Introduction
Scaling Traditions: An Anthropology of Theatre, Migration, and State

But how to get this going? How
To portray men's living together like this so
That it becomes possible to understand and master it? How
To show not only oneself, and others not only
As they conduct themselves once
The net has caught them? How
Now to show the knotting and casting of fate's net?
And that it has been knotted and cast by men? The first thing
You have to learn is the art of observation.

You, actor
Must master the art of observation
Before all other arts.

(…)
Therefore your training must begin among
The lives of other people. Make your first school
The place you work in, your home,
The district to which you belong,
The shop, the street, the train.
Observe each one you set eyes upon.
Observe strangers as if they were familiar
And those whom you know as if they were strangers.

(Bertolt Brecht, *An Address to Danish Worker Actors on the Art of Observation,* 1987 [1976]: 235)

The Subject of This Book

'Theatre is not a cure for the ills of the world and not a replacement for therapy', Adem sighs into his cup of çai, as we sit in his go-to shisha bar near the centre of Mülheim an der Ruhr, *Casanova.* Like many mid-sized cities in the Ruhr valley, situated in the north of Germany's most populous state North Rhine-Westphalia, the bled-out urban social fabric of the city

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exemplifies the fate of post-industrial regions. Dubbed 'Germany's Detroit' by *The New York Times* (2013), post-war wasteland and high unemployment rates outweigh nostalgic rejuvenation campaigns that repaint the rusty structures of long-gone essential industries. Shopping malls that replaced the post-war middle classes and their independent stores have now themselves become bankrupt, leaving large and empty blots of white and grey in the inner cities; empty windows tell of the fluctuation on the former high streets, which lead up to desolate tower blocks accommodating the city's poorest demographics. A bleak, yet condensed narrative starting point for the story told in this book; a book that tells of theatre, heritage, and migration in a region literally undermined. And yet only one narrative entry into this heterotopian valley along the Rhine and Ruhr, shot through with hundreds of kilometres of subterranean tunnels that give way to methane in porous exits, often far from the remnants of the old heavy industrial ruins that have become the projection screens of overly optimistic and flawed creative economies. There are other exits and entrances into this burrow, like the many creative observers – migrants or the children of migrants, amateur and professional actors, evoked by Brecht (1987 [1976]) in the epigraph to this introduction, who learnt the art of observation through the schools of the quotidian, the encounters among strangers – and the institutions they created in this region once connected only by the smoke of its past industries, to recall Joseph Roth's phrasing from a reportage he wrote about the region: 'Here, the smoke forms a sky. It connects all cities.' (Roth 1926, see also Rossmann 2012).

I am 'tolerated' in the bar's hidden and somewhat illicit backroom where shisha smoke clouds my notepad because Adem is a staple character respected among the mostly Lebanese and Turkish-speaking café-goers. Card games and slot machines add to the murmur of voices, interrupted by the sonic backdrop from recent rehearsals that Adem shows me on his phone. We have been meeting in the bar to discuss a theatre group he founded a few years ago under the patronage and aegis of the *Theater an der Ruhr* (hereafter also: the Theater) and its émigré-founder, philosopher, and self-taught director Roberto Ciulli. Its name, Ruhrorter, pays tribute to the street on which it staged its first self-composed play, and the derelict industrial building in which it took place. The complex on the 'Ruhrorter Straße' used to accommodate refugees from the Balkan wars and housed a 'psychosocial centre for foreign refugees' (*Psychosoziales Zentrum für ausländische Flüchtlinge*). It sits between different cities along the Ruhr – Oberhausen, Duisburg, Mülheim. All of these are 'Ruhr Orte', places along the Ruhr.

> I don't want to say to the press that we are a 'refugee theatre collective', because it disturbs me that we are separating refugees and migrants from the others here in the city. Because: Who are these others? Bio-Germans [*Bio-Deutsche*], here since generations and with a different access to the rights of German citizenship and culture? No.

Adem's proposal for a new theatre collective touched a nerve with the founder and director of the Theater an der Ruhr, Roberto Ciulli. Not only had he himself migrated to Germany in the 1960s, working initially, as so many fellow migrants from the Mediterranean at the time, as a production line worker at industrial plants, before taking a slow route into the German theatre landscape. First as a lighting assistant, then slowly in smaller roles as an actor (see Wewerka and Tinius 2020). In Göttingen, later in the larger cities of Düsseldorf and Cologne, his wit, but also his previous experience – despite his young age, he had migrated to Germany following studies in philosophy, a failed tent theatre on the outskirts of Milan, and a heart attack – made him noteworthy among the predominantly German directors and acting colleagues at the time. And yet, even as Ciulli began directing in German, took over theatres, and founded his own institution, he was stereotyped.

'An Italian directing German plays'. 'The Migrant in Germany'. Titles of major newspaper reviews throughout the 1970s and 1980s that I gathered over the course of my research on Ciulli tell a story of the persistent cultural tropes of a united German identity and Southern European others, which are projected onto his theatrical work. Divisions that Ciulli was to challenge for the coming forty years with his post-dramatic, post-migrant work aesthetic and ensemble members when they declared themselves as a theatre of and for the *bastardo* (see Tinius and Wewerka 2020). A theatre that sought, against public opinion and critical reviews, to offer a perspective on cultural production beyond the national frame. 'Theatre as and for the bastardo', Ciulli told me frequently, 'means doing or being something or someone without a *Vaterland* or *Muttersprache*', using the two gendered kinship terminologies for father-land and mother-tongue. Exemplifying and performing this political aesthetic, his institution would later house, for ten years, the first professional Roma theatre *Pralipe*, whose ensemble had fled from discrimination in Macedonia. Many of their ensemble members, as the group dissolved, became active in Ciulli's ensemble and formed the migrant-situated core of the institution whose significance for understanding and troubling German theatre and culture I unravel in this book.

The Argument of This Book

This book takes the Theater an der Ruhr as a case study of an odd artistic tradition, as a school for the development of ethical and political sensibilities through art that both seems to fit into a very 'German' narrative of public theatre and politically detached criticism and yet appear at odds with it; by breaking with the idea of theatre as a cure or therapy. Instead, the narrative of this book is about the institutionalisation of a situated, migrant-led and -situated artistic critique of sociocultural homogeneity; about what happens when institutions are formed on the back of long-standing national traditions, and what forms of artistic and social critique are rendered possible through them.

This account also scales up as a comparative description of art (including theatre) as a form of ethical practice where engagement with the self is not an antipode to an engagement with others, or even society at large. Such a scaling up brings us in particular to the remarkable German network of public ensemble and repertoire theatres and the country's tradition of *Bildung*, or self-cultivation, but it equally relates to other contexts of performance traditions that I elaborate in this book, especially those connected to refugee collectives that formed through forced migration into the Ruhr region.

Every anthropological inquiry, even comparative ones, begin from a concrete context and a partial locality. As an anthropological anchor point, this book situates the institutional form of the Theater an der Ruhr and its notion of art in the wider context of German cultural policies and state patronage. Indeed, the book shows how theatre can be a prism for making sense of and critically analysing the romantic notion of Germany as a 'state of the arts and culture', a *Kulturstaat*. It documents how an institution positions itself as an alternative to both, the flexible labour conditions of the 'creative industries' and the bureaucracy of state institutions. I therefore focus on how Ciulli and his ensemble conceive of and enact the Theater an der Ruhr as a site for self-formation and political deliberation in and through art. This enactment occurs through a range of means, including recourse to (critical) theory in the field itself and what I call 'institution-building' labour practices (Chapter 2), the creation of an internal training of conduct during rehearsals (Chapter 3), as well as transnational public engagement through theatre with international artists (Chapter 4) and migrants in the aftermath of the 2015 and 2016 'refugee crisis' in Germany (Chapter 5).

This self-positioning of the Theater occurs in the context of the cultural institutions specific to Germany. The country boasts an exceptionally high density of publicly funded theatres with an ensemble and repertory system. These more than 150 institutions comprise municipal or city theatres

(*Stadttheater*), regional theatres of the federated states (*Landestheater*), and state theatres (*Nationaltheater*). This 'theatre landscape' has emerged through phases of republicanism, centralisation, and decentralisation that have shaped Germany over the last 200 years. In 2014, following years of lobbying by the powerful German theatre employer's association (*Deutscher Bühnenverein*), the country's unique public ensemble and repertoire the-atre landscape was recognised by the German chapter of UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage. While it was thus officially acknowledged as integral to modern German cultural identity, critical commentators inter-pret this act as a conserving 'musealisation' of a decaying institution. Other critics from the consolidating freelance performing arts scene in the coun-try further challenge the contemporaneity of public ensemble theatres on aesthetic grounds, portraying them as anachronistic guardians of classical Western canons and a long overdue historical avant-garde.

The cultural politics and political economy behind Germany's public theatres thus reveals more than just funding statistics. As Brandon Woolf (2021) formulates it aptly for the West-German theatre context, its cul-tural policy 'should be thought of as an artistic practice of institutional imagination'. German theatres are part of the country's cultural and often difficult heritage, and as such, in Sharon Macdonald's (2013: 1) words, 'products of collective memory work'. The cultural historian Manfred Osten speaks of German theatre as an 'administrator of cultural memory' (Kaiser et al. 2010: 20). As arguably 'the country that has struggled most and longest over its twentieth-century difficult heritage' – even inventing a term to mean 'coming to terms with its past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) – Germany's public theatres can reveal the country's meaningful past, allow it to break through into the present, and constitute sites to negotiate its future (Macdonald 2009: 1).

Theatres are profoundly bound up with the German state through the pervasive notions of patronage and self-formation. The idea of the German 'culture state' or 'state of the arts and culture' (*Kulturstaat*) reflects Germany's long tradition of state patronage for the arts and, moreover, of the arts as autonomous sites for self-formation and political commentary. This tradition is profoundly tied to the concept of *Bildung* and the dialectic formation of intellectual expertise among the educated intellectuals of modern German society (see Boyer 2005). A German cultural and intel-lectual history of art institutions inevitably has to take into account the divergent and conflicting traditions of fascism and socialism, division and reunification. I chose therefore to speak of connected tropes rather than a single 'tradition', as Walter Bruford intimates in his seminal *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation* (1975). For him, the 'German tradition of

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self-cultivation' (Bruford 1975.) originated among the Romantics as a lib-
eral political notion that regarded the state as a *facilitator* of personal self-
development of aesthetic sensibilities, rather than a *dictator* of artistic styles.
As the following chapter elaborates, this political conception is linked to
the idealist philosophy of Fichte and Kant and the attribution of moral
value to art, elaborated by authors such as Goethe and Schiller for theatre
(see Bruford (1950) for an extended discussion, and Goethe and Schiller
1986 [1799]). Self-formation through the arts gained a significant albeit far
from unproblematic societal and political dimension through the states-
manship of Wilhelm von Humboldt and the German *Bildungsbürgertum*
of the nineteenth century, the educated middle-class which embodied these
ideals and significantly informed modern German culture and society (cf.
Messling 2016). Although it is arguably also true that 'romantic nationalism
in Germany was the product of a generation of underpaid and underem-
ployed intellectuals who eventually turned to the task of inventing tradi-
tions' (Giesen 1998), my account underscores how theatre, as a network of
public institutions, a professional field, and as an artform, relates to ideals
of political self-cultivation today and how contemporary migrant theatre
troubles these national heritage narratives by seeking concepts and practices
that overcome the othering reification of the figure of the migrant.

This book thus contributes especially to two fields of study that pertain
to anthropology, theatre and performance studies as well as scholarship on
modern and contemporary Germany and its grappling with a post-migrant
society. On the one hand, my analysis of German theatre in the cultural
traditions of *Bildung* introduces the pertinence of art as an extra-ordinary
ethical field; 'extra-ordinary' in the sense that it became institutionalised
and is thus different from everyday performance. I am not following a
'descent into the ordinary' (Das 2012: 134), or the 'transcendent' (Robbins
2016), but rather work out ways in which moments become marked as
other, theatrical, or set-aside (Barber 2007; Davis and Postlewait 2003).
Brecht's speech to Danish working-class actors (1987 [1976]: 235), which
opened this chapter, exemplifies this extra-ordinary theatricality I am here
analysing. While Brecht may appear to tell the lay actors to stay in the
everyday ('The place you work in, your home, / The district to which
you belong, / The shop, the street, the train'.), he breaks their perspective
on the unreflected quotidian by asking them to take these – 'The lives of
other people' – and their places, as 'your first school', where 'your training
must begin'. The invitation to 'master the art of observation / Before all
other arts' is a profoundly anthropological one, which resonates with my
interest in theatre as a prism for anthropological understandings of society

and culture. It is as if Brecht talked of fieldwork when he tells the Danish worker-actors to 'observe strangers as if they were familiar / And those whom you know as if they were strangers' (Brecht 1987 [1976]: 235).

On the other hand, this study of theatre as an ethical field hopes to foreground a neglected aspect in the anthropological study of Western cultural institutions, especially in Germany: the articulation of traditions of political thought and self-formation through and in the arts. This also hints at how anthropological description, analysis, and theory interact in this book. The historical context of theatre as a key German cultural institution is important in situating the fieldsite and what I call its founders' 'instituting practices' (see Chapter 2 and Tinius 2015b). Primarily, these consist of rehearsals, international travel, and political engagement through theatre with marginalised communities, which I describe in this order in the following chapters. Since these practices constitute internal goods around which the identity of the institution and its members as well as the self-understanding of a cosmopolitan German nation has been negotiated for the last forty or so years, I use the analytic term 'tradition' to describe how the institution, its practices, and ideals hang together. In my account, then, the Theater an der Ruhr serves as a case study of an institution that has become a tradition with its own form of training, pedagogy, critique, and transformative *telos* and a prism for theorising, that is, explaining its own practice so as to understand it better.

The aim of this analytical vocabulary is to scale up and extrapolate from the example of theatre to the relation of (public) art institutions and ethical practices in contemporary societies more broadly. It is for these reasons that my study does not focus on the analysis or interpretation of individual performances or plays, but on the role of authority, the institutional processes that facilitate reflection and self-cultivation, and the way in which the virtues and ideals of German public theatre in general, and of the Theater an der Ruhr in particular, are negotiated through its engagement with transnationalism, alterity, and migration.

This study does therefore not address how theatre (as an art form) is consumed or circulated in a socio-economic 'field' (Bourdieu 1993), nor does it dismiss aesthetics altogether as a uniform bourgeois cult (Gell 1999). Rather, I wish to attend to how theatre contains both actual practices and 'a utopian promise of a different form of life' (Sansi 2015: 78; see also Blanes et al. 2016; Bourriaud 1999, 2002). This book thus does not explore how theatre (as an art form) is instrumentalised as a tool (Cohen-Cruz 2010; Crehan 2011) or an object of communication (Chua and Elliott 2013; Leach 1976; McAuley 1999). Rather, it studies how the

reflexive practice of theatre can be a form of political self-cultivation, and how this occurs in an institutionalised professional and public context that connects theatre as a 'relational entity' to other reflexive spheres of society (Bell 2012: 86; see also Flynn and Tinius 2015). My emphasis on the public role and responsibility attributed to German public theatres by the state and the significance I attribute to the moral narratives of key informants thus speaks to Weber's description of politics as a vocation (*Beruf*), that is, the deliberative reconciling of conviction and responsibility (Weber 1992 [1919]; 1995 [1919]).

Furthermore, if we understand by ethnography the information of analytic terms through emic, situated concepts in the poetic and political act of writing about experience, then this book does just that by asking how the terms used by my interlocutors and constitutive of the cultural history of Germany (*Bildung*, *Haltung*, and *Beruf*) can inform our anthropological understandings of ethical subjects and traditions in theatre and art. Since anthropology is both description *and* translation, this book treats these concepts as localised and therefore relative and partial, but also as informing an analytic vocabulary that is generalisable and comparative. The questions raised by this account are therefore at once about the specific account I offer, and about its effectiveness in informing the vocabulary, analysis, and theory of both anthropology and theatre and performance research. The core questions informing this book are: What can public art institutions, understood as 'prisms', tell us about the ethical relevance of art (including theatre) in German and European society today? How do artists in such institutions reflect on their practice, methods, and theories, and in doing so, what kinds of expertise do they develop to rethink social theory today? What methods and theoretical frameworks do we require to develop new approaches to professional public theatre today?

Problematising Performance

This book began as a personal and intellectual fascination with the skilful craft of acting, the reflexive climate of the milieu, and the complexity of theatres as sites of cultural production. Although my acquaintance with institutionalised theatre traditions precedes my anthropological training, I have long been attracted to what we might call the anthropological aspects of theatre, for example the cross-cultural differences in gestures and expression, its reflection on human relations and subjectivity, or its once ancient function as an *agora*, which recurs today in the guise of occupations, protests, and assemblies (Butler 2015). As institutions, professional theatres present a unique cross-section of artistic crafts and professions, ranging

from stagehand and designer to pedagogue, director, and dramaturg. It is not surprising that the Wagnerian notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art encompassing and transcending all art forms and genres, has so frequently recurred in reference to theatre to this day. As I got more familiar with the institution of 'theatre', I became interested in the hierarchies and discipline, the authority, and hard labour that went into rehearsing theatre on a daily basis, and its contemporary 'function' in agonising over the self-understanding of German heritage. And of course, by attending to the extra-ordinary and theatrical in the labour I accompanied, I came closer and closer to the profoundly anthropological 'art of observation' that Brecht again addresses in his speech to Danish working-class actors; their understanding of conduct, their training 'among / the lives of other people' (Brecht 1987 [1976]: 235).

Unfortunately, anthropological accounts that study professional and contemporary art practices and European theatre institutions in depth are scarce. Gell's (1999) description of the Western 'art cult', according to which 'art is a modern form of religion and aesthetics its theology, just as museums are its temples and artists its priests' (Sansi 2015: 67), characterises the tone of many anthropological accounts of professional art. A combination of this scepticism and the 'performative turn' has left the study of professional art and theatre as a credible field to sociologists (see Bourdieu 1979, 2013) and historians of theatre (e.g., Marx 2006); yet it has also produced an interesting turn away from studying actual theatre to seeing it as a set of metaphors for cultural analysis. Anthropologists extrapolated concepts such as 'performance', 'performativity', or 'theatricality' into cultural metaphors and analytics for understanding ritual and social action (Davis 2003; Davis and Postlewait 2003; Nield 2014; Turner 1974). This shift still influences fascinating analyses of political phenomena and political performativity today (see Alexander 2011; Balme 2008; Gaborik 2021; Mast 2012), yet it has always run the risk of being too all-encompassing: what is *not* performance, after all?

The anthropological engagement with theatre and performance has nonetheless generated a fascinating and fundamental discussion about the processual nature of cultural production that is hard to capture (see, however, Beeman 1993; Fabian 1999; Korom 2013). Its emphasis on subjective meaning and the constant negotiation and construction of relations and symbols in and through interaction may be indebted to Weber's principles of sociology (Weber 1904), but it also owes much to ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and its shift from thinking about performance as an *aspect* of culture to performance as a *symptom* of culture (Burke 1969). The definition of man as 'homo performans' (Turner 1986: 187), that is,

'a culture-inventing and self-making creature' (Conquergood 1989: 85) then came to define the so-called 'performative turn in anthropology' (Conquergood 1989: 85). As Goffman's (1959: 26) theses on the subject had already elaborated, in this approach all aspects of social life were seen as dramaturgic, and all public activities as enactments of roles. Clifford Geertz (1983: 22) has aptly described this kind of 'genre blurring' as a chance to find new explanatory analogies without giving up one's commitment to anthropology altogether: 'What the lever did for physics, the chess move promises to do for sociology'.

Complementing this conceptual widening of 'performance' and 'theatre', essential aspects of social life and personal identity such as class, ethnicity, gender, and nationality were not merely seen to be *performed*; they came to be regarded as *constituted* by their performance and, as such, *performative* (see Butler 1990, 1993; Cowan 1990; Gay y Blasco 1999; Lemon 2000; Sax 2002; Wacquant 2007). Inspired by sociolinguistics and the speech-act theory of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), performance theory reconceptualised the categories of anthropological inquiry (Davis 2008). Ritual, theatre, and performance became metaphors for cultural praxis more generally, responding to both Edith and Victor Turner's call for an empirically grounded 'anthropology of performance'(Turner 1986) and their colleague Richard Schechner's (1969, 1977, 1985) foundational writings on theatre performance studies. This blurring of boundaries between theatre as a subject *of* anthropology and anthropology *as* a ritual found a provocative echo in the 'writing culture' critique of the same decade (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Oswald and Tinius 2020), which turned this observation back onto anthropology and its own performance. In conjunction with the interpretative turn in the social sciences founded on Gadamer (2010 [1960]), Geertz (1973), and Ricoeur (1981), this shifted attention not only to the logic of the practising subjects of anthropological research (Bourdieu 1977 [1972], 1988 [1984]; Ortner 1984), but also to anthropological inquiry itself. This discussion is still influential, for example in the more cautious but equally provocative experiments *between* anthropology and artistic practice (Bakke and Peterson 2017; Martínez 2021; Sansi 2015; Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010, 2013) or in studies of practices through a lens of performance and performativity, such as the anthropology of authority and truth (Holbraad 2012; Mahmood 2001a), democracy and citizenship (Lazar 2008; Navaro-Yashin 2002), human rights and law (Barber 2007; Breed 2013; Englund 2011), or gender, race, coloniality, and class (Aly 2015; Sharifi and Skwirblies 2022).

This body of literature has informed this book's understanding of how professional artists perform and enact themselves, or constitute political