



PROJECT MUSE®

Fritz Bennewitz in India: Intercultural Theatre with Brecht and Shakespeare by Joerg Esleben, Rolf Rohmer and David G. John (review)

Vera Stegmann

German Studies Review, Volume 42, Number 1, February 2019, pp. 182-184 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2019.0029>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/717221>

allows for an examination of how Grass's texts relate to the evolving public sphere. In *Mein Jahrhundert* (1999), for instance, the choice to represent Nazi-era events through interactions between characters two decades later reportedly allows Grass to highlight "shifting attitudes toward history" (152). As a further example, Thesz shows the tragic plot of *Im Krebsgang* to involve "communicative missteps at each generational level" (168).

Thesz often refers in passing to theoretical work, especially studies of communication. In this sense, the book is well researched. The only noticeable error, which could have been corrected in editing, is Thesz's attribution of the first verse of the biblical Gospel of John to Genesis (213). However, she might have engaged more with the cited studies to develop a theoretical apparatus for examining Grass's representations of communication. As it stands, allusions to theory go by rather quickly, and readers are frequently left with the task of unpacking the proposed connections between literary and theoretical texts. For instance, in a short sentence without much elaboration, Thesz notes that the character Augst's difficulty speaking in Grass's *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* "aligns with" one of Habermas's ideas (79). A further example is her assertion that an aspect of *Hundejahre* "echoes" a particular point made by Dominick LaCapra (43). An exception to this tendency is the discussion of *Die Box. Geschichten aus der Dunkelkammer* (2008), in which Thesz draws meaningfully on the work of Julia Hirsch and Marianne Hirsch to explore Grass's allusions to family photos. In general, though, readers might want a more explicit, conclusive analysis of how the implied author Grass, as a theorist of communication, compares to the scholars referenced throughout Thesz's book. Nonetheless, Thesz has ambitiously produced thoughtful, close readings of sixteen literary texts. Especially for readers intent on familiarizing or refamiliarizing themselves with most of Grass's prose oeuvre, the study will be of value.

Timothy B. Malchow, *Valparaiso University*

Fritz Bennewitz in India: Intercultural Theatre with Brecht and Shakespeare. By Joerg Esleben with Rolf Rohmer and David G. John. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. Pp. xv + 365. Cloth \$52.50. ISBN 978-1487500382.

The East German theatre director Fritz Bennewitz (1926–1995) had a colorful career and left a remarkably versatile body of work that may not be widely known outside the field of GDR studies. Born in 1926 in Chemnitz, he was drafted in World War II, taken as a prisoner of war by the Americans in 1945, and had to work in a coal mine. After the war, he studied humanities in Leipzig and theater in Weimar; and from 1953–1955 he was a lecturer on Marxist-Leninist aesthetics at the Theater Academy Leipzig. In 1955 he became senior director of the Meiningen Theater, which he

transformed into the second most important Brecht stage in the GDR. In 1960 Bennewitz took over as director of the Deutsches Nationaltheater in Weimar. Beginning in the 1970s, Bennewitz's artistic career was increasingly shaped by international experiences. He directed plays and conducted workshops in Romania, West Germany, the US, Switzerland, Venezuela, and most frequently in India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. Bennewitz first went to India in 1970 to produce Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* with students at the National School of Drama in New Delhi. This visit initiated a twenty-four-year-long engagement with Indian theatre, during which he returned regularly to India to produce plays. His long-time involvement with the International Theatre Institute and his role as the institute's vice president since 1984 facilitated these visits. In 1991 Bennewitz received the coveted Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the highest award for performing arts in India, as only the second non-Asian to be granted this honor. His last productions concentrated on Goethe's *Faust*, in Hindi at the Tata Theater in Mumbai and in German at the Meiningen Theater. He could not complete the latter, since he died of cancer in 1995 and was buried at the historical cemetery in Weimar.

Research on Bennewitz's work has recently grown dramatically. The *Fritz-Bennewitz-Freundeskreis*, founded in January 1996, established the Fritz Bennewitz Archive in Leipzig, which is curated by Rolf Rohmer, one of the contributors to the volume. Canadian scholar David G. John, another contributor to this volume, published *Bennewitz, Goethe, Faust: German and Intercultural Stagings* in 2012; and Esleben's *Fritz Bennewitz in India* represents the product of team work and the most advanced state of intercultural Bennewitz scholarship to date, for which prominent Indian scholars, such as the cultural critic Rustom Bharucha, were consulted as well.

The book is divided into two parts: the larger first part, about two thirds of the volume, covers Bennewitz's letters about his experiences in India, translated and adapted into English by Esleben and presented with Esleben's contextualized commentary and annotations. Interestingly, these letters are now first presented in English; a publication of the original letters in German never materialized, primarily for financial reasons. Most of these letters were addressed to his friend and confidante Waltraut Mertes. It is a one-sided correspondence; Mertes's responses have not been preserved.

The shorter second part of the book contains external sources about Bennewitz: a character sketch by the Indian theater personality K.V. Subbanna; excerpts from Esleben's interviews in India with theater practitioners and scholars Amal Allana, Samik Bandyopadhyay, Akshara K.V., Prasanna, and Anuradha Kapur; a biographical essay by Rolf Rohmer; and an article by David G. John on Bennewitz and Brechtian political theater in India. A complete chronology of Bennewitz's productions in South Asia and his Indian projects in Germany, as well as a glossary of Indian and German theatrical terms, complete this rich and detailed sourcebook.

Bennewitz's letters cover a fascinating array of subjects. We learn in detail about

Bennewitz's productions of plays by Brecht, Shakespeare, Goethe, Chekhov, and Volker Braun; we hear about the Indian performances that Bennewitz witnessed, and his efforts to bring about an equitable exchange between Western and Indian performance traditions. The question of language frequently occupies Bennewitz, not only because Brecht's texts need to be translated, but also because of Indian multilingualism: Bennewitz's actors did not always share a mother tongue and, instead of Hindustani, spoke Marathi, Punjabi, Bengali, Kannada, Telugu, Gujarati, Malayalam, or Kashmiri (108).

Bennewitz's efforts were part of the global cultural and theatrical processes of the 1970s and the 1980s, such as the anthropological conceptions of Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba, Augusto Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed," and the intercultural approaches of Peter Brook, Jean-Claude Carrière, and Ariane Mnouchkine (286). Bennewitz distinguished himself from these artists in that he came to India as an emissary of an Eastern Bloc nation, the GDR. He was an ardent communist and benefited from extensive travel privileges, but he was also subtly critical of the regime and suffered reprisals in the GDR because of his homosexuality. The Cold War influenced his stays in India, as his work was frequently in competition with the activities of the Max Mueller Bhavan, the West German Goethe Institute in India. The *Wende* and the ensuing end of the GDR caused intense intellectual introspection, reflection, and disillusionment in Bennewitz.

"My medium is the moment," Bennewitz stated in many letters (6, 226–227, 239, 241). While it is true that theatrical work lives in the present, the diary format of his letters proves that Bennewitz did consider an afterlife for his work and provided a rich source of documentary materials. This exhaustively researched book by Joerg Esleben and his group represents the culmination of efforts to document and evaluate Bennewitz's multifaceted work in India. Beyond Bennewitz's specific oeuvre, it provides an invaluable resource for the study of such diverse subjects as GDR cultural history, Indian performance practices, and concepts of interculturalism, as seen from an Eastern European perspective.

Vera Stegmann, *Lehigh University*

Risen from the Ruins: The Cultural Politics of Rebuilding East Berlin. By Paul Stangl. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018. Pp. 352. Cloth \$65.00. ISBN 978-1503603202.

Berlin is one of the most densely packed urban palimpsests in the world. Barely more than a provincial residence for the Hohenzollern electors and kings before 1871, the following century saw the city's monumental topography accumulate as many layered inscriptions as the urban fabric of a metropolis with millennial history. After radically expanding into the German empire's capital and largest city with a vast industrial