

“Bei uns ist immer was los!” Feste in Rheinland

RUHRFESTSPIELE / RUHR FESTIVAL“

This year’s 62nd Recklinghausen Theater Festival is dedicated to the land of opportunity. It pays tribute to the fact that the U.S., a relatively young nation, has developed a theater culture second to none.

America’s modern theater culture began right after World War I with Eugene O’Neill, soon followed by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Thornton Wilder: playwrights that the Germans only got to know in the 1950s and 60s. They dealt with American themes and problems similar to those in Germany. But the milieus they took place in seemed strange to Germans – while at the same time exciting.

Where is America? In the west, from the European point of view. But in 2008, a little bit of it is in Recklinghausen, too, because the writers and artists from this equally fascinating and paradoxical land are present everywhere in this theater festival – a program of 49 performances in all.

And the first play – a continental European premiere – was a sensation. Hollywood stars Kevin Spacey and Jeff Goldblum opened the festivals with “Speed-the-Plow,” by two-time Oscar and multiple Pulitzer Prize winner David Mamet, who sarcastically takes the mechanized illusionism of moviemaking to absurd lengths, showing human beings in a grandiose verbal battle on the verge of a communicational collapse.

Tickets for the nine performances were quickly sold out – even though they were in English, with no more than German subtitles.

The New World Is a Stage

Festival celebrates America’s modern theater tradition



A second highlight: Oscar-winning actress Cate Blanchett directed the drama “Blackbird” by David Harrower, a play which looks at child abuse from the point of view of the victim and the perpetrator. Two realities meet and clash.

Also on the program: pieces by O’Neill (“A Moon for the Misbegotten”), Miller (“The Crucible”) and Williams (“Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”), played by well-known German actors and directed by icons and the up-and-coming directors of German and European theater. There are also readings, solo programs, song recitals, late night cabaret, dance theater, an exhibition, and a cheeky Fringe Festival that has blossomed into a reputable international showcase for young theater professionals.

The festival began more than 60 years ago after an attempt to circumvent the occupying powers’ control. Our story is set in the Ruhr valley, in the

icy winter of 1946-7. The war is over, people were cold and resources were scarce.

That was the case in Hamburg too, where the theaters were threatened with closure because there was no more coal to heat the auditoriums or the machinery for the stage. So a director of administration and the chairman of a works council drove two trucks to the Ruhr area to ask for coal in the biggest coalmining area in Germany. And they found it – at the König Ludwig mine in Recklinghausen. The miners loaded the trucks with the coal behind the backs of the British occupying forces, who only realized what was going on after several loads. And this is how Hanseatic thespianism was rescued from ruin.

In return for the donation of coal, 150 singers and actors from the three Hamburg state theaters came to Recklinghausen in the summer of 1947. They gave a guest performance opening with of “The Marriage of Figaro” at the Städtischer Saalbau. Later, a festival theater and other theater locations were added. “Kunst für Kohle – Kohle für Kunst” (art for coal – coal for art) became the motto.

Another thing that makes the Recklinghausen theater festival unique: it was, and remains to this day, a cultural festival anchored within a union movement. Nowhere do people from less-educated levels of society go to the theater as often as they do here. There can be no privileges for the educated classes, because the German Federation of Trade Unions purchases 40 percent of the tickets and gives them to its members at reduced prices. And that means that audiences here can experience the best that German and European theater has to offer. ■