those things, because I am taken seriously as what I am. Because I am expected to say something about myself. To take a stand. To fight for what I want and to defend it. I believe there is movement, because I can see it. Because we are all trying to get somewhere together. Where that somewhere is, we only ever know for a day—then everything is renegotiated and we start over.

Somebody once said, 'Home is not the place where you are born; it is the time in which you live.' Shermin, Jens, thanks to you I'm having a fucking good time. And my guess is that the work you do creates a home for a great many people who would normally avoid using the word.

Perhaps you know that *gorki* in Russian means 'bitter'. That was the pseudonym the great man chose for himself: Maxim the Bitter. What you may not know is that it is also a word shouted at Russian weddings. *Gorko! Gorko!* people yell. *Bitter! Bitter!* And the newly-wed have to kiss. Do you remember when we thought about celebrating the opening of the Gorki with a Turkish-style wedding? We wanted Shermin to dress as a bride and ride from Kreuzberg to Mitte on a horse, while Jens—also dressed as a bride—waited for her at the doors of the Gorki.

I don't think much of marriages, but the two of you are a reason to believe in partnerships, in alliances—and in a fight for a common purpose (even if you don't always agree). Thanks to you and your work, there are so many people out there who no longer feel alone. Who feel spoken to. Sometimes, that can mean the world.

And because, as well as being writer in residence at the Gorki, I am also the in-house marriage rabbi, I declare you the sexiest newly-weds of the theatre world. You may now kiss. *Gorko! Gorko!*

*Tr. Imogen Taylor*