

Jörn Peter Hiekel

Permanent Quest: The Processional Theatre of Manos Tsangaris

The music theatre *œuvre* of Manos Tsangaris is characterised both by continuously changing choices with regard to formats, arrangements and instrumentations, and by the fact that these changes also occur within individual works of separate groups of works. All his works seem to wrestle free from the customary frontality of presentation, as we have known it from the history of opera and classical concerts, in order to explore new solutions. This also usually means that traditional roles and responsibilities of vocal and instrumental performers are eliminated or at least extended. It is characteristic of Tsangaris' approach that his works consist of individual stations in different rooms through which one migrates – an approach that has for some time been called 'Processional Theatre'.¹ Due to the different formats and changing strategies, the question of the perception of music becomes the centre of attention, independently at first of the semantic constellations evoked by certain texts, which change in every project and provide different levels of concentration and intensification.

Spaces of/for awareness

Such delimitations and transgressions in the works of Manos Tsangaris can be characterised without exaggeration as an act of resistance against the conventions and norms of the music industry. In this respect, Tsangaris follows the tradition of his former teacher, Mauricio Kagel. But even more determinedly than Kagel he has coined and variegated this creative form of transgression time and again, often in conscious deviation from familiar locations of music(-theatre)-performance. This approach, based not on a radical break but on the idea of a permeability of different strategies of presenting music, benefits from what the age-old, tried

and tested performance situation shares with the existing strong dramatic imprint on musical or theatrical works or with its inherent teleological aspects: all these factors are rooted in our consciousness so strongly, and the dominance of the marks they have left over a long time period is so unchallenged, that a composer can continuously rebel against them in a number of ways.

This rebellion by means of strategies of using different spatial arrangements provides a perspective that for Tsangaris is not an end in itself but a basic requirement of most of his projects. Again and again these unlock unusual spaces or approach familiar spaces in new unusual ways, invoking innovative and unique theatrical situations in the often minaturesque music-theatre pieces. These can be characterised – following Hans-Thies Lehmann’s descriptions of a post-dramatic theatre – by their renunciation of a given artistic macro-structure providing coherence, such as the dramatic text (cf. Lehmann 1999, here and for the following). Here, the dissemination of text and meaning are not ostentatious factors. Instead, there is a multitude of prismatic refractions. As a recipient, one is drawn into situations that manage to sustain one’s aesthetic curiosity by means of many surprises. It becomes apparent that what is being (re)presented might be an excerpt of a larger context. Instead of a solid, stabilising synthesis of the different levels, there are always open fragmented moments as well as ‘figurations of self-eradications of meanings’ (Lehmann 1999, 140). But in addition to moments of contingency, there are repeatedly condensations of clusters of meaning. These can be characterised as flashes of insight, which sometimes reveal their orientation to real daily life experiences and emphasise the fleeting, casual and ephemeral, but are sometimes far removed from everyday life and seem almost surreal. In all this the essential experience is that of an oscillation between understanding and not understanding – which constitutes a fundamental experience in contemporary music theatre.

When Manos Tsangaris' theatre operates with texts, it succeeds in creating event-like situations, which may distance themselves from logical sequentiality in many ways. Examples include the Dresden production *Lot's Weib [Lot's wife]* (2006) and the Donaueschingen *Batsheba*-project (2009) – both oscillate in remarkably diverse ways between the representation of stories and a variety of elements which lead away from these stories. Central to Tsangaris' Composed Theatre are perceptual constellations, which are characterised by permanent transitions between representation, association and seemingly unrelated playful performance. This transitionality draws our attention to the common difficulty in interpreting something seemingly unrelated as a consistent string of signs.

Tsangaris' preferred mode of text presentation ironically suspends the conventional dissemination of text – particularly in the media – without exaggerating it in a pointedly grotesque way. Reflections on the plethora of sensory stimuli in our reality are also central. The composer's miniaturesque compositions (which consist of small, mostly two- to eight-minute scenes) are attempts to condense this abundance into concentrates, which in their unique mixture are often terse and enchanting, and sometimes poetic.

<H1>Interrogation of sites</H1>

Visitors in the processional theatre of Manos Tsangaris are *flâneurs*, who, in the sense of Walter Benjamin's emphatic descriptions of ideas of passages, end up in unusual constellations of experience and thus begin to marvel. This can be read as a critical comment on those public passages called 'shopping malls', which may be seen as a signature of our present time. Their abundant (over-)staged event-worlds rely on the suggestion of individuality while tending towards a collective, ecstatic experience. Suggestively, Tsangaris reflects on the persuasive nature of the commercial strategies of *mise en scène* without

adopting them. His theatrical works discover distinctive, delicate possibilities for passages and unexpected links.

The composed passages in works by Tsangaris are in some respects the exact opposite of all those light-flooded commercial arcades. In work as early as his *Studie [Study]* for performer and lighting (1978), labelled ‘Opus 1’, one can clearly see how important it is for him to operate with darkness. A completely dark room is transformed into a partially perceptible space through the use of a single spotlight. The result is a dull brightness, which clearly reflects the difficulty with which it was wrested from the darkness. A crescendo of the main spotlight from 0 to 100 per cent and other finesses of lighting follow. It is precisely the lighting design and timing which is minutely determined in the scores of Tsangaris. This highlights the artificiality of what is depicted. Brief moments of turning on lights full beam in otherwise dark spaces are characteristic of many of his projects. This often happens by means of torches, which either eliminate the usual ritual of seeing-and-being-seen in the concert or opera situations, or reduce it to a brief moment of wonder due to a sudden encounter. Ushers are thus an indispensable part of some of his works.

Time and time again the key issue is the interrogation and interpretation of very specific places. The venue as a community space, which offers the possibility of a collective experience, is contrasted with small-scale situations, in which the usual rituals – such as applauding or taking a bow as well as similarly clearly recognisable finale effects – are suspended. The works of Tsangaris are thus often situated on the border between a ‘situational’² and a progressively structured design. They are not unfamiliar with traditional forms and sequences, but continue to disrupt the conventional continuum of the temporal art of music with regard to their actions, gestures and sounds.

Overall, the deviation from traditional theatre performance settings is more obvious in Tsangaris’ work than for example in the instrumental theatre of his former teacher, Mauricio

Kagel – a concept which certainly influenced his understanding of theatre. Today, as Kagel's music has already found its place in municipal symphonic concerts or in conservative–representative festivals and is being presented as a genre-typical music with a conventional dramaturgical format (one may welcome or regret this), it appears that his former student has in many respects taken Kagel's place. By now Tsangaris' projects can also no longer – as used to be the case at festivals such as Donaueschingen – be pigeonholed as a mere addition to the 'actual' concert activities. The boundaries of what is supposed to be at the centre and on the fringe have been largely blurred, particularly evident in the strong presence of the performance of *Batsheba: Eat the history!* at the Donaueschingen Music Festival in 2009.

Even though Manos Tsangaris responds to specific sites with his works, almost all of them can still be transferred to other places without a loss of substance. This is particularly true for the project *Winzig [Tiny]*, first realised in Cologne in 1993, a variably fanned out 'music for a house'³ consisting of highly unusual situations. One walked through surprising, sometimes disturbing spatial arrangements. These resemble the sensation-promising show booths at a fun fair, which can indeed be regarded as the epitome of developing and staging a world of its own and its poetic possibilities. Rooms, which are not usually accessible, are being filled with musical and theatrical activities and are (re)activated, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Tsangaris' projects occur preferably in historic buildings. Ideally, these historical spaces come with a unique aura to which he can respond. The project *Drei Räume [Three Spaces]*, seen and heard at the Donaueschinger Music Festival in 2004, may serve as an example. The object of reflection was the Fürstliche Hofbibliothek [Donaueschingen Court Library], which had been emptied out (due to the sale of manuscripts) and was now presented and made resonant in all its charm and its dignity by Tsangaris. Amongst other things this was achieved through the exquisite sounds of a harpsichord, which was embedded in a candlelight setting

with Dirndl dresses from the Mozart era. A setting like this cannot easily be transferred. Some things in this project were even specifically related to Donaueschingen and the festival which sprawls over the whole city, such as scenes in the upper floor of the library or the cellar, where the ‘prince’ and the ‘artistic director’ were brought into view in addition to showing video recordings of festival visitors. The aim was to playfully exemplify and model the essence of the festival structure in Donaueschingen. Tsangaris even suggested that these sorts of concretisation could be compared with reality television.⁴ It is precisely in *Drei Räume* that the question about what reality could ever be arises. And from the eponymous spaces of the title the most significant one proves to be the inner space of the spectator.

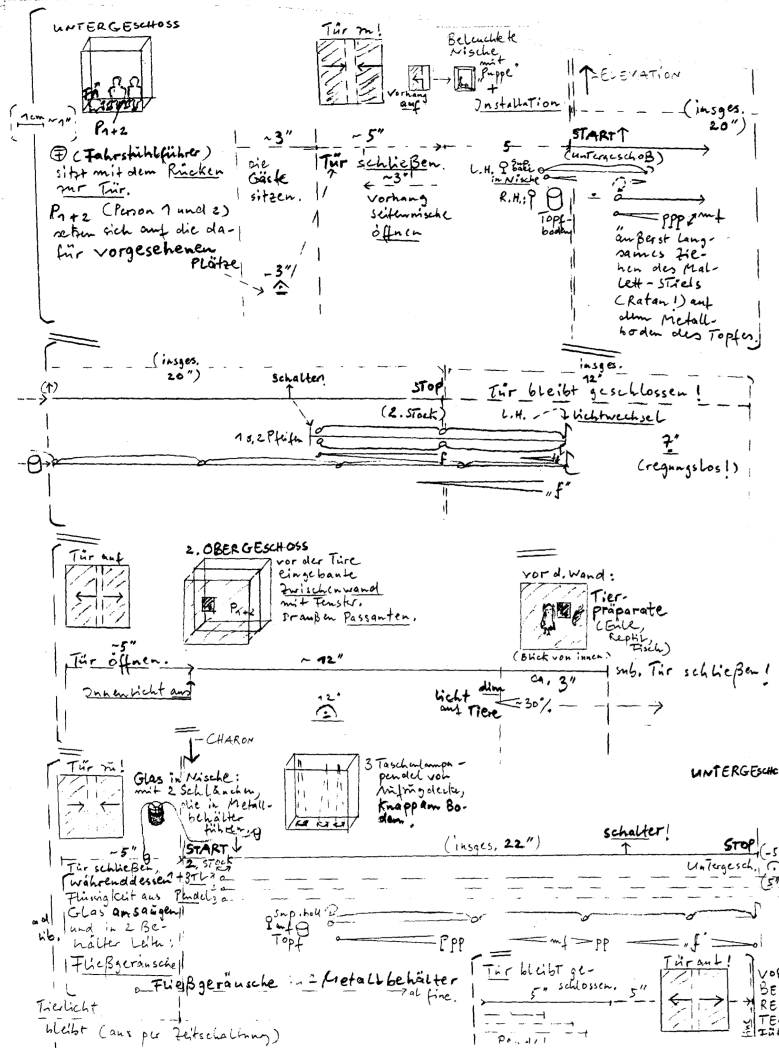
Winzig, with which Tsangaris first gained international attention, is already one of those projects that explore a house, make it sound in different places and bring its hidden charms and possibilities into view (beyond the accepted performance spaces even all the way to the boiler room), as well as its limitations. In this, Tsangaris’ concept may not be unique, but it has a special suggestiveness. The places where one has intensively experienced one of his projects (and which obviously revert to serving other purposes afterwards), can hardly be re-entered later without the memory of this project. It is all the more attractive, then, when some projects – especially his *Diskrete Stücke [Discrete Pieces]* – are realised in public places that are not otherwise used for music-theatre. At its world premiere, this was the main building of the WDR in Cologne;⁵ a place whose rich history is also to some extent reflected in this composition.

<H1>Changes of perspective</H1>

It is important for Tsangaris’ processional theatre to keep perspectives flexible. At each performance, visitors can give up their chosen direction of movement in favour of another. This includes at least three aspects: First, the succession of the stations that the spectator

traverses is deliberately not determined. The *parcours* through these staged imaginary worlds is consequently individual and – according to the notion of passages by Walter Benjamin – characterised by a non-directional movement which suspends a clear succession. Also, in some theatre situations one is invited to linger as briefly or long as one wishes, or to revisit parts of the performance, which have a fixed duration and are repeated, and see them several times. Second, the question of one's own position is interrogated each time: there are various concepts that either allow strolling during the performance or facilitate different viewpoints of the same event from different perspectives. And third, the spatial arrangement alternates between moments of close proximity and distance, not unlike a camera moving from a close-up to a long shot.

The latter, rendering perspectives flexible, is particularly significant: the close-up culminates in installations which guide the viewer's eye into a keyhole situation. With the help of small invisible magnets or similar techniques, movements are evoked in small showcases which can only be seen by one or two spectators simultaneously. Here a kind of proximity is achieved, which we are otherwise at best familiar with in the visual arts.



Closeness can be encountered in a very specific way in a miniature, which Tsangaris presented at various performances of *Winzig* under the title *Sessellift [chair lift]* – and which used a particularly small room performatively (see Figures IV.4.1 and IV.4.2). The piece consists of a lift moving up and down crowded by two spectators and one performing musician. Not only is this space mobile; it also creates a kind of proximity between performer and audience that is highly unusual in traditional concert life. We are familiar with it in contemporary theatre, particularly during its ‘activist’ phase in the 1960s and 70s, if we think about the many productions in which actors performed in the middle of the auditorium

between the rows of seats (see Lehmann 1999, 291). The proximity of this ‘elevator music’ by Tsangaris, however, is linked in a quite different way to spatial intimacy and security. The aesthetic experience intertwines extremely different qualities such as luxury and distress by means of this unusual closeness: the exclusivity of a private performance with an almost claustrophobic narrowness as an indicator of being at someone’s mercy.⁶

In *Sessellift* one can identify the specific way in which Manos Tsangaris composes different media. In this section of *Winzig* the following instruments are used: a large galvanised aluminium pot, the bottom of which is played on, a mouth-pipe, a light pendulum made from a blinking flashlight, which hangs by a thread from the ceiling, and another blinking flashlight. In this orchestra of simple everyday objects, the visual level is quite naturally intertwined with the acoustic level. A look at the score of this piece reveals that the use of all elements is coordinated quite accurately by Tsangaris (by providing timings by the second). The same applies to the closing of the lift door as well as its journey to other floors. In this arrangement of sounds and visuals there are both continuously flowing and deliberately surprising elements. The latter consists, for example, in suddenly exposing two prepared (stuffed) animals – a flying bird and a fish – which have been kept hidden until that point. Playing with surprise and mysteriousness turns out to be the central dimension of the *Sessellift* section. Playing the mouth pipe and the aluminium pot also contributes to this significantly through its alternation between loud and quiet moments. Just when the lift doors first close according to the score, a threatening atmosphere is created. The narrowness of the space is first experienced; gloomy expectations are evoked. Shortly thereafter, the departure of the lift leads to the first climax of the whole piece, before opening the view on the stuffed animals. In a peculiar way, they signal something of a departure from the vitality of life, associating a rather negative feeling. The two stuffed animals appear in a black box, which has been set up in front of the lift door on the targeted floor. Thus instead of leaving the lift,

as one would expect after its arrival, the audience is confronted with these mysterious animals. The door closes again and the lift returns to its original floor. What follows then is certainly a kind of *lieto fine*, namely the reopening the door – and the spectators realise on exiting the lift that they have witnessed a small and ominous musical theatre scene. The ironic undercurrent of the scene – due to its setting and its aura and the simple materials – forms a vital part of the experience of this scene.



Tsangaris has often been drawn to this aspect of a strict limitation of the audience and the essential play with different perspectives it includes. It represents a deliberate inversion of the relationship between performer and spectator and he tested this in a particularly radical way some decades ago: in the composition *o.T.* (i.e. *Untitled*) from 1980, a seven-piece ensemble plays for a single listener. At its first performance, this listener was Mauricio Kagel.⁷

Characteristic of many projects of Tsangaris are also moments of distance, indebted to the Brechtian theatre. This distance juxtaposes at times the effects of immediacy (such as those in the lift), which result from the limited space. Similar to the frames of paintings, Tsangaris' theatrical situations are also often framed.⁸ These frames are related to the repetitive structure of what is being shown. Each visitor is led by an usher into a small room, feels the concentrated characteristic of a miniature piece, but is aware that others have preceded and will follow his/her brief presence in this room. The aura of uniqueness, which even in the age of mechanical reproduction is still an essential element of our culture, is thus suspended or at least put into perspective.

Tsangaris' projects are often framed in original or consciously defamiliarising ways, for example by creating a cage or aquarium situation in the *Vegetarische Lounge* [*Vegetarian Lounge*] within *Nacht-Labor* [*Nocturnal Laboratory*] – which forms part of another cycle of music-theatre-miniatures called *Die Döner Schaltung* [*The Kebab Circuit*] (2004): an artificial laboratory-like world outside of the continuous flow of time. The same applies to the constellations which revolve within themselves in which objects – in *Riesig aus Winzig* [*Gigantic from Tiny*] these are small metal beads – are led by an invisible hand.

Some works of Tsangaris develop a dialectic between the setting of a framework and a continuous flow. In the ensemble piece *An die Vorwelt* [*To the Ancestral World*] (1996) this means that the composition “sneaks unnoticed from the everyday world into the art world”

(Mörchen 2001, 49). The large room to which this piece responds is Cologne Philharmonic Hall. On its podium scenes are being performed, that reduce all the familiar activities of this place to absurdity. The artistic director for example is called away in the middle of his announcements to give way to a free anarchical proliferation of activities, such as the warm-up of an ensemble of musicians. A space is thus being relieved of its rituals, its usual hierarchical formations are rendered obsolete and everyday activities take their place. This, too, is a typical example of post-dramatic theatre in Lehmann's terms. And the transitionality that unfolds could be read as a transgression between fiction and factuality along the lines of Gérard Genette's concept of metalepsis (2004).

<H1>Surprising experiences</H1>

This breakdown of the theatre of Manos Tsangaris into its different stations corresponds clearly with the widely discussed abandonment of the metanarrative and the end of the grand unified theories with a claim to truth. This reflects the salient modesty that this processional theatre radiates, no different by the way than most of the lyrical texts of the author, which are often laconically short. This modesty may be the opposing force to the tendency towards the *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art], which is undoubtedly inherent in this approach to theatre. It corresponds with the linking of different formats, which are crucial for much of Tsangaris' work. Titles such as *Winzig [Tiny]* and *groß und klein [large and small]* point to this already. For this, the composer's experience with radio plays and incidental music is likely to have been formative.

The small format – having become a defining feature of the art of Tsangaris – raises a variety of associations. It brings to mind little toy worlds, or model-scale (re)constructions to help to understand the world. And it also raises the question of the division of the seemingly important and the supposedly unimportant, as the radio play from 1988 *Grundfleisch*

[Groundflesh] did with its enjoyable parody of Herbert von Karajan's self-importance. This problematic has since become a recurrent basic tendency of Tsangaris' works. His concepts know about complex connections and technical sophistication, but they also contain distinctively simple moments, which in the tradition of the *arte povera* undermine the widespread digitisation and rendering technical in all fields of art.

The liminality between observation of events and contribution to them marks a further aspect of Tsangaris' aesthetics. An example from the core of the project *Winzig*, bearing the terse title *winzig aus winzig [tiny from tiny]* attests to this. This piece places three spectators on an audience platform, just where a 'pretend audience' has already taken its place, which begins to become theatrically active after the show has started. The spaces between performers and audience overlap so much that the spectators soon expect – shockingly or exhilaratingly – that they ought to participate in the events themselves.⁹ At same time, the small format leads back to the aspect of the fragmentary nature of the (re)presented. Is what we see and hear – one wonders as a visitor of the processional theatre – part of a greater whole or rather its blueprint? At any rate, the inside and the outside engage in complex relationships.

In *Nachtlabor* the relativity of our perception is brought to our attention. In this case, that includes exposing the audience. Thus a general tendency of Tsangaris' work can be pinpointed here: to bring to the forefront the disappearance of the individual spectator in the crowd. The audience is first outside, positioned between an old brick wall and a modern glass wall, initially even blinded by the light, in a limbo between narrowing restriction and an opening.¹⁰ The eyes rush ahead and take part in a theatre event, while the ears are committed to strikingly different impressions. The inner stage of the recipient – an essential space in Tsangaris' Composed Theatre – thus becomes surprisingly lopsided. This situation resolves

itself when the same event is perceived from a different perspective in the adjacent room and one becomes aware of the next cohort of spectators in their helplessness, their exposure.

This precisely composed imbalance points to a characteristic of unlocking, which is typical for Manos Tsangaris' composing. His concepts lead to an experience of self that is diametrically opposed to the dissipating, desensitising tendency of public passages. This aspect is reminiscent of Leonardo's cave wanderer who can be incited to pursuit of knowledge and understanding by a plethora of the unfamiliar, but sometimes also of Plato's cave dweller, who must be dragged into the light by force. Certainly, the experience of Manos Tsangaris' projects in their surprising and awe-inspiring moments is an exciting and pleasurable affair. But with their moments of mystification or even obfuscation, with the flexibility of perspective, with the constant play of closeness and distance, with the different proportions and the reflection of the specific aura of a place there is also a consciously disorienting and question-raising impulse. And in experiencing some of his projects one nurtures the faint hope that the music industry as a whole, in so far as it is determined by the fixation on certain performance modes and forms of reception, gets some injection of life through the artistic laboratory nature of Tsangaris' work – a stimulus which is neither meant to eliminate concerts nor to lead to trivial decoration, but to a creative reflection and revitalisation of their rituals.

Manos Tsangaris takes musicians and listeners on an exploratory journey with his works. His music embodies a permanent quest, precisely because of the non-obviousness of the formats; a kind of basic research into what the interaction of music with other elements such as texts and spaces can achieve. The oscillation between closeness and distance – between the discrete proximity of sounds very close to the ear of the perceiver on the one hand and the normal hearing distance on the other – illustrates this particularly well. It is naturally important to the overall development of the composer that he does not want to be

locked into certain formats. And thus specifically the large-sized *Batsheba* project aims not to simply eliminate the bearing of great classical opera: This presentation of the biblical story is familiar with both its close-up perspective with discrete, almost imperceptible movements and its grand operatic gestures. These elements of traditional opera have taken aback many viewers at the premiere in Donaueschingen. But the tendency to change formats, if brought into play consistently, can hardly be thought of without creating some unexpected twists. And that is precisely what constitutes a crucial aspect of the work of Manos Tsangaris and its invigorating effect within contemporary music theatre.

<H1>References</H1>

Genette, Gérard (2004) *Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction*, Paris: Seuil.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies (1999) *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren.

Mörchen, Raoul (2001) “‘Und wenn es gelingt, verschmilzt auch alles’: Das mediale Theater von Manos Tsangaris”, in: *MusikTexte*, 91 (2001), pp. 45–50.

Tsangaris, Manos (1998) “Wahrnehmungspänomene als Auslöser des kompositorischen Prozesses”, in: *Musik im Dialog. Jahrbuch der Berliner Gesellschaft für Neue Musik*, ed. by S. Sanio and Chr. Metzger, Saarbrücken: Pfau-Verlag, pp. 55–66.

Tsangaris, Manos (2006) “Was heißt situatives Komponieren?”, in: *KunstMusik*, 6 (2006), pp. 30–5.

Further information on Tsangaris works can be found on his website at www.tsangaris.de.

(Translation: David Roesner)

<Figure captions>

<FN>Figure IV.4.1</FN> <FC>First page of the score for *Sessellift* by Manos Tsangaris.

With permission of the Thuermchen Verlag, Cologne.</FC>

<FN>Figure IV.4.2</FN> <FC>Scene from *Sessellift*. Private Photograph.</FC>

¹ The German term ‘Stationentheater’ refers to a similar aesthetic principle as its counterpart ‘processional theatre’; it is, however, more neutral with regard to its political implications (often described as an empowering form of street theatre) (DR).

² With regard to this notion see Tsangaris 2006.

³ This refers to the subtitle of the composition: *Winzig: Musik für ein Haus* (DR).

⁴ Cf. the conversation between Armin Köhler and Tsangaris documented in the programme notes of the Donaueschingen music festival 2004, p. 108.

⁵ The main building of the federal broadcasting company for the West of Germany (DR).

⁶ Other music-theatre works have meanwhile taken up this aesthetical strategy, for example in the piece *Avenir! Avenir!* by Hamed Taheri and Dror Feiler, 2006 in Stuttgart.

⁷ See also David Roesner’s comments on *o.T.* in the context of his discourse analysis earlier in this book.

⁸ Tsangaris has reflected on the importance of framings himself, see Tsangaris 1998, 59.

⁹ This is also paralleled by other contemporary theatre *auteurs*. The performance-installation *Human Writes* by William Forsythe and Kendall Thomas from 2006 is an example in which the question whether the spectators become actors themselves becomes a central aspect during in the course of the performance.

¹⁰ This at least was the arrangement in the performance in Witten. Other staging solutions would also be possible.