



## **Theatrical perceptions of German reunification**

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Against the backdrop of the East-West stereotypes that emerged shortly after 1989, this essay analyzes three plays written during the early years of reunification, illuminating differences and similarities in form and content in Manfred Karge's *Mauer-Stücke* (1990), Elfriede Müller's *Goldener Oktober* (1990) and Rolf Hochhuth's *Wessis in Weimar* (1993). As immediate responses to the 'Wende', these plays demonstrate the speed with which the culture clash between East and West found its way into contemporary drama. This essay argues that the playwrights, in addressing the economic, psychological, and sociological consequences of reunification, involuntarily contributed to the formation of a set of clichés, ranging from the 'raping' of the East to the wrecked 'marriage' of the two German states and to the 'looting' of the former GDR. Although the plays discussed can be regarded as typical examples of the way in which the consequences of the 'Wende' have been depicted, they particularly have in common their use of the setting of the former 'death strip' in Berlin to emphasize the strong emotional undercurrents of the post-1989 debates.

In recent years, Germany has witnessed the (re)emergence of a number of playwrights whose work is both politically incisive and theatrically rich, and who have responded to the problematic consequences of a reunited Germany. Among these playwrights Christoph Hein has probably achieved the widest international acclaim,<sup>1</sup> yet he is hardly a solitary star in an otherwise vacant sky. He writes amidst a constellation of innovative dramatists whose output is marked by a distinctly German personality even if that personality is still *either* East *or* West German. A significant number of plays constitute a strong response to reunification, such as Volker Braun's *Böhmen am Meer* (1992), Botho Strauß's *Schlußchor* (1991), Herbert Achternbusch's *Auf verlorenem Posten. Eine Revolutionsfarce* (1989), Rainald Goetz's *Festung* (1993) and Christoph Hein's *In Acht und Bann* (1998), to name but a few.

This article will consider a play by Rolf Hochhuth alongside two works by lesser known playwrights, Manfred Karge, whose career as actor and playwright began at the Berliner Ensemble in 1961, and Elfriede Müller, a younger but increasingly visible and prolific dramatist.<sup>2</sup> I will examine here three plays representative of what might be described as a stereotypical approach to the German-German culture clash: *Mauer-Stücke* (1989/90)

<sup>1</sup> See for example Albrecht 2000: 104-06; Niven 2000; and Hammer 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Pfister 1997: 79-81.

by Manfred Karge, *Goldener Oktober* (1992) by Elfriede Müller and *Wessis in Weimar* (1993) by Rolf Hochhuth.<sup>3</sup> All three authors' involvement in the re-reading of the gentle revolution is manifested in their joint interest in the former border territory, for they have all made the former death strip the setting of (parts of) their plays. In doing so they have focused on what is – apart from the concentration camps – perhaps the most emotionally charged territory of German history. To this very day the Wall remains the symbol of a national trauma.<sup>4</sup> In a Special Issue on 21 March 1993, the Sunday Times asked 'Does Germany Need Major Surgery?' and its title page featured a map of a unified Germany through which the former border ran like a scar. This demarcation line is symbolic of the collision of two worlds and of the unwanted 'marriage' between wealthy westerners and the 'lost tribes' of the East. Moreover, the 'Todesstreifen' at the heart of Europe is not only the symbol of a fractured fatherland but also the visual proof of a shattered dream of painless unification. Caught up in the mood of crisis that prevailed at the time, playwrights located East-West encounters in the creaking, half-demolished buildings of the wasteland between the two former countries.

Soon after the fall of the Wall in November 1989, however, people became aware of the *financial* potential of the former no-man's land. For forty years the death strip had preserved what is now classified as Berlin's most expensive real estate.<sup>5</sup> The post-unification struggle for ownership of this land is best symbolized by the 'battle' for the Potsdamer Platz, where four firms have created gigantic commercial centres, under which new tunnels have been carved out.<sup>6</sup> While some praise the new development as a considerable step forward for the new-old capital, others remain apprehensive.<sup>7</sup> And it is hardly surprising, in view of the speed with which the building work commenced everywhere along the former border, that opposition was voiced by many artists. According to Günter Grass, the GDR was sold off at a rock bottom price (Grass 1990:

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of other literary responses to German reunification see Zitzelsberger 2000.

<sup>4</sup> The Wall is still a burning issue in contemporary Germany. See for example Joffe 2001; on the personal implications of division and the tragedies on both sides of the Wall see Dieckmann 2001; on the situation of intellectuals in the GDR see Kunert 2001.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the gigantic construction projects along the site of the former Wall see Bahr 1998. His book comprises old and new photographs of the sites in question as well as photographs of models of future projects.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent documentation of the Berlin border before and after the fall of the Wall see Hampel and Friedrich 1997; on the transformation of the Potsdamer Platz see particularly 26-35. For an architectural history of Berlin's most famous venues and places see Haubrich 1997. For useful teaching material on the changes in Berlin see Landeszentrale für politische Bildung 1995.

<sup>7</sup> See for example: Anonymous 1995a, 1995b and 1995c.

45), while conversely Peter von Becker, theatre critic of *Theater Heute*, quipped that the GDR was also the most expensive real estate of all time, pointing to its threadbare economy and environmental problems (von Becker 1992: 1).

Exploring the intersection of politics, drama and territory in Berlin in the wake of the 'Wende', the plays with which I am concerned here focus on the derelict former border territory less as a real estate developers dream than as a potent symbol of the psychological, economic and political trauma which characterized the East German response to reunification. In these three early dramatic responses to the 'Wende' the grey zone of the 'Todesstreifen' proves to be a powerful image for the negative consequences of reunification. Utilizing this setting and harnessing its emotional resonance, these playwrights have crafted committed and emotional post-unification dramas. For this reason I cannot agree with the conclusion reached by Axel Schalk (1994) in his survey of 'Wende-Stücke' in which he states that the mediocre quality of plays during this period points to a crisis in the theatre. In my opinion, and as my analysis will show, a number of plays that explore the theme of reunification and its consequences are neither 'shallow' nor 'superfluous' as Schalk contends. On the contrary, they represent serious attempts to tackle Germany's most recent history and its economic and psychological repercussions.<sup>8</sup> However, it is also the case that these plays address in a largely uncritical fashion a number of issues that were to become stereotypes about reunification. That is, while they might in many ways represent good theatre, they have also contributed to the formation of a range of East-West clichés which together boil down to an opposition between the insensitive and overbearing capitalist 'Wessi' on the one hand, and the lazy, dissatisfied and self-pitying 'Ossi' on the other. Although the plays discussed below attempt to come to terms with the culture clash between the two German peoples, they nevertheless fall into the trap of confirming some of the thoughtless clichés about the nature of reunification and its consequences. In doing so, they help to keep the so-called 'Mauer im Kopf' intact and show just how strong was the influence of some of the prevailing stereotypes. The clichés perpetuated by these plays include the 'raping' of the East, the 'colonizing' of the former GDR, the way in which it fell prey to money-makers and, finally, the way in

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<sup>8</sup> Schalk's argument may be influenced to some extent by his experience of the poor stagings of a number of plays. See Schalk 1994: particularly 273 and 281. I found a number of minor factual misunderstandings in his article puzzling, e.g. Volker Braun's *Böhmen am Meer* (1992)

which reunification deprived East Germans of their traditions and undermined their psychological well-being. Rather than explore these problematic historical interpretations, the plays help to reinforce stereotypes. The aim of this essay is thus to focus on the way in which such clichés are created, or at least sustained, through their uncritical reproduction on stage.

### **Manfred Karge: *Mauer-Stücke* (1989/90)**

Karge wrote his collage of short scenes, *Mauer-Stücke*, in 1989-90. In focusing attention on striking images from the year in which the Wall fell, he demands a highly attentive and committed audience. The collage presents a kaleidoscope of issues, ranging from the role of the former Ministry of Security to the looting of the GDR and the revival of the Nibelung myth. Through a series of short farcical mini-dramas the play addresses some of the economic and psychological problems which followed the 'Wende'. Here, I would like to focus on a scene entitled 'Mauerhund', set on the former German-German border shortly after the fall of the Wall. In this scene, representative of the play's derisive depiction of East Germans, a former GDR 'Grenzpolizist' and his watchdog quarrel about their future duties. While the dog insists that they should continue to guard the border, the man quickly adapts to changed circumstances. He slips through a hole in the Wall, only to return in a change of clothing – the uniform of the West German police. In this way, he epitomizes a figure who was to become a commonplace in literary responses to the 'Wende': the 'turncoat' – 'Wendehals'.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, his new hat leads to a comic interlude, alluding to the Gessler episode in Act 1, 3 of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*. In this particular scene, the Fronvogt Gessler's hat is placed on a stick and he demands that the common Swiss people greet it and respect it as if it were the Fronvogt himself, prompting the proud Meister Steinmetz to ask: 'Was für ein Faßnachtsaufzug und was soll der Hut?' (Schiller 1962: 930). Thus Karge draws on parallels between the West German 'rulers', who are equated with the Fronvogt, and the oppressed Swiss and their East German counterparts. In contrast to *Wilhelm Tell*, however, the underdogs in Karge's play, the 'oppressed' Easterners, fail to revolt

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is not explicitly set in Italy (278), and the character Anita von Schastorf (from Botho Strauß's play *Schlußchor*, 1993) does not copulate with an eagle (290).

<sup>9</sup> On the emergence of this new kind of East German see Ardagh 1995: 437.

successfully against the ‘yoke’ of reunification. What is more, in *Mauer-Stücke*, the allusions to the quarrel about Gessler’s hat are given a farcical dimension through the participation of a dog in the political discussion:

DER HUND Sag an, Soldat, was hast du auf dem Kopf?  
 DER SOLDAT Ich?  
 DER HUND Wer denn sonst? Das ist ja ein Hut  
 Und äußerst verdächtig und gar nicht gut  
 DER SOLDAT Das ist nie ein Hut.  
 Das ist eine Mütze  
 Die ich so gut  
 Wie schon immer besitze.  
 DER HUND Ich warn dich, Soldat, laß diesen Scheiß.  
 Herunter den Hut, oder ich beiß.  
 DER SOLDAT Sind Sie von Sinnen, Gefreiter Fritz.  
 Ich sag, Gehorsamsverweigerer sitz.  
*Der Hund pariert.*  
 DER SOLDAT Hut oder Nichthut, das ist die Frage.  
 Was ists, was ich auf dem Kopfe trage?  
 (Karge 1996: 159)

Imitating the verse form of Schiller’s play, the dog objects to the way in which the soldier has swiftly adapted to the changed political circumstances after the fall of the Wall. However, the colloquial language suggests that Karge does not take his characters too seriously and is in fact mocking the commonly heard complaints of the East Germans that they had been placed under a West German yoke. This is underlined by the farcical elements of the scene, such as the ludicrous spectacle of a speaking dog trying to educate his owner on how to maintain his integrity. Schiller’s discussion of high political ideals is presented as a farce which mixes quotations and stereotypes. It is no coincidence that Hamlet’s existential doubts of ‘to be or not to be’ are uttered by the soldier who, like many East Germans, perceives the fall of the Wall as an existential threat.<sup>10</sup> The play does not take such fears seriously, however, instead mocking the exaggerated self-pity of East Germans who perceive themselves as the losers of reunification. The fact that the soldier does not agree with the dog’s idea of freedom, aggressively defending his turncoat attitude and forcing the dog to sit and be silent, implies that Schiller’s notions of freedom of thought and speech have effectively been traded for a new outfit – that is, a subservient attitude – alluded to by the ‘Mütze’ of the German Michel. It seems that Karge takes a comical view of the ‘Wende’, indirectly accusing the East Germans of over-adapting to the new Germany by rigidly observing

its 'dress-code', with the soldier exemplifying the stereotypical image of the 'Wendehals'. Despite its farcical framework, however, the scene can be read as a powerful attack on the East Germans' inadequate response to reunification. Written from the viewpoint of a West German, Karge's play does not take seriously the difficulties encountered by many East Germans in coming to terms with completely changed political circumstances.

### **Elfriede Müller: *Goldener Oktober* (1990)**

Müller's play is set in Berlin in October 1990 near the former death zone, in a hastily refurbished and westernized bar called the 'New Moskau'. As a cynical swan song for the former GDR and its populace, its core theme is the colonization of the former Socialist state. According to Müller, *Goldener Oktober* presents us with the 'archeology' of post-1989 Berlin and demonstrates how the dismal and abandoned cityscape in which the play is set has a considerable effect on the lives of the characters. Looking back on reunification, she paints a gloomy picture:

Die Deformationen von Ost und West treffen sich über einem Abgrund voller Leichen. Da wird weder Gras noch Europarasen darüberwachsen. Obwohl viele unerschrockene Deutsche mit dem Fall der Mauer auch gleichzeitig ihre Ursache mitbegraben wollten, ist sie nicht begraben. (Müller 1995: 153).

In *Goldener Oktober* the abyss between East and West is transformed into a setting which exposes the utter hopelessness of the abandoned border territory. The play consists of two parallel parts, each of which is further divided into three 'Streifen'. In each part the first 'Streifen' takes place in the 'New Moskau', then the action moves to the street before concluding in a third section entitled 'Niemandland'. This grey zone not only symbolizes the economic difficulties following reunification, it also represents the fact that shortly after 1990, Germans in both East and West tried to hush up the real problems that were hidden beneath the scar of a hastily stitched together unity.

The play opens with a fairly dilettante revue featuring the aptly named 'Plastic-Bomber-Boys [...], die aussehen wie ihr Name schon sagt' (Müller 1992a: 44). The three singers make ironic comments on the 'show' character of the 'Wende', which was often dubbed

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10 On the emotional stress caused by the new political and cultural environment in reunified Germany, see Bialas 1996: 106-7.

a 'Medienrevolution', with the implication that television coverage had in fact caused the collapse of the GDR state, a point of view which was naturally contested by East Germans.<sup>11</sup> This view is alluded to when a journalist takes out a cassette recorder at the bar in order to capture some first hand evidence of the conflicts between East and West. The play also targets the new East German identity which began to define itself primarily in response to a fundamental distrust of the 'capitalist' West,<sup>12</sup> in the form of the growth of 'Ostalgie' and the various after-effects of reunification, such as the emergence of opportunists. As in Karge's play, the opportunists are strongly criticized, although Müller does not veil her criticism in a comic tone:

Der Wendehals fehlt im Verein  
 Wo ein Arsch ist ich kriech hinein.  
 (*Melodie von 'Moorsoldaten'.*)  
 Wir sind die Wendehäse und schnattern wie die Gänse im Chor.  
 Wir sind die Wendehäse und lernen schnell die neue Partitur.  
 (Müller 1992a: 147).

The song of the turncoats, sung in the drab premises of the cheap bar, also illustrates the fact that behind the quickly erected façade of a shiny commercial world, the psychological problems caused by the 'Wende' persist. Although attempts have been made to modernize the East German environment, the changes are merely superficial and cannot gloss over the fact that the collapse of the GDR has left its people in a state of emotional and economic bankruptcy. This is emphasized in the contrast between the cheap amusements of the 'New Moskau' and the backdrop of the former no man's land. The glittery world of capitalism is clearly shown to stand only on shaky foundations.

Müller reinforces her pessimistic view of the German-German culture clash by presenting us with the damaging psychological impact of the 'Wende' on East Germans, criticizing the destructive influence of capitalism from the perspective of a number of individuals. The West German, Erich, for instance, bosses about his timid East German wife Margot, whilst the two would-be capitalists Letty and Harry chat up the ageing prostitute Lola, omitting to reveal to her that they only want her to star in a porn film. When she finds out, she is deeply disappointed and sarcastically comments on the

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<sup>11</sup> For a thorough analysis of the 'Medienrevolution' see a collection of essays edited by Bohn et al. 1992.

<sup>12</sup> See Wagner (1999: 154) who blames the rejection of the West on the culture shock experienced by East Germans.

disadvantages of the free market economy, merging adverts and political slogans into a bitter resumé:

Die neue Zeit, hurra. Der wilde Westen, der ist da. Hier grinst der Chef, da lacht die Mark. Gemeinsam, gemeinsam, gemeinsam, sind wir stark. Arbeitslos ist keine Schande. Der Rest ist ihre eigene Sache. Allzeit bereit. Jetzt kommt die deutsche Gemütlichkeit. (Müller 1992a: 158-59).

The insecurity and the quiet bewilderment of East Germans in the face of the self-assured and over-bearing behaviour of ‘Wessis’ has often been observed and Peter Haller’s remark in *Die Zeit* can stand for many:

Es ist nicht so, daß die DDR-Bürger besonders servil wären; ihnen fehlt indessen die Erfahrung erfolgreicher Selbstbehauptung und so auch das Maß an Selbstsicherheit, um widerstehen zu wollen. (Quoted in Golombek and Ratzke 1991: 83).

However, Müller challenges this cliché through one of her main characters, Silke, a young East German girl who works as a stripper in the ‘New Moskau’ and who becomes the victim of a mentally disturbed West German. At the beginning we see her perform her show and, as is the case every night, the compère invites somebody from the audience to undress her, commenting cynically: ‘Was Sie da öffnen, ist Westcouture. Was sie da sehen, ist Silke. Feinste Ostware’ (Müller 1992a: 90). In other words, the young East German stripper is little more than an object of desire. To the capitalists, she is simply a beautiful object for sale, just like all other items in the commercial world. Thus Silke symbolizes the ‘feminine’ GDR viewed from a Western perspective. In comparing the girl to the former GDR, Müller draws on the metaphor of ‘marriage’ which was soon to become a stereotypical image of reunification, since the media portrayed the reunion as a shotgun wedding between the masculinized West Germany and the vulnerable, feminized East Germany.<sup>13</sup> In the metaphorical context of the play, ‘marriage’ is equivalent to an abusive and destructive relationship and is symbolized by the (very brief) union of Silke and the store detective. This relationship begins when Silke becomes the recipient of unwanted attentions from the man who undoes her dress. He is a West German detective from the KadeWe department store who caught her stealing that morning but who failed to inform the authorities. Following her to the bar, he more or less forces her to have a drink with him, yet Silke makes no effort to hide her contempt for the fat, elderly man. Müller thus challenges the

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<sup>13</sup> See Morrison 1992.

common image of ‘whinging’ Easterners, as she is a strong and self-assured character who is ready to tackle post-Wende economic difficulties. She is appalled at the detective’s self-pity: ‘Sie sind ein Gulli, aus dem es manchmal blubbert’ (Müller 1992a: 152). Although she has every reason to be melancholy, it is in fact the West German who is hopelessly depressed and obsessed with his job, constantly ranting about the evils of human nature. Greedy, fat fingers that steal whatever they can grab are the only things on his mind (Müller 1992a: 130). As the odd couple strolls across the death strip after closing time, Silke misjudges the situation. She does not see the writing on the wall, as it were. Pretending to caress her, the detective simply kills her, and then commits suicide (Müller 1992a: 152). This suggests that the West Germans’ desire for the East results from a dissatisfaction with their own lives, yet because the East cannot in reality fulfil their desires, they find themselves wanting to destroy it. The violent outburst is followed by silence and indifference, and although several people walk by, nobody notices the dead couple. The melancholy nature of the death strip, the deserted no man’s land between the two parts of the city, thus becomes symbolic of a place where the thinly veiled tensions between East and West erupt. However, life goes on and the passers-by represent those who pressed on with their careers, regardless of the distress they would have seen had they looked more closely.

Silke is not the only East German victim of reunification. After her death, a young East German who has just been dumped by his girlfriend enters the ‘New Moskau’. He is outraged that her new lover is a Turk:

OSTLER Kann der überhaupt richtig Deutsch. (Hält dem Türken die Zeitung vor die Nase, tut, als würde er lesen.) Deutschland im Gulück.  
 TÜRKE Kümmern Sie sich um Ihr Deutsch.  
 OSTLER So ist das, wir sind jetzt die neuen Türken.  
 TÜRKE Ihr seid keine Türken. Ihr habt Kohl, Waigel, Wahlrecht.  
 (Müller 1992a: 124).

The East German youth sees himself as a foreigner in the new Germany but the Turk reminds him that he is still in a far better position than others excluded by mainstream society. In the dialogue cited above, the self-pity of East Germans, who in the eyes of many West Germans willingly adopted the role of outcasts, is criticized. The fact that both the young man and even Silke, for all her strength of character, are portrayed as victims, suggests that *Goldener Oktober* sustains one of the stereotypes of post-Wende plays, namely that Easterners are self-pitying and ineffectual.

*Goldener Oktober* employs its death strip setting to illustrate how alienated, disillusioned, and disoriented East Germans have become. The setting is a powerful backdrop against which to depict the helplessness of the two Germanies in dealing with each other and to reveal the psychological devastation that was lurking behind the quickly modernized façades. Contrasting the ‘Todestreifen’ with the tastelessly refurbished bar, Müller highlights the futility of attempts to gloss over the differences between East and West. In this sense, the setting of *Goldener Oktober* represents a successful feature of the play, despite the fact that it trades, at least partially, in clichés.

All in all, Müller paints a dark and gloomy picture. The desolate topography reflects the sombre mood, as it is here that the symptoms of the hidden conflict reveal themselves: a social worker loses her temper and assaults an East German; a skinhead mugs a kiosk owner; another young East-West couple splits up, because the East German man refuses to give in to his girlfriend’s capitalist thinking. Although he is not killed, he faces enormous difficulties when trying to preserve his East German identity, an identity which Müller reduces to the refusal to accept the rule of money. The East-West conflict deepens throughout the play and in the end it is only the West German capitalist, Erich, who walks off triumphantly and self-confidently because he is convinced that he is going to increase his profits by expanding his business in the East German regions. When he leaves, he drags his doggishly devoted East German wife behind him, a final reminder that overbearing West German behaviour will triumph. Against the backdrop of the cheap bar it becomes obvious that only West Germans, such as Erich, are completely unaffected by the melancholy of the death zone that surrounds them, while the East Germans are left to suffer. Müller employs a very powerful setting which successfully expresses the culture clash between the two German ways of life. However, at another level she undermines her critical thrust by resorting to the common stereotypes of the reckless, ‘male’ West Germans and the powerless, ‘female’ East Germans.

### **Rolf Hochhuth: *Wessis in Weimar* (1993)**

Although Rolf Hochhuth is one of the most acclaimed and innovative playwrights of his generation, and while his earlier plays generally received favorable reviews, a common reservation concerning his later works recurs in a number of recent articles. It is typified

by the comment of the Deutsche Presseagentur (dpa) which remarked that the 'glanzlos' staging of *Wessis in Weimar* in Hamburg was greeted by no more than 'wohlwollenden Applaus' for the 'wenig bewegenden Szenen aus dem Alltag der wiedervereinigten Republik' (von Bergen 1993). It is implied that in comparison to his earlier plays, such as *Der Stellvertreter*, Hochhuth's later works demonstrate a loss of dramatic verve. Far from being viewed as offering gripping insights into the intersection of politics and private life, his later plays have been judged boring, repetitive, and his characters too far removed from real-life.

As the subtitle 'Szenen aus einem besetzten Land' suggests, this play does not present reunification as the result of a peaceful coming together of Germany's two halves, but as a matter of colonization and occupation. Even before it was staged, the play sparked some media debate as three scenes sent to *manager magazin* by Hochhuth were mistakenly read as an apologia for terrorism. All three scenes speak of violence: in the first, the manager of the Treuhandanstalt, Karsten Rohwedder, is killed; in the second, a member of the Berlin Senate is murdered by a letter bomb; in the third, expropriated heirs set fire to their parents' house. In an interview with the magazine, Hochhuth explains his standpoint. When the interviewers blame him for legitimizing Rohwedder's assassination, he carefully corrects them, stating that Rohwedder must have been aware that his actions would eventually provoke violence. Hochhuth says: 'Daher bleibt ein Meuchelmord zwar ethisch unhaltbar, aber er mußte vorausgesehen werden von jedem, der Geschichte kennt' (Hochhuth 1992: 264). Despite such comments, the then minister Norbert Blüm attacked Hochhuth for allegedly collaborating with killers and excusing murder. On similar grounds, Herta Däubler-Gmelin condemned the play as 'disgusting'. Even the then chancellor, Helmut Kohl, joined in, calling it 'ein Freibrief für Mörder' (Müller 1992b), a vehement reaction that proves the sensitive subject-matter of Hochhuth's play.

Hochhuth regards himself as an advocate of the exploited East Germans and sees it as his duty to defend their cause. *Wessis in Weimar* therefore paints a black and white picture of a nation deeply divided by money: Westerners are obsessed by capitalism, whereas the East Germans suffer from the overbearing attitude of the 'Wessis' and their ability to buy up the former GDR. In taking this line Hochhuth uncritically follows the path paved by Günter Grass when he labelled the GDR a 'bargain'.

In order to illustrate the black and white nature of Hochhuth's portrayal of East-West divisions, I would like to focus on scene six, 'Zu ebener Erde und erster Stock oder: Die Launen des Glücks. Lokalposse mit Gesang, frei nach Nestroy'. The divide between the poor East Germans and the rich, wealthy and powerful West Germans as it is depicted in this scene could not be greater. In the foyer of a Berlin courtroom, a group of elderly ex-GDR citizens assembles in order to speak to the Minister of Justice, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger. While a stylish wine reception is being prepared in the background, these house owners, whose properties have been expropriated by the Socialist state, voice their discontent at the fact that their homes are not going to be returned to them by the FRG.

Citing numerous newspaper articles, Hochhuth summarizes the debate between the house owners and the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>14</sup> In highly stylized language, the different positions are juxtaposed: the house owners now experience exploitation for a second time, as the German state refuses to reimburse them, let alone return the estates, claiming that expropriation had been perfectly legal under GDR law.<sup>15</sup> Hochhuth paints a picture of a legal system in which state lawyers are corrupted by power and parliamentary immunity. Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger serves as the perfect example of an MP who is out of touch with reality and thinks only in terms of legal practices and procedures:

DER FÜNFZIGJÄHRIGE [...] Was eine außerbundesrepublikanische Staatsgewalt vorgegeben hat, kann, es muß aber nicht von der Bundesrepublik korrigiert werden.

*Er läßt den Brief sinken und wiederholt:*

Kann – muß aber nicht korrigiert werden, sagt die Senatsverwaltung, Uff deutsch: Pure Willkür: kann - muß aber nicht! Wenn die Stadt Berlin oder der Bund den großen Reibach selber machen wollen: jeben se de Mauergrundstücke halt nicht zurück! Denn die Staatsgewalt hat immer recht – sofern dat, wat se 'Recht' nennt, ihr nutzt. Jesetz – det muß man als Normalverbraucher hierzulande erst lernen, als Neubürger der BRD: Jesetz ist, wat dat Recht annulliert. Meine Mutter zahlte siebzig Mark Miete unter Honecker, unter Kohl siebenhundert. (Hochhuth 1994: 118).

<sup>14</sup> Hochhuth's sources are newspaper articles by Peter Schmalz in *Die Welt*, 15 July 1992 and by Rudolf Wassermann, chairman of the Oberlandesgericht Karlsruhe, in *Die Welt*, 19 September 1992; as well as a letter dated 8 October 1992 from Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger to the house owners. It is, of course, problematic to cite these as documents whose truth is incontestable.

<sup>15</sup> To support his case Hochhuth quotes Schmalz as follows: 'Doch auf Kosten der Opfer, die damals Haus und Grund für den Grenzbau verloren, will der Staat jetzt einen milliardenschweren Gewinn machen: Die Bundesregierung weigert sich beharrlich, die Mauergrundstücke and ihre früheren Eigentümer zurückzugeben. Die Enteignung werde nicht rückgängig gemacht, da sie nach dem Verteidigungsgesetz und somit nach damals gültiger Rechtslage der DDR erfolgt sei.' (Hochhuth 1994: 108)

In this passage Hochhuth's main argument is reiterated: namely that the new Germany is based on injustice. In short, capitalism operates on illegal grounds. In fact, he takes the argument a step further and compares the Federal Republic to Nazi Germany. Alluding to Hitler's policy of 'neuer Lebensraum im Osten', Hochhuth accuses West Germany of exploiting East German resources. As one of the house owners, Frau Schlucker (with an echo of 'armer Schlucker'), claims: 'Dat is die Spezialität der Wessis: verkoofen oder verschenken, wat se uns jeklaut hab'n' (Hochhuth 1994: 122). In another monologue based on her letter, the Minister states that the properties do not have to be returned, since the owners had already received compensation during GDR times (Hochhuth 1994: 128). As Hochhuth combines passages spoken in Berlin dialect and documentary material, such as Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger's letter, he blends fictional thoughts and documents to support his own ideological position without making the distinction between them clear. The dramatic structure finally crashes to the ground under its own ideological weight, when Honecker enters the stage, justifying the construction of the Berlin Wall. Here Hochhuth underlines the fact that while Honecker was taken to court for his crimes, the Berlin Republic does not question its own illegal policies, namely the confiscation of real estate on the 'Todesstreifen'. Indeed, the playwright's view is expressed by Frau Trumpf, who claims:

Wo sind die rechtlichen Voraussetzungen,  
 daß unser Staat zwar den jetzt Achtzigjährigen  
 einsperrt und vor Gericht stellt [...]  
 daß dieser selbe Staat sich zum  
 Erbe der Enteignungen macht,  
 die zum Zweck allein des schändlichen Mauerbaus  
 veranlaßt wurden? (Hochhuth 1994: 134).

That Frau Trumpf is merely expressing Hochhuth's own opinion becomes clear in the light of his interview with *manager magazin* where Hochhuth says:

Nun, es gibt Häuser und Boden. Und da der Kommunismus sie den Einheimischen gestohlen hat, mußte der Westen sie den Einheimischen zurückgeben. Die Ossi-Funktionäre waren die Diebe – die Wessi-Funktionäre sind die Hehler [...]. (Hochhuth 1992: 267).

In the same vein, the play appeals to the emotions of the audience, who are not supposed to adopt a distanced or critical position but are encouraged to identify with the weak and deprived East Germans. At no point in scene six is the position of the expropriated citizens called into question and the only person accused of wrongdoing is

the then Minister of Justice. Whilst the latter is portrayed as a lawyer promoting 'fascist' policies, the East Germans are presented as victims, thus encouraging the audience to take their side uncritically. For the most part the scene consists of a series of fairly lengthy complaints from the East Germans which remain unanswered. This sequence of mini-speeches by the Easterners means that the dialogue is artificial and while dialect is used to give the language a naturalistic feel, the constructed nature of the East-West opposition behind the dialogue remains very apparent.

Although Hochhuth attempts to force us to believe in the characters, the play is not a genuine platform for a fruitful exchange of ideas. Instead of offering room for thought, he attempts to convince the audience of his central hypothesis, namely that 'Ossis' are good and that 'Wessis' are bad. His black and white portrayal of East and West reduces the play to a set of clichés and the characters become little more than mouthpieces for Hochhuth's own rather rigid perspectives. Thus Barnett has argued in respect of the play that 'the more important concern is the communication of authorial opinions'. (1998: 187). As a result of the lack of ambiguity or real debate in the play it becomes little more than a piece of propaganda pleading the cause of the deprived 'Ossi'. Despite its aim to enlighten the audience as to the origins of economic problems caused by reunification, *Wessis in Weimar* largely hones in on East-West stereotypes, presenting the East Germans as victims of the capitalist West German 'colonizers'. It thus speaks uncritically with East German intellectuals such as Volker Braun who summarized the post-Wende situation as follows: 'Eine Revolution, die kein Brot gibt und eine Demokratie, die die Arbeit nimmt, sind keine ernsthaften Avancen' (Braun 2000: 26).

## Conclusion

As I have argued, post-reunification drama is characterized by a stereotypical analysis of the 'Wende', an exercise, I have maintained, that reflects the artistic and intellectual debate in Germany today. It is possible that this response results from a sense of fatalistic exhaustion, especially in the East, which is generated by a fear that the country's geographic and economic union glosses over two contesting concepts of culture. Researchers have argued that little real exchange of opinion took place, especially during the first two years of reunification. Particularly politicians aimed to attain an 'innere Einheit' at all costs. Intellectuals, on the other hand, viewed this goal of

inner harmony as dubious, since it reflected the old desire for a 'Gemeinschaftsmythos'. They began to see East-West differences as a chance to explore the consequences of forty years of separation and to examine the problematic concept of a 'normalized' and harmonious society (Probst 1999: 15-17).

Motivated perhaps by an urge to work against the politicians' desire to hush up hidden conflicts, Karge and Müller use comedy and irony to restage history. Müller recreates isolation and desperation in the setting of the death strip and the hostile location in *Goldener Oktober* brings out suppressed hopes and fears, thus drawing attention to the emotional scar that runs through the reunified country. The setting is a successful feature of the play, providing an ideal backdrop for the clash between East and West, because it makes use of the contrast between the cheap commercialism of capitalism and the psychological devastation caused in the East by the free market economy. Although the East Germans are shown to suffer largely as a result of reunification, Müller resists an all too simplistic depiction of East-West stereotypes and attempts to present the Easterners as strong people with firm and justified views.

Reducing his characters to walking clichés, Karge's farcical approach to the rapidly whitewashed image of the East German border guard presents the opportunist 'Wendehals' in an ironic manner. As the play has the fragmented structure of postmodern drama and presents us with two-dimensional characters who are little more than bundles of quotations, it is difficult to pin down Karge's view of the East-West relationship. The stereotypical setting and the clichéd figures of *Mauer-Stücke* mean that the political message of the play also remains caught up in stereotypes with the East Germans portrayed either as turncoats or as victims of reunification, as underdogs. With respect to the play's somewhat superficial approach to the sensitive issue of the 'Mauer im Kopf', it could be concluded that the playwright refuses to take the East-West rift seriously, a view which suggests a certain insensitivity towards the growing psychological problems of the time.

In line with Grass's view of the 'Schnäppchen namens DDR', the death strip in Hochhuth's *Wessis in Weimar* symbolizes the colonization of the former Socialist state, with East Germans presented as the innocent victims of money-grabbing Western capitalists. Although this could be an interesting starting point, the play remains to some large extent tedious, for the argument is not developed in a subtle way but is simply reiterated in a variety of contexts. In order to bring the message home to his audience,

Hochhuth does not create scenes driven by dialogue. Instead he writes monologues overburdened with an ideological view. Instead of offering room for thought, the playwright cannot resist the sort of simplistic black and white thinking which inevitably results in the reproduction of a rigid set of clichés.

Looking back on these early responses to the 'Wende', it can be concluded that their subject matter reflects the issues debated in Germany at the time, such as the East's painful shift to the free-market economy and the psychological crisis which developed amongst the GDR's former citizens. In reflecting on these topics, the playwrights draw – whether consciously or not – on the clichés which began to form in the immediate aftermath of reunification. Thus *Wessis in Weimar* uncritically features the 'colonising' of the former GDR, whilst *Goldener Oktober* makes use of the metaphor of the 'wrecked marriage' of the two German states, and *Mauer-Stücke* presents East Germans either as opportunists with no conscience or as pitiful victims of reunification. The playwrights considered here are by no means the only ones to make reference to these stereotypes, as the concept of the 'colonized' East also plays an important role in Volker Braun's *Iphigenie in Freiheit* (1989-92) and Heiner Müller's *Germania 3 Gespenster am toten Mann* (1996); the metaphor of 'marriage' is used in Botho Strauß's *Schlußchor* (1991); the figure of the 'Wendehals' is also mocked in Herbert Achternbusch's *Auf verlorenem Posten* (1989); and the psychological problems faced by East Germans are at the heart of Volker Braun's *Iphigenie in Freiheit* and *Böhmen am Meer* (1992). Thus the plays analyzed here can be seen, both in terms of the issues with which they are concerned and the manner in which they deal with them, to be representative of post-reunification drama in general.

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## **Biodata**

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