

# Caroline Neuber Prize 2008 from the City of Leipzig for Ann-Elisabeth Wolff

Laudation by Michael Freundt · Schauspielhaus Leipzig, 09th March 2008

## A modern trading ship

Ann-Elisabeth Wolff, Federal Minister Tiefensee, Lord Mayor, Wolfgang Engel, prize-giving congregation,

You have read theatre scholar Michael Freundt and may now be dreading the theatrical placement of today's event, the historic person of Neuber and our contemporary, Wolff, the festival in general and euro-scene Leipzig in particular.

No, the case is actually more like this: a few weeks ago, the city of Leipzig – in the form of the Head of Theatre in the cultural office – rang me and started with the words: »Every two years, the city of Leipzig awards the Caroline-Neuber prize...« Essentially, there was no need to continue the conversation, as it was obvious that, sooner or later, this Leipzig prize for women of the theatre had to be awarded to Ann-Elisabeth Wolff. euro-scene Leipzig is established well beyond the city as a beacon of local theatre culture. The festival and the festival director are bound together as closely as possible – almost as one being. As my colleague, Ms Wolff, and I have worked together for a number of years on euro-scene Leipzig, it may also be obvious that I should say a few words on this occasion. This was a request from the city that I was happy to meet.

From 1997 to 2002, I had the opportunity to look after the festival. Today, I help to shape the projects of the German centre



Jonathan Burrows & Mattheo Fargion, London »Both sitting duet« innerhalb der Matinée anlässlich der Preisverleihung (siehe auch Seite 44)

of the International Theatre Institute, including the big World Theatre Festival, which will be staged in Halle in a three months' time. Ann-Elisabeth, I bring the congratulations and best wishes of our colleagues at ITI on the occasion of the city awarding you the Caroline-Neuber prize.

Ann-Elisabeth,

At the start of your career as Festival Director came a speechless terror. »The first sign of the new person [is] the terror,« Heiner Müller said. It was the staggering news of the death of euro-scene founder Matthias Renner (according to the report of an early fellow campaigner, who conveyed the news on the telephone) that caused you to be lost for words. The festival was on the verge of its third appearance and the responsibility rested entirely

on your shoulders. This tragic loss has had an effect on your life – your whole life. In the past 14 years, you have established and expanded the festival in its exceptional constellation of international guest performances, its special atmosphere and a repeatedly breathtaking financing effort.

This takes willpower and strength. You have often mentioned your parents' home: your father the musicologist, composer and painter Prof. Dr. Hellmuth Christian Wolff and your mother the singer Liselotte Wolff. You are not put off and do not accept things by appearances. Your father, so you have told me, is your role model here. For him, this resulted in conflict with the ruling powers both before 1945 and afterwards in the GDR. Open-mindedness, a love of art and a desire to cross boundaries: these are all characteristics from your parents' home in your childhood and your youth.

Then came your degree in musicology, your work as a reader for music publisher Edition Peters, the publication of a collection of opera arias – much of this is still evident to me today. »Bach«, which was the 1998 motto of euro-scene Leipzig, and »Consonances – Dissonances« from 2006 testify to a love of music and the programme brochures published every year to the meticulousness of the editor.

With reunification, the publishing house was dissolved and, through several assignments for magazines and a music agency, you came to euro-scene Leipzig in 1991. This was a very ambitious project in a period of political upheaval. From »Wir sind das Volk« (»We are the people«) came the opening of the borders and the reunification. Germany was one and the sky soon foreboded national constraints again.

»euro-scene Leipzig. Theaterfestival europäischer Avantgarde«: here was a festival talking about Europe, about avantgarde and, according to Matthias Renner in his forward entitled »Avant-garde – does it have to be?!«, about the »fantasy of the artists and a shot of chaos«. Later, the festival chose the addition: »Vision of Europe – an open door to the stranger«.

For a brief week, Leipzig became a stage for theatre from Eastern and Western Europe and from East and West Germany. It was a theatre of bodies and images, a theatre that crossed genre boundaries and a theatre of people, humanity and social contiguity. Over the years, the mystical and bizarre theatre rituals of the Poles have met with the bewildering dance worlds of the Dutch and the French. The new passion for form from Jo Fabian (East Berlin) met with the reflections on the fall of the wall from director Gabriele Bußacker (Hamburg).

What the festival has struggled with: the purely aesthetic experiment, the artistic denial of the connection with reality, the return of conceptual art to contemporary dance, contemporary drama of European provenance, breaking the bounds of dramatic form. This is not entirely true – a number of works by Armin

Petras can be found in the festival programme. However, this has been more down to chance, being small productions delegated by Leipzig theatre for the festival when the large company was giving an outside guest performance at the time of euro-scene.

Where the festival has been completely at home: Alain Platel. This Belgian choreographer and director first came to Leipzig in 1996 with »La tristeza cómplice«, then »Bernadette« a year later, »Iets op Bach« in 1998, »Allemaal Indiaan« in 2000 and »vsprs« in 2006.

Accurate observations of reality. Requests to speak from the fringes of society, from the very soul. Dancers and actors – including lay people – who Platel has managed so fantastically that they have opened up their protective body armour to admit and portray their innermost beings on the stage.

In my view, this is what produced the breakthrough with the critics and the public. With tenacity, Ann-Elisabeth Wolff established herself as a broad connoisseur of the landscape. Even today, it remains a tough struggle with sponsors. Leipzig has its festival at a considerably lower price than other communities.

Here, however, for the festival director, people – I am talking about the Lord Mayors of this city and particularly their culture deputy Dr Georg Girardet – have opened doors to other sponsors, to the state, to charities and even to the BMW Plant Leipzig, which is now the main partner of euro-scene Leipzig. Ann-Elisabeth Wolff then also went through these doors – with vehemence. If she had to leave without success, she simply came back again.

The festival is her passion. Numerous trips, industrious communication, endless working days. In the past, the night porters of the Neue Szene woke with a start when the festival director left the office at dawn. There are no longer night porters but nocturnal letters and e-mails still come from wolff@euro-scene.de at 03.30 or 04.18 a.m..

With names such as Alain Platel, Emio Greco, Romeo Castellucci, Josef Nadj, Angelin Preljocaj, Oskaras Koršunovas and with discoveries from Eastern and Western Europe, euro-scene Leipzig takes its place on the European festival landscape and it has done so for almost ten years. This has included the thematic festival programme titles: »Das Eigene im Gefüge« (»Framing identity«), »Wahlverwandtschaften« (»Elective affinities«) and »Die Liebe – Chance der Unmöglichkeit« (»Love – chance of impossibility«). These are the themes that move her heart. They focus on what the festival director has found unsettling, impressive and highly unusual on her travels.

At the start of the 90s, reunification provided the practical example for Jean-François Lyotard's speech on the »end of the grand narratives«. Lyotard spoke of the political explanations of the world that excluded heterogeneity. The real socialism of their approach was visibly failing. The theatre that brought euro-scene Leipzig has also made a break from the grand narratives, the closed form and the homogeneity of conventional theatre.

Today, over 15 years later, theatre productions as performative creations have become even more divergent, more brittle and more fragmentary as well as more individualised. Artists cross the boundaries of what can actually be called theatre, indulge excessively in the stage action and deny the spectator a saving catharsis. They are installations and they even help themselves from the dia-

logues of the visual arts. For artists, more important than the final result is the process – the dialogue into which they enter. Artists are becoming curators themselves and curators are questioning their own positions. The Carte Blanche has existed at euro-scene Leipzig for two years – one guest performance is selected by a member of the artistic advisory council. The gallery of contemporary art is taking this idea to its peak and giving carte blanche to others for an entire season – although not without discursive supervision. euro-scene has retained its desire for the overwhelming theatre event, the big bit of a director, the mind-blowing company. This is a desire that is becoming increasingly difficult to fulfil on the travels of the festival director.

Allow me to make a comparison. This is how Marie Zimmermann, Theatre Director of the Wiener Festwochen (Viennese festival weeks) and Programme Director for Theater der Welt (Theatre of the world) in Stuttgart in 2005, who left us last year, compared the Wiener Festwochen with Theater der Welt: compared with the tanker in Vienna, the festival in Stuttgart is a small, versatile pirate boat, which makes its unusual haul on the world's oceans. However, euro-scene Leipzig is certainly not a festival tanker but more a modern trading ship. It cruises along the coasts of Europe to bring new merchandise to the home port. The owner is also the helmswoman, providing the spirit and setting the course.

Let us take this idea into the world of the theatre and finish by looking at the comparison with Caroline Neuber. This is certainly not the banishment of the clown but rather, like Caroline Neuber, Ann-Elisabeth Wolff is a theatre director. She shows her theatre on the stages of the city. For one week. With success. In and for Leipzig.

Without doubt, one expression of this is also in today's prize giving. Congratulations Ann-Elisabeth Wolff.



Burkhard Jung, Oberbürgermeister der Stadt Leipzig, verkündete nach der Festivaleröffnung 2007 die Preisübergabe an Ann-Elisabeth Wolff.



Ann-Elisabeth Wolff sagt »Danke!«