

Ragnhild Freng Dale

Creating community by means of performance: walking the German-Polish borderland

Political theatre after Brecht stretches beyond aesthetics and philosophies which explicitly define themselves as political. As Brecht was looking for a realism and aesthetics suitable to his time, so contemporary theatre's political potency must be considered in relation to its placement within a particular social context. This paper examines a strand of European theatre that specialises in participatory engagement through their research and performative strategies. They are currently working in the German region of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which shares a border with Poland in a landscape rife with experiences of forced migration and hostility towards strangers. With the far right National Democratic Party gaining ever more ground, other parts of civil society are organising to build other forms of democratic participation. Arts and theatre is a cornerstone in this work, and I draw on my fieldwork experiences with a group called The Working Party to show how they use theatre as a deliberately inexplicit political strategy for imagining and living alternative social relations in the area. By self-crafting their identity as artists, they create a license to operate and speak across borders, building understanding between communities on both sides of the border. It is precisely the fact of walking this transformatory borderline that makes their work political, and in extension shows us how contemporary theatre may have explicit and willed influence without claiming heritage to specific political traditions.

Ragnhild Freng Dale is a theatremaker and PhD student at the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge. Her PhD is concerned with social and cultural change in Greenland, and she is particularly concerned with how arts and theatre can work as social forces for change. She has previously done fieldwork with Studio Matejka in Poland, and The Working Party in Germany and is currently active in the UK.