

On the death of German theatre director Claus Peymann: “War makes resistance necessary—art can do that”

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On July 16, German theatre and artistic director Claus Peymann died at the age of 88. Rarely has the death of a theatre figure received so much attention in national politics, the cultural world and the media. Claus Peymann was unique, and not only because he was an important artist who shaped major German-speaking theatres for many decades. At the beginning, he was a rebel; in the end, he was considered the last king of the theatre, while retaining the role of rebel.

His importance lay in the fact that he understood and defended the theatre as a politically and socially significant and indispensable institution, without making any artistic concessions. He defended just as vehemently the standpoint that theatre should also be a place for laughter. Fools and clowns were just as much a part of his life as tragic heroes and strong women.

Peymann was born in Bremen in 1937. His father was a teacher and staunch National Socialist, and his mother an equally staunch opponent of Hitler and the Nazis. During the final years of the war, she listened to Allied radio stations and longed for an end to the slaughter. Her son Claus grew up during these decisive conflicts of the 20th century, and his youth was shaped by the sentiment against war and fascism—“Never Again.” Like many of that generation, he sought a better world via literature, art and theatre.

Stuttgart, Bochum, Vienna, Berlin. These were the primary locales of Peymann's career, but his beginnings lay in student theatre in the 1960s, first in Hamburg, where he studied German, literature and theatre studies. He later said of his Hamburg origins: “I wanted to be a writer. At least a journalist,” and continued: “It was by chance that I became a director. Someone dropped out of the Hamburg Student Theatre, where I had been involved since 1960, so I took over, and of course it immediately became a worldwide success.”

The Student Theatre had its heyday in the 1950s and early 1960s. In the postwar period, it began performing plays that had been banned during the Hitler era and whose authors were opponents of the Nazis, living in exile or “undesirable” foreigners. Among these plays were the works of Bertolt Brecht, whom West German municipal theatres avoided for a long time during the Cold War.

The 15th International Theatre Week in Erlangen 1965

A special event was the International Theatre Weeks of student theatres, held annually starting in 1949 in the university town of Erlangen. The Weeks attracted not only groups from Western Eastern and non-European countries, but also well-known theatre critics and theatre scholars from West and East. These included, among others, the elderly Herbert Ihering, who had helped Brecht achieve his breakthrough in the 1920s, and Hans Bunge from the Berliner Ensemble, who later established the Brecht Archive, as well as well-known critics such as George Schlocke and Reinhart Baumgart, a member of the famed writer's Group 47.

Peymann directed *The Stratford Racist Coplay* Henny Jahnn at the Erlangen Studiobühne. The performance on July 24, 1965, as part of the 15th Theatre Week, was a great success. Also present at the premiere celebration was the then-unknown Austrian author Peter Handke, with whom Peymann had already made contact.

The entire ensemble, of which the author of this obituary was a member, was subsequently invited to a large student theatre festival in Warsaw, where the production was also celebrated and won first prize. On the way to Warsaw, the ensemble stopped in Auschwitz and, deeply shocked, visited the concentration camp and the exhibition. In Warsaw, where the brutal destruction of the Nazi invasion was still visible in many places, we visited the site where the ghetto once stood.

The theatre in which we were originally scheduled to perform had to be changed due to its dangerous instability following its damage from a bomb. The festival organizer, Andrzej Wirth, a Brecht specialist and friend of critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, ensured that we were finally able to perform in the large Palace of Culture.

The student theatres helped pave the way for the student movement that began in Germany in 1967. That period of struggle culminated in the general strike of French workers in 1968, which prompted President Charles de Gaulle to flee to Baden-Baden in West Germany. And it wasn't long before German workers also engaged in fierce labor battles. One of Peymann's most famous statements toward the end of his career in 2018 was: “I wasn't born in 1937. ... I was born in 1968. Or in the 1960s, 1970s ...”

It was in this atmosphere that Peymann's career began as a director who shook up Germany's postwar theatre scene—with plays that were successful but also repeatedly the target of hostile criticism. As director of the Theater am Turm [Theater at the Tower] in Frankfurt, he soon caused his first major scandal with the premiere of Handke's *Offending the Audience* in 1966.

Peymann repeatedly staged the plays of the future Nobel Prize winner Handke, even though, as Peymann himself emphasized, they had completely opposite personalities. Three years later, Handke's *The Ward Wants To Be Warden* followed, also in Frankfurt. When Handke faced fierce hostility after the announcement of the Nobel Prize in 2019 for previously rejecting the demonization of Serbia and its people in the wake of the NATO military offensive in Yugoslavia, Peymann defended him.

Filbinger

Peymann held his first artistic position as a theatre director in Stuttgart from 1974 to 1979. There, in 1977, he ventured to direct, among other things, both parts of Goethe's *Faust*, but that wasn't why he made headlines. It was the period of the Stammheim trials against Red Army Faction [Baader-Meinhof Group] members Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, Holger Meins and Jan-Carl Raspe. There was an

unprecedented witch hunt against anyone who dared to advocate in any way for the humane treatment of the prisoners or their rights as defendants.

At the request of Gudrun Ensslin's mother, Peymann donated 100 Deutsche marks for her dental treatment and posted a notice on the theatre's bulletin board, inviting anyone who would like to join him. This gesture was then used by the outraged Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg, the former Nazi and naval judge Hans Filbinger (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), to demand Peymann's head. It was thanks to Stuttgart's mayor, Manfred Rommel, that Peymann was able to complete his contract, which ran until 1979, and stage several more successful productions.

Peymann later declared that it was a "stroke of luck" for the theatre that the "bigoted, dark man of reaction" was in power at that time, "who always saw the West in danger and who ultimately exposed himself as a completely perfidious liar and Nazi lawyer." Peymann often emphasized that reactionary times had the potential to be good times for the theatre. His own career was proof of this.

Peymann repeatedly engaged in politics, both as a theatre man and privately, which earned him more than just friends. What distinguished him was that his performances were certainly politically sharp, but not at all ideologically stubborn or dry. He had a great deal of biting humor and extracted comical aspects from many serious texts.

He was also characterized by a sure sense not only for the topicality of historical themes, but also for the sensuality, suspense and poetry of the plays he chose. This is especially true of one of his most famous productions, Heinrich von Kleist's *The Battle of Hermann* (1808), which the author wrote to oppose the Napoleonic occupation. The Nazis had usurped the drama as a German nationalist propaganda piece, and it was subsequently deemed unplayable in the postwar period.

Peymann directed it at the Bochum Schauspielhaus, his next theatre stop. Christine Drössel, the theatre critic for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and contributor to Peymann's autobiography, calls it "perhaps the best production of his life." Renowned actor Gerd Voss shone in the leading role as a Germanic guerrilla leader. He was part of a group of top-class actors and actresses who accompanied Peymann to many theatres. Among them were Ilse Ritter and Kirsten Dene, who followed him from Stuttgart via Bochum to Vienna.

In Bochum, Peymann had to justify his dismissal of 44 actors to make room for the actors he had worked with. Among other things, he expelled a young actor, a certain Herbert Grönemeyer, from the ensemble for "lack of talent." An act he later considered one of his worst mistakes.

Due to his unchallenged authority and dominance as a director and artistic director, Peymann was often referred to as a great showman, pope, dictator, raging man or, more positively, as a theatre king. This is certainly not unfounded. On the one hand, it expressed the sovereignty with which he approached his work, and on the other, a certain ruthlessness in the service of the cause.

Thomas Bernhard

Peymann described his time at Vienna's Burgtheatre (1986-99) as the high point of his career. His relationship with Thomas Bernhard began in the early 1970s and was to last a lifetime. In 1972, Peymann directed the premiere of *The Ignorant and the Madman* with Bruno Ganz and Ulrich Wildgruber at the Salzburg Festival. He also directed Bernhard's plays in Stuttgart and Hamburg.

Bernhard was a congenial contemporary author for Peymann. The latter appreciated Bernhard's biting humor, his caustic criticism of Austria's eternal backwardness and the resurgent of far-right radicalism. By his own count, Peymann directed 21 of Bernhard's plays over the course of his career, 15 of which were premieres.

Peymann premiered Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* [Heroes' Square] at Vienna's Burgtheatre in 1988. The play took aim at the enthusiasm for

Hitler and the Nazis on the part of many Austrians after the country's annexation by Germany in 1938 [*Anschluss*] and tackled the country's fascist legacy. The author and director met a chorus of bitter hatred. It was a theatre scandal of truly historic proportions, with both accused of "smearing Austria."

The right-wing press in Austria viewed Bernhard and Peymann as leading enemies of the state. The *Kronenzeitung* newspaper escalated the affair, and numerous politicians, such as then-Vice Chancellor Alois Mock (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP), former Chancellor Bruno Kreisky (Austrian Socialist Party, SPÖ), Federal President Kurt Waldheim and, above all, Freedom Party (FPÖ) chairman Jörg Haider, all joined in. Eventually, a pile of garbage was dumped in front of the theatre. Peymann refused to be intimidated and instead performed at his best. His record at the Burg: a total of 252 premieres, 51 world premieres. Today Vienna mourns his death and has offered him an honorary grave.

Berliner Ensemble

Determined to shake up the theatre and political world in the German capital, Peymann took over the former Brecht theatre on Schiffbauerdamm, the Berliner Ensemble (BE), in 1999. Directing this theatre was actually a dream job for him. His motto was that he wanted to be "the thistle in the backside of politics."

Regarding his failure to achieve his aim, he declared that he lacked political opponents in Berlin. Moreover, the broad spectrum of politicians in Berlin could be "culturally classified as philistines."

In Berlin, he staged works across the spectrum of dramatic literature from past and present. These were outstanding theatre evenings when he staged Shakespeare, Handke, Brecht, Wedekind, Büchner or Kleist. The theatre was usually packed, but scandals were less frequent.

Peymann clashed with former Governing Mayor Klaus Wowereit (Social Democratic Party, SPD) and later with State Secretary for Culture Tim Renner (SPD), whose dismissal he demanded. However, his criticism remained at a more organizational level, such as his criticism of "live streaming" or the planned increase in admission prices. Peymann rarely addressed the political changes in Berlin after the end of the GDR [East Germany] and the Soviet Union, which had also adversely transformed the cultural atmosphere. Nevertheless, this was most probably the basis for the social headwind that caused him difficulties. Socially critical cultural activities were drowned out by a barrage of criticism against the supposedly "final death of socialism."

Peymann complained a great deal about "event culture," for example, on the occasion of the changes in the direction of Berlin's famed Volksbühne ["People's Theatre"], which Berlin politicians wanted to transform into "another event venue," as he put it. The media, including *Die Welt*, responded with a cry: "Out with the revolutionary grandpa."

Peymann's replacement in 2017 and the handover of the Berliner Ensemble to the current artistic director, Oliver Reese, did not go smoothly. Reese terminated many actors' contracts and also changed the theatre's artistic direction, which now focuses more on financial success and adapting to the political mainstream. Peymann expressed his displeasure, accusing his replacement of dissolving the BE archive and thus indirectly breaking with the history of this legendary theatre.

To mark the end of his directorship, he bid farewell with a long evening of theatre on July 2, 2017. Excerpts from his favorite plays were reviewed, and film footage of deceased directors and actors closely associated with him were projected on a screen. Household names in Germany such as Nina Hagen, Katharina Thalbach, Georgette Dee and Angela Winkler performed. Grönemeyer, whom he had dismissed in Bochum, was also in attendance.

Anyone who would like to see a play directed by Peymann at the BE is recommended to watch Shakespeare's *Richard II* on 3sat [German-language public service television channel] in a new translation by

Thomas Brasch. It can be viewed until August 16, 2025.

Theatre of the Absurd

But Peymann's career didn't end in Berlin. In the 2017-18 season, he returned as a guest at the Stuttgart State Theatre, where he directed Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Despite falling seriously ill in 2019, he directed Bernhard's short play *The German Lunch Table* at Vienna's Theater in der Josefstadt in 2020, as well as Eugene Ionesco's absurdist *Exit the King* (1962) in 2021, followed by another of Ionesco's most famous works, *Rhinoceros* (1959), at the Ingolstadt City Theatre in 2022, and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* back in Vienna at the Theater in der Josefstadt in 2023.

His last production was Bernhard's *Minetti—A Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man*, a play about the actor Bernhard Minetti, in 2023 at the Residenztheatre in Munich.

Some critics have seen it as a sign of resignation that, toward the end of his career, Peymann turned to the previously ignored pieces of absurdist theatre. In Sibiu, Romania, where his production of *Rhinoceros* was shown as part of the 2022 theatre festival, he explained in an interview with *Deutsche Welle*: "I saw [in Stuttgart and Vienna] that theatre can have an impact. Regardless of whether it was Kleist, Büchner, Brecht, [Austrian playwright] Peter Turrini, or [Austrian playwright Elfriede] Jelinek, I was always convinced by political theatre."

Now, at the age of 85, he saw things differently. Under the impact of the war in Ukraine, he began to doubt whether theatre could truly change the world. "Sometimes I think, and here I follow Eugene Ionesco, that what's happening is so absurd and unimaginable—I experienced Hitler's war as a young boy—that it's happening again now, in the middle of Europe, that we're arming ourselves to the teeth."

But his rebellious spirit shines through again in the very next sentence: "We don't have money for the emigrants, and we're not helping the refugees from Africa who are fleeing hunger. But suddenly we have billions to finance this war. Suddenly the money is there." As he ages, his view of reality changes, appearing increasingly absurd. Nevertheless, "I don't want to become a cynic like Heiner Müller [noted East German playwright], with whom I was very friendly," he states unequivocally.

In an interview with Atha Athanasiadis in *Bühne* magazine at the end of 2023 about his production of *Waiting for Godot*, Peymann summed up the essence of his work, especially in recent years. It's worth quoting Peymann's comments at length:

I read the play over and over again and thought: Never! I'm definitely not doing that! But here and now, right now, we need theatre like this again: The world is out of joint. Wars, catastrophes, terror, and helpless politicians plunge us into helplessness, resignation, and loneliness.

To avoid going berserk, we need a different perspective, a renewed sense of freedom, not constraints. Reflection, pause, wonder, listen, dream, cry, and laugh—and above all one thing: imagination.

We need to return to a theatre that takes its time, that allows space, that leaves questions open, that is no wiser than we are. We need leisure to reflect and to ruminate. One gets the feeling that war is like an infectious disease—like a virus, a kind of corona, war has swept across the world. Murder is taking place everywhere. Our planet is being systematically destroyed by us...

This terrifying, almost hopeless situation requires resistance, and art can do that...

It's not about having great actors on stage and interesting plays and spectacular productions... The core task of theatre is to say, Stop! to shout out: "Look closely!" And to ask: "Do we really want to live in such a world?

Claus Peymann, despite occasional vacillations, remained firm until the very end that art and theatre had to rebel against the prevailing inhumane conditions. This is his most important legacy for future generations, for both those on stage and those in the audience.



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