

COMING IN *Theater*

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FRONT AND BACK

Bauerntheater, directed by David Levine,
Brandenburg, 2007.

Photo by Joe Dilworth



Poster for
Bauerntheater,
directed by
David Levine,
Brandenburg, 2007.
Design: Carosi



DAVID BARLOW IN

BAUERN

10 STUNDEN PRO TAG, 5 TAGE DIE WOCHE, AUF 1 HEKTAR LAND

THEATER

ARBEIT
ALS
ATTRAKTION

EIN LAND ART PROJEKT VON
DAVID LEVINE

5. BIS 28. MAI 2007
MITTWOCHS BIS SONNTAGS 11 BIS 18 UHR

PRÄSENTIERT VON
BIORAMA PROJEKT
AM WASSERTURM/TÖPFERSTRASSE
16247 JOACHIMSTHAL

SHUTTLE AB BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ (PARKINN HOTEL):
5. MAI: 11 UHR, 12., 19. & 26. MAI: 13 UHR

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DAVID LEVINE

ARTIST'S JOURNAL

Bauerntheater

In 2003, I directed the premiere of Lynn Alvarez's *Romola and Nijinsky* at Primary Stages in New York. What stayed with me was the preparation and performance of David Barlow, who managed to make himself a persuasive ballet dancer—even to professional ballet dancers—in the course of four weeks of rehearsal. Forget learning pidgin Russian, or research on mental illness, or any of the other stuff he did; *ballet* would seem to be one of those tasks that really confounds the possibility of *acting*; you're either doing it or you're not. But there it was. In four weeks. *Acting*. I started wondering about acting technique as a means of accelerated knowledge acquisition.

A few months later I moved to Berlin to found the Performance Component at the European College of Liberal Arts. Seeing the totally different kind of mainstream theater that happens in Berlin, I started thinking about the ways in which the material circumstances of theater—social context, funding sources—tend to determine its aesthetics. And about the way viewing circumstances—start times, ticket purchasing, lobbies—determine your experience of a show.

My first experiment in this vein was *'Night, Motherfucker*, an installation at Gavin Brown's *Passerby* gallery in New York. I locked shifts of Equity actors in an L-shaped plywood box and had them perform Broadway two-handers (alluded to in the title), on an endless loop, during gallery hours, for a week. I wanted to know what happened to theater if you shifted it into the viewing conditions of art—gallery setting, no seats, no admission fee, daytime viewing, looped activity, and permission to leave whenever you want. One thing I learned was that as soon as you take away all the customs, and as soon as you increase the frequency of theater's habitual loop (once a night) to a movie's habitual loop (five times a day)—that is, as soon as you eliminate the illusion of a unique event—then the *work* of acting becomes much more visible.

Another such project was *Actors at Work* (published in *Cabinet* magazine), where I signed Equity actors to showcase contracts to basically just go to their day jobs. Legally, their workplace became a theater, and job performance became a “performance,” documented with a series of “production stills.” I was interested in the idea of representation

Rehearsal for
Bauerntheater,
Brooklyn, 2007.
Photo: Maria
Gambale



as labor but also in the limits of realism: what if certain performances are so subtle that no one can tell they're happening?

I think also I did it because I missed making theater in New York, and the only way I could do it from Berlin was by fax.

Projects like this came out of being in two places at once: missing, and really loving, the American realist style of theater making while at the same time realizing that it's just totally lame. And doomed. And compellingly bizarre—the entire notion of “being in character” is just so pathological, so nobly unattainable. And so American: who among us doesn't wish they could totally become someone else? And yet feel that their real self is somehow hidden?

Can you sleep in character? Work in character? Make art in character? I was turning all these questions over in my head when I met Sarah Philips and Richard Hurding, owners of the Biorama-Projekt, a land art center just north of Berlin. We discussed the possibility of doing a project together. And I'm thinking, what activities are so culturally authentic they (supposedly) can't be faked? Art making. *Farming*. So there it was: Train an American actor to play a German farmer, undertaking rigorous psychological and physical preparation in New York. Then give him a plot of land in Germany. Have him perform, in character, on a farmer's schedule: ten hours a day, five days a week, for an entire month. Of course, this entails *actually* farming.

And what actor would be crazy and/or versatile enough to do that?

March 2005, New York

Jesus, he's a vegan. Everyone's asking me why *anyone* would agree to do this; I'm asking myself why I agreed to meet David at Caravan of Dreams. I pitch David the project. David tells me that six months earlier he'd considered chucking acting and going to Italy to learn sustainable farming. I tell David that the Biorama-Projekt is situated in a UNESCO-protected site; our project *has* to be sustainable. David tells me this sounds perfect.

What was everyone so worried about?

Barlow onstage was a persuasively real ballet dancer. But was he persuasive only within the attenuated reality of the stage? Or would he be persuasive in some other circumstance? In some other role? Both Stanislavsky and Strasberg imply that an actor who has fully realized a character ought to be able to improvise a response to *any* stim-

ulus. But how quickly does an actor learn a reality? How does the doubly attenuated reality of the rehearsal room—an approximation of an approximation—extend more fully, more persuasively into the reality of the stage? Traditional rehearsals rely on substitutes, on rehearsal props, on rehearsal marks. Tape marks on the floor to indicate walls. . . . How do you catapult from rehearsal knowledge to the fuller reality of being onstage? Then again, how does the *partial* knowledge of being onstage approximate being fully alive?

October 2005, Berlin

He can't just play a farmer. His technique—realist acting technique generally—requires that that he play a *specific* farmer. You need the skeleton of a character, with specific objectives and a specific social context to hang your physical and mental insights on.

So Jim Leverett has graciously posted a query on a dramaturgy Listserv, seeking suggestions for plays about German farmers. I brought these suggestions back with me to Berlin, where I'm having a German research assistant go through them and give me synopses.

I wish I could learn this fucking language.

May 2, 2006, Berlin

Good lord, I have never seen a grant application like this in my life. The Germans are so . . . *methodical*. One month to put a team together, prepare a detailed budget, tons of documentation, letters of reference, and to . . . choose the—*play*? I've weeded out every play that involves industrial farming, since I want the audience to watch the work he's doing *by hand* (it's exactly like ballet—can you “act” hard labor?). It's down to Heiner Müller's *Die Umsiedlerin* or Hauptmann's *Rose Bernd*. Both dramas are roughly appropriate to the region.

May 14, 2006, Berlin

Umsiedlerin, because it's more contemporary. Doing *Rosa Bernd* would have cast me into the nineteenth century; I would have to dress him up funny, and it'd turn the whole thing into Colonial Williamsburg or some kind of reality-television thing—I mean, I *like* that; the suggestion of reality TV *ought* to be there. But that can't be all there is. Müller's play is set in the early 1950s, and it's got a strong farmer character (his name's *Flint* . . .). It also sets up weird extra resonances I can't even follow yet, applying this American naturalist acting style to a play that's basically Brechtian. Müller's famous Epic style will get bulldozed by an American Method style, an obscenity that more or less mirrors other forms of capitalist triumphalism. But it gets even weirder, since Lee Strasberg and the rest of the Actors' Studio, who launched the Method, were a bunch of *soi-disant* Communists anyhow, misinterpreting an acting system developed by a precommunist Russian (Stanislavsky) and then making it big off the Hollywood capi-

talist hit machine, only to be ratted out by their fellow traveler Kazan before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Twenty years later Müller, hero playwright of the DDR, the supposedly socialist heir to Brecht, is ratting out his own buddies to the Stasi and then trying to figure out what use he is post-*wende*. This piling of absurdity onto absurdity is basically life in Berlin, where last year's blasted-out sixties-era Polish Cultural Plaza is this year's Jopp Frauenfitness-Center. And that goes for the land we're working on as well. Sure, it's a UNESCO Biosphere *now*, but thirty years ago it was a vacation home for the same collectivized farmers whose specter haunts Müller's play. This area has now abandoned all hope of an agricultural economy in favor of "ecotourism" (in which work becomes an attraction). So this same land has now been exploited by two diametrically opposed economic systems: communist agrarianism and the late-capitalist service industry. Ecotourism. And ecotourism, just as it avoids wind farms as eyesores, is banking on a vision of farming that neatly skirts any acknowledgment of the DDR's history (and of course the Nazi era as well). Doesn't this vision just turn farming into . . . a performance? So this *project*—whatever it's called—is offering a different kind of ecotourism: call it DDR ecotourism. Berlin is very obsessive about packaging the urban history of the DDR. But little is ever said about its agricultural

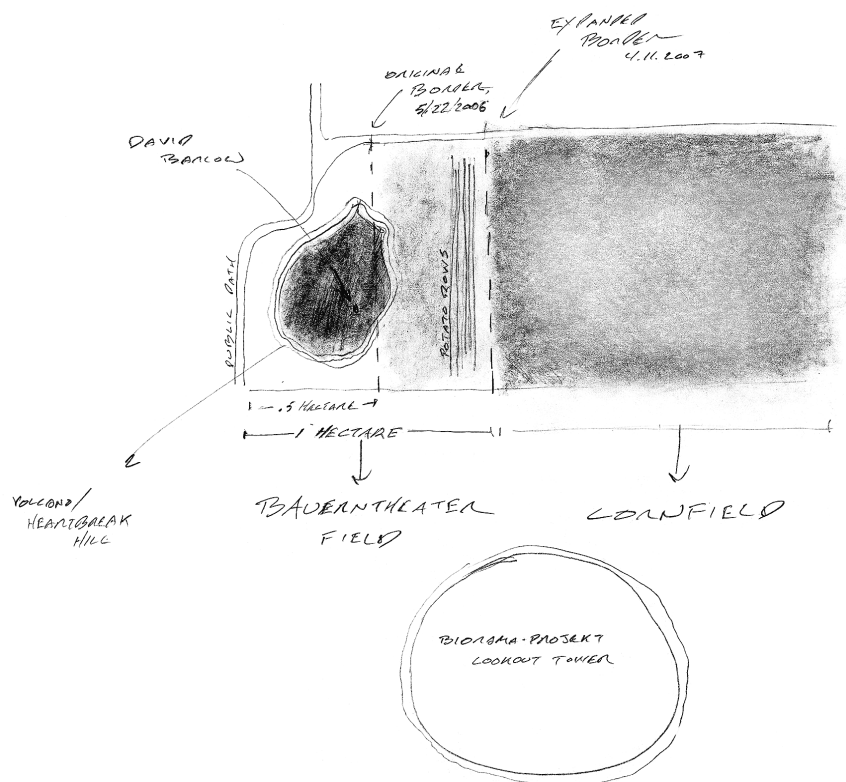


Diagram of Bauerntheater field. Courtesy of David Levine

history, and the farmers out here sure don't want to talk about it. And Müller's just so volatile as a subject right now. His widow's in a fight with his estate, no one's performing him until it gets settled, no one's sure he's relevant anymore. . . .

May 20, 2006, Berlin

Team assembled, plan ready. Grant application in progress. Got to leave enough time for someone to translate the forms back into German.

This project becomes a way of examining theater as a phenomenon. Since this is, among other things, a test of American acting technique, it's crucial that this project provide a fully professional American rehearsal environment. We translate *Die Umsiedlerin* into English, and we rehearse it *in America*. We provide David with a cast, script, staging, dramaturgy, and whatever he feels he needs to develop his character. Because this is a test of theater as knowledge. And what kind of knowledge "theater," as an epistemology, yields. What kind of learning is a rehearsal? Just as David studied some pidgin Russian for *Nijinsky*, here he'll learn basic German to deepen and extend his ability to inhabit the role.

So, two theatrical teams:

<u>Position</u>	<u>New York</u>	<u>Germany</u>
Assistant director	Daniel Brunet	Julia Hart
Dramaturg	Heather Denyer	Henrik Kuhlmann

And, thank God, they're all bilingual.

The American and German dramaturgs have different areas of expertise (really, I don't know why you'd ever rehearse with *fewer* than two dramaturgs). Heather is from Columbia University: she's covering Müller, production history of *Die Umsiedlerin*, history of Stanislavsky-Strasberg, and so on; Henrik is doing farming. He's a director/playwright/dramaturg, and his father is the former chairman of agricultural science at the University of Giessen. Giessen is also where they invented "post-dramatic theater." Huh.

Project title: *Bauerntheater*. Caro's idea. Technically "farmer's theater" but colloquially a name for the kitschiest possible kind of regional dreck.

May 22, 2006, Berlin

Field trip with Henrik to look at the field that's been offered to us. We need to decide how much land we want. Henrik suggests a line from a bush to the other end. I worry that's not enough. He reassures me that it's enough. We agree that planting potatoes is definitely all David is doing. It's quintessentially German, absolutely minimal, and it focuses the activity to a fine, focal point of monotony. Potatoes. Half a ton.

October 8, 2006, New York

WE GOT THE FUCKING GRANT. 67,000 Euro. All systems go. Opening date, May 8, 2007.

February 2007, Berlin

I have to duck out of my German class to explain to Frank Kroll, Heiner Müller's agent, that it's an art piece and that not a word of the text will ever be spoken in public. "Then why use it?" he asks. "Because it's a central focus point, internally speaking, for the actor." (Jesus, I wish my German were better.) We make a verbal agreement that not a word of the text will be spoken aloud and that I won't claim to be using the play in any advertising. I mention that it may come up anyhow, in reviews or interviews. He says that's fine.

March 2, 2007, Berlin

Space in Brooklyn is reserved, Brunet's translation's almost finished, we've got a cast for the first weekend's read-through. Or so I'm told. I'm still in Berlin.

Final arrangements with Herr Melzow, who owns the field adjacent to the Biorama-Projekt. He's going to lend it to us in exchange for the harvest. He looks at the field. He wants to know how much field we want, so that he can avoid planting there. Before he comes over, Henrik, Julia, Sarah, and I look carefully at the site, wondering if it's too small, wondering if David will run out of things to do, wondering if it's enough. Henrik assures us it's enough.

Once Melzow's gone, we shoot instructional videos on the field for David to study in New York: the *physicality* of the role, the *activity*. He's going to be planting potatoes—the way they did it in the DDR tradition, as researched by Henrik. He'll mark rows with a *reihenzieher*, an outmoded (and gigantic) German tool for marking farmer's rows by hand when you don't have a horse or a plough or a tractor—that is, when you're a DDR farmer in the early years of the regime, when everyone was given five hectares and no one had any equipment because it had all been looted or melted down and used for munitions. (Incidentally, this method dovetails nicely with the legal requirement that farming on UNESCO sites be sustainable; if you're poor enough, you're always eco.)

Once the rows are marked, he'll drop the potatoes into them, and then "step" them into the ground, one by one, making his way down the row. (All the locals know this step-drop-step-drop thing from their parents. I shoot enough of them to make a video for the *macarena*.) Then, once they've been dropped into the earth and stepped on, David needs to take a hoe and build mounds over them, covering them with at least five inches of dirt, all down the line.

The soil is wet and bouncy and feels marvelous to walk on.

March 8, 2007, in Flight

This translation *sucks!* I hate this play! (*So* typical: one day before rehearsals start and the only two people who haven't read the play are the Director and the Star.)

March 9, 2007, New York

Wah. They took my dirt. Before I left, Henrik gave me a recipe for how to mix New York State soil with sand to achieve Brandenburg soil's consistency. It's not enough for David to watch the farming videos—he's got to get it in his body; it has to become physical habit if he's going to convey some sense that he's been doing it all his life. So he needs dirt. And not just any dirt. But dirt of approximately the right consistency. This is what's so weird about American acting: on the basis of three weeks of experience, both actor and audience are supposed to infer a lifetime's worth. This is the kind of learning I want to both test and frame. So we're building him a fake Brandenburg field in the studio: twenty feet long by nine feet wide by one foot deep.

I had wanted to bring a reference sample, so I packed a Tupperware container full of authentic Brandenburg soil into my luggage. And I would have gotten away with it, too, if my curiosity hadn't gotten the best of me: I really wanted to know what would happen if you checked "yes" next to that soil-sample question on the customs declaration. Do they send you through a separate door? Or what?



The company on a research trip to Upstate New York. Photo: Randy Bell

Actually, they kind of do. And they ask you if you have a permit for it, and they explain to you about nematodes, and then **THEY PUT ON THE GLOVES AND THROW IT AWAY.**

March 10, 2007, New York

We have an incredibly beautiful rehearsal space at the Old American Can Factory in Gowanus, Brooklyn. At our first meeting in the studio we conduct an initial read-through of the play, followed by a longish presentation on communism from Heather. Ten actors were present; four of them didn't seem to know what they were doing there. What we all found out was that the play is an incredible mess and Daniel's translation, which I commissioned for the project, isn't too smooth—which doesn't help. This is probably my fault. My working assumption here is that, actually, the idea of mashing an explicitly socialist piece of Epic theater through American soft-core realism



Bauerntheater, 2007.
Photo: Joe Dilworth

isn't actually so weird: it happens all the time. *Mother Courage* at the Delacorte, for instance (*Mother Courage* anywhere). So I'm conducting these rehearsals according to the following model: what happens if Theater for a New Audience—an established LORT company geared toward “difficult” texts but abiding by theater's official rules and union regulations—decides to stage *Die Umsiedlerin*?

Well, you get the opening read-through, you get the dramaturgical presentations, you get the images stuck to the wall and table work and scene analysis and pencils and highlighters and bottled water. AND you get a translation, which, though streamlined and act-

able and reasonably contemporary, is somehow a bit off. Stiff translation from the German is an aesthetic in itself, and I was going for that . . . um . . . Bentleyesque quality. *Just like in a real rehearsal.* But that aesthetic depends on a reasonably coherent play, and *Die Umsiedlerin* turns out not to be that. *Die Umsiedlerin* turns out to be a total fucking mess. Not Daniel's fault. The play is just . . .

March 11, 2007, New York

Heather has mounted a big display about East Germany, the LPGs, the revolution, on the studio wall. I remember this routine from *Nijinsky*—the dramaturgy, the whole convention of theatrical *bildung*: people who know only half the subject, presenting to people who only know a quarter, for the ultimate edification of people who don't even give a fuck.

Today we went to get soil from a local Lowe's to build the rehearsal field. Predictably, this took hours, on top of delays obtaining wood, measuring, everything else. Tomorrow is planned for construction. Even though I can't build anything, I had for some reason thought it wiser to build it ourselves rather than hire a crew. Another surprise: this was a stupid idea. Even after stretching out the plastic—the structure is plastic, under gravel, under dirt mixed with sand and rocks—the trip to Lowe's took forever, from not accepting our credit card to not letting us rent a van to debates over what kind of soil to pick. We bought a ton of gardening soil (according to the recipe)—priced by dramaturg Heather (since knowledge is her business). The van sank over its wheels under the weight.

Heather is a former stage manager and her instincts are unrestrainable. Five minutes of watching me and Daniel screwing around with a circular saw and she volunteered to cut the wood for the dirt box herself. This led to the coining of the term *stag manager*, or *dramanager*. Since Heather had done the research *on dirt*, her work, in a strictly professional theater-making model, should have just been to figure out where to buy it and what to do with it, while it would be, say, the ASM's job to churn it. But if

we're asking about the limits of acting, we may as well push the limits of dramaturgy as well. There she is, *churning*.

Where is a dramaturg's knowledge supposed to end? One of the things I love—and find totally pathological—about American rehearsals is this idea of the dramaturg as the only person in the room with any substantive knowledge. I'm from an academic background. I think that what passes for knowledge in theater is cheerfully bullshit. I think the isolation of the dramaturg in American theater is probably the most fascinating phenomenon American theater has to offer. I like watching people think; I like watching people who don't know anything (including myself) debate passionately. I frame acting; I frame education; in framing theater and theater rehearsals here, I'm framing a process of reverse engineering the real world, in order to build a cheap copy. This is realist theater. Except that now I'm putting the cheap copy into a much more authoritative world, full of contingency and whatever, and finding out if theater's made-in-Hong Kong knowledge can stand it.

March 15, 2007, New York

We watch the instructional videos I shot in Joachimsthal, and David tries to get the moves down; meanwhile, the documentarian, who's here every day, *films* us doing this: at the end of the practice field, we station a television monitor. David takes his tools and, while watching the television, tries to imitate and internalize the onscreen moves so that he can begin to get it into his body. This, along with German lessons, scene work, discussions of the play and German history, and other character-building work, become more or less our rehearsal process over the next weeks. We often have to stop, reshoot certain moments, because the light isn't adequate.

Is this even directing anymore? We are rehearsing a play. But we are also performing the rehearsal of a play.

March 18, 2007, New York

Even rehearsing for four hours a day, there is no time. I don't know what happened. There is nothing, nothing outside *Bauerntheater*, except for the occasional trip out in the evening. But for the most part it's like being bludgeoned with endless logistics.

There was a moment toward the end of *Actors at Work* when I walked into the Ohio Theatre during someone's dress-tech and was just shocked at the amount of *work* everyone was putting into it. All that *emoting*; those hot lights . . . I thought, "Shit, I just produced eight Equity showcases in less than a year. By fax! Lighten *up!*"

But now I'm realizing all of these conceptual projects I've been doing just displace energy from directing (what am I going to do? *Direct* him farming?) to producing—and



Bauerntheater, 2007.
Photo: Joe Dilworth

it winds up being just as much work. Every waking hour I find myself either editing video or buying a new computer or arranging international logistics for the next phase. I don't recall ever being so busy in my life. And for what? A guy farming. But this is where *Bauerntheater* is like AI: What comes naturally is almost impossible to replicate analytically. And the simpler the activity (thinking, farming) the more difficult it is to break down into component, learnable parts. (Thinking and farming are things you just have to *do*, but that's not necessarily what acting is.) Making a fake farmer is *a lot* of work.

March 20, 2007, New York

Odd little things keep happening. Heather continually puts up more and more dramaturgical material, *as though this were a rehearsal room*. The temptation to do a "good" script, to arrive at a sound interpretation and a good staging, even though the play is *never* happening, is overwhelming.



Bauerntheater, 2007.
Photo: Joe Dilworth

I keep telling everyone to behave as though this was being done at Theater for a New Audience, but for me this comes naturally. There are moments in the play that are really beautiful, but there's also stuff that I cannot imagine Müller allowed into print. It's unedited, inconsistent. More expressionistic directors would know exactly what to do with a play as fucked up and messy as *Die Umsiedlerin*—as they would with, say, *Baal*. But I am, above all, a naturalistic director, and I don't know what to do with it, other than keep hammering at it, shaping it, trying to give it arcs, beats, and through-lines. And the work is really satisfying.

But this takes time. And we're losing time. And Daniel's unhappy that I keep attacking and revising his translation for a play that's not ever actually going to be performed. Why are we doing all this? So that David can fully understand the social world in which Flint, farmer, husband, and communist leader operates. So that he can understand how Flint thinks, how he behaves, how he moves through space. So that David can *inhabit the role*.

We're working on an excellent backstory for him, too.

March 23, 2007, Geneva, New York

A road trip. More excellent practical dramaturgy from Heather's end. Heather has not only found experts to come in and speak to us, she has found us a family of German farmers to go and visit in Geneva, New York, about a six-hour drive from Brooklyn. I am not sure if this is cheating on LORT's acting prep or not. I feel as though this would have been something David did on his own, outside rehearsal hours, as part of

his own character research. (In the same way, I'm fairly certain the Angermunde potato farming trip is definitely cheating.) And yet, it sure is fun.

In the car, we read to each other from Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares*. David and I argue over meanings and implications. We get lost on our way. We finally get to the farm just as the family is settling down to dinner. The patriarch is the son of an actual *Umsiedlerin*, whom we'll interview tomorrow. He talks to us about the farmer's relationship to the soil, his relationship to the land—all sorts of stuff that's intensely useful for David's conception of Flint and for understanding the conduct of all the characters in the play. We hear his mom's story. We meet his children, all of whom are superstars in Future Farmers of America. We learn about the family's switch to organic farming—after pesticides killed all sensation in dad's arm for a month—which of course applies to our UNESCO-designated site as well as to David's interests.

Then David and the farmers start talking about Rudolf Steiner and biodynamics. I space out. Finally we drag David out and head to a burger joint in this vacated college town. On the way over, a local pours water on my head from the window of a darkened building. I have no idea why.

March 27, 2007, New York

I have lunch with Marina [Abramovic]. She wants performance to be real; I want it to be fake, revealing its aspirations to be real. She wants visible acts of endurance, and I'm more interested in invisible forms of endurance. For me, the challenge isn't farming ten hours a day; it's acting ten hours a day.

That was the good part of the day. The bad part of the day was arriving at rehearsal in order to listen to some acting teacher talk mysticism about Michael Chekhov. Chekhov's technique, which descended from Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, is somewhat disappointingly distant from Stanislavsky. Chekhov's whole thing—according to this guy, at least—is to emphasize the *process*, not the final outcome. David's into this: his feeling is that placing constant pressure on yourself to achieve an end product just destroys the work. One reason he's *doing* Bauerntheater is that it's about tracking actual activity, like an old-school Happening.

The two of them are making me grouchy. They're talking about Rudolf Steiner. Absentmindedly hoeing soil I suddenly realize that the entire problem with the dirt box is that we've overwatered the field. It wasn't draining, of course, because it can only seep down so far. We add another ton of dirt. Once you turn the soil properly, it all becomes much bouncier.

Inspired by the Michael Chekhov talk, David does an exercise called "There's This Guy." For the first time David really talks about his character and half turns into Flint. That's the other thing about American acting technique: it's loopy as fuck but gets results.

March 28, 2007, New York

Severe problems with *Kartoffeln*. No one knows how deep they're supposed to go for planting. Henrik told me one thing, but the farmers upstate have told me something else. Now Henrik says we're *not* supposed to bury them, and the *reihenzieher's* not supposed to go in that deep. He keeps changing what's happening, and David is starting to get suspicious that his staff doesn't know what they're doing. I call Henrik up and yell at him. Then Heather and I have a very dismaying conversation wherein, based on a *reihenzieher* loop, she calculates that David will be able to pull the whole Brandenburg field in three hours. *Three hours?* I yell. What the fuck? I call Henrik up and yell at him.

March 31, 2007, New York

Visit from Jonathan Kalb, American Müller expert. After about five minutes, he asks, "Do you actually care about this play?" I stifle the urge to say, "No," since we're scheduled to spend the next two hours together, but it's clear that he thinks this is a tragic waste of a really quality play. I, on the other hand, really enjoy having him here precisely *because* he's so skeptical of the whole endeavor.

April 8, 2007, New York

For the past few days we have actually been staging scenes from *Die Umsiedlerin* so that David can have some sense of Flint's physicality, how he moves under different conditions of stress and relaxation, with company and alone. As it happened, these scenes we staged in the dirt field wound up closely mirroring B. K. Tragelehn's 1961 original—but we didn't discover the photos till later.

David spent two entire days and nights in the studio—a monastic warm-up—with a farmer's companion dog (which we thought he was going to get in Germany, but legalities intervened). For the final two days before moving the project to Berlin, we open up the studio for two days and invite people to see what's going on. As I show them around, I realize that the factual existence of a rehearsal is valorized only by its end product: a performance. It's not a room that's meant to exist publicly. In the absence of an instrumental purpose, a rehearsal room turns out to be just a classroom, or a museum exhibit: the stuff on the walls, the props, the relics. Or actually, leading these people through the studio . . . it looks like an installation of a rehearsal room.

April 11, 2007, Berlin

Back in Berlin. Just for kicks, I smuggled in a box of dirt, and I've decided to enlarge the field, since I no longer trust Henrik's judgment, and I'm convinced David would otherwise run out of stuff to do. This is important because the most dramatic activity has to happen first. Then it turns to weeding. The weeding won't look dramatic enough, muscular enough, even though I love the monotony of it. I try out the new *reihenzieher*. (I abandoned the rehearsal *reihenzieher* on the street in Brooklyn, with a sign that said WORKS.) It breaks as soon as I put it in the ground.

April 15, 2007, Berlin

David arrives in Berlin. We meet him at the airport, take him to his new Berlin apartment, and quickly shuttle him out to buy him farmer boots. Julia, Henrik, David, and I take a trip up to the site a few days later. When he sees how large the field is, David's properly daunted. Worries start creeping in. He starts saying things like, "Well, I guess I'll just get as far as I get," and I'm torn between being supportive and being like, "No, you're getting paid to do the whole fucking thing."

A few days after this, David goes for three days to a potato farm in Angermunde, 20 kilometers from Joachimsthal, to hang out with some real potato farmers—so real, in fact, that they don't speak any English. Julia meets him there every morning to translate, and they apparently are having an amazing time. He studied the farmers' physicality and drank beer with them (which he generally doesn't do). After spending two hours working our field by hand, and then spending three days riding around on the back of Herr Schliestein's John Deere, David says he really gets why all the characters in the play are looking forward to receiving tractors.

We move him to the apartment in Joachimsthal where he will spend the next month.

May 2, 2007, Berlin

We are in—Jesus, what would you even *call* them . . . *dress rehearsals*? David is doing practice rows. It occurs to me that we need something on the border of the field to let people know what's going on. Otherwise all they see is a guy in a funny outfit farming. We have to point them toward the invisible stuff, because the idea is to focus on the paradox: you have no visual evidence that he's acting: no admission prices, no curtain time, no dialogue. You have to take it on faith that he's at once authentically working and yet . . . not. And once you do take it on faith, you start having to ask yourself where you locate authenticity, or presence. The signage has to point you gently to that. I write some text: "You are watching an actor at work. He is playing Flint, the main character from Heiner Müller's 1961 play, *Die Umsiedlerin*. His movements, thoughts, and expressions have all been rehearsed in New York. He is planting half a ton of potatoes."

That oughta do it.

There has been a horrible drought for weeks in Brandenburg. Also: there is a hill, which is really freaking David out. You can't see it from above; you can't really even see it from the path around the field. David calls it Heartbreak Hill. I call it Volcano Hill. The soil here is so stony you can hardly step the potatoes into the ground, let alone sink the hoe deep enough to cover them up. Iron striking stone makes a terrible sound.



Bauerntheater, 2007.
Photo: Joe Dilworth

David is trying to come up with ways to avoid the hill. I say no. He suggests making the field smaller. I express my total faith in his ability to get it *all* done. At some point he says, hopefully, that it's a process-based piece, and if he doesn't get it all done, that's just part of the story. And I'm like, sure, the project's about process, . . . but it's not *that* much about process.

The difference between actors and endurance artists: actors are emotional masochists; performance artists are physical masochists. What's insidious about this piece is that I get to have it both ways. When things get out of my control, I get to invoke Kaprow and Smithson and various conceptual-art strategies. When I want to justify micromanaging every last detail of the site and of David's performance, not to mention the massive PR campaign, I get to invoke the Theater. Probably *everyone's* going to kill me, but if it's equally offensive to both contexts then I probably did something right.

May 3, 2007, Berlin

There is a really beautiful and unintended side effect to this: people seeing Barlow from the Biorama's observation tower see something other than performance. They see *lines*, appearing very slowly in the earth as David hoes and pulls. It looks like something by Heizer. And from the top, you realize what an enormous plot of land I gave him. Man against nature; same old thing. Very bird's-eye view, very alien. Much bleaker than on the ground, where you're mainly thinking about labor, and maybe the *nobility* of work.

As Julia and Henrik and I watch David practice on the field, various questions start coming into focus. Where will he *start* from, on opening day? Where will he *enter* from? Will the potatoes be *preset*, or will he bring them on himself? Henrik and I disagree. David keeps asking if he has to do "the whole thing." He seems to be laying the groundwork for trying to get out of this.

An endless problem seems to be the hoeing. In the studio, this had been very easy, but here it's the most time-consuming part. And I've compounded the problem by making the fucking field bigger. Henrik and I argue again, about whether or not he expressed this clearly enough, early enough. David starts trying to lower expectations again. I take the hacker and do a row to show solidarity. I do it in an hour, with Julia and Henrik watching from the viewing tower. Henrik says it'll be fine either way, so long as David works at a normal rate. He thinks maybe David is slowing down because he's scared.

I think David is working slowly because he's acting, on top of farming. Because he's being extremely deliberate in how he plants the rows. They're beautiful, glacial even. But they take him forever.

May 4, 2007, Berlin

After four or five days of intensive field prep, David is taking a break while the farmer who owns the field helps us prep the field by turning the earth in his tractor. David is shocked at how much harder and stonier this field is to manage, and it shows. Henrik is concerned: "You look like someone who's being forced to do hard labor," he says, "not like someone who thinks they can do this. Flint would never farm this way."

We sweep away the tractor tracks and run out red rope, with which we intended to surround, and thereby frame, the field. It looks awful—like the whole thing was a game. It's a frame that's totally unnecessary, since the field isolates itself. Meanwhile we also have a culture journalist, one Max Glauner, "embedded" with us, who's writing articles for not one but two Berlin journals, the daily *FAZ* and the weekly *Freitag*.

I've rented DDR-era "villas" for myself and my friends to stay in at the opening. They look like American garages from the 1950s.

It now hasn't rained in Brandenburg for two weeks. Small clumps of earth are baking into microrocks. We have been wishing for rain, but not on the opening, or the day before the opening, because there's an event. Maybe two days before the opening? The theatrical imperative to control *everything* versus the conceptual imperative to simply track *process*. So which will it be?

May 5, 2007, Berlin

Opening day: I've decided to have David pull the *reihenzieher* over the entire field first. This is a waste of time, since he can plant only one or two marked rows a day, and by the time he finishes those two rows, the rows he drew in the soil will have disappeared. That said, if he just draws two rows and starts planting, there's almost *too much* variety in what he's doing, and it would seem like this was happening for the crowd—as though it were a *demonstration* of how to farm and not actual farming. The first impression has to be of intense—albeit *heroic*—monotony. (The real-life farmers who see the project object to this, since, as they point out, he would never do that.)

The audience seems to have expected a really big show. Everyone applauded when he came over the hill and started pulling. Marvin Carlson yelled, "Encore!" after David finished his first row, and of course the event-ness of it had David totally amped; he's working hard, holding his head high. Shit, I'd follow him into communism. Then there's another row. The locals clap each time he finishes one, and David's still looking great, but after about ten minutes the Berliners start to wonder when the actual *event* is going to start, and they start drifting back to the food and drinks. No event here. Just farming. The locals are more interested; they hang back and watch. There's a nice opposition between local and Berlin audiences; what they're watching is so basic that they wind up with diametrically opposed responses. Here the locals are the experts; city dwellers, the provincials.

Overall it's almost like there was too much event going into those first ten minutes. News crews, the *New York Times*, shuttle buses from Berlin . . . a couple hours later, after the panel discussion, people start wandering back and getting into it; the idea was really to watch it at your leisure. The reassuring thing is that it keeps going, whether you're there or not. It can be really *relaxing* to watch someone else perform hard labor. . . .

The panel discussion—featuring an array of scholars, critics, and artists—centered on things like "Is he or isn't he really farming?" Meanwhile David continues working the entire time the discussion is going on.

May 6, 2007, Berlin

David spends the rest of the afternoon obsessing over how yesterday's rows were crooked. And so we wind up making minor adjustments when no one's looking. Result? Only three rows made in two days.

Get home on Sunday evening to check out Max Glauner's *FAZ* piece, the product of two whole days spent in our company: "What this has to do with land art or with Heiner Müller I have no idea."

Funny: in Iraq inviting the press along made them more docile.

May 8, 2007, Berlin

On his day off, David worked on straightening his rows. He gets his first visit from a farmer, who tells him he's doing it all wrong.

May 9, 2007, Berlin

David gets his second visit, in the pouring rain, from a local farmer, who not only tells him he's doing it all wrong, but also suggests that the previous farmer's advice was complete bullshit. Welcome to Brandenburg: Everyone knows better.

May 10, 2007, Berlin

More rain. David's hut, which is on the field and in which he acts "waiting," is providing no shelter at all from sideways-blowing wind. He needs to put canvas up on the sides.

May 12, 2007, Berlin

Despite a deluge, the panel discussion must go on. David is in a horrible mood. I reassure him that when it stops raining things will go faster, but I'm not sure I believe it. His wrists hurt. Although the rain was needed, it has compacted the soil and actually made it heavier. David is worried about what will happen if he doesn't finish. He's worried about his wrists. He's freaking out. Not in character: for real. While the media photographs him in the rain.

A small contingent of visitors are perennially disappointed by the fact that there's no Müller text being spoken here.

May 13, 2007, Berlin

My day off. I SMS Julia, who's on-site today, to gauge Barlow's mood. She tells me he's going slowly. She tells me he's taking too many breaks. She tells me this morning he was practically crying. I'm like, "Whatever. Drama." She tells me two *more* farmers have come over to hassle him about technique, and these guys actually brought him a shovel. And rather than politely brushing them off in German, which is our agreed-upon protocol, he not only listened, but went over to Julia, spoke to her *in English*—breaking character—and ordered her to come translate for him. ON THE FIELD. WITH

PEOPLE WATCHING. Now he insists on trying this new technique. Julia tried to dissuade him, but he yelled at her. Julia explains all this to me and I yell at her. David is planning to take this up with *me* tomorrow.

May 14, 2007, Berlin

Henrik and I are panicked. We're sick of David's bellyaching, we're worried that the field's not going to get finished, and we decide that the only thing to do is head up there on his day off and do some of his work for



Bauerntheater, 2007.
Photo:
Helena Giuffrida

him. Either he'll take it as a show of support, or he'll be shamed into working faster. We work all morning—funny how hard labor's actually a great stress release—and get five rows done between us. David comes down to visit me around 3 p.m. and asks to talk. He seems totally terrified.

First, he apologizes for having been so surly and mopey for the past few days. He then says that his wrists are a mess and that his next production, back in New York, basically involves carrying cinderblocks around a stage for an hour and a half—Jesus, they call *my* work monotonous—and he's scared of chronic injury. Yesterday morning he was in such pain he found himself praying to God for a way to make it through the next two weeks, and, he says, God sent him a sign through these two farmers—his guardian angels, he calls them—who showed him a *new* way of doing it that's just as historically accurate, but much easier on the wrists because you dig with a spade—that is, you use your foot to *push* the shovel into the earth, rather than using your wrists to manipulate a hoe. Could he try it, with me there?

On the one hand, I have no choice. I can't force a guy to injure himself. From the ground this new approach—we call it “the dot method,” since each potato occupies a dug-up little dot—looks OK, and vigorous. From the air, though, looks a mess. No delineation, no beauty, no nothing, next to those rows.

But what am I going to say—no? He's not Chris Burden. He's an actor. And I know the actor will walk if he feels the director doesn't favor his safety. You can take the project out of the American theater, but you can't take the American theater out of the project.

Besides, his apology was really heartfelt. I know he feels terrible, and I know he isn't crazy about how it looks, either. This alone makes his plea more sympathetic. In the end, I say what I have to: “OK, fine.”

Still, as Henrik and I drive back to Berlin, I'm wondering if I take my own work seriously enough. What would William Friedkin do? Give Ellen Burstyn a chronic back injury. What would Ellen Burstyn do? Give herself a chronic back injury.

Henrik, on the other hand, takes a more cheerful view. "It's just like opening a play," he tells me by way of consoling. "Once you put them onstage they do whatever they want anyway."

May 16, 2007, Berlin

David's back to work. Julia reports from the field that the problem is apparently solved. He looks super happy and vigorous and is actually on track to do five rows in a day, a record for him. And, really, Friedkin be damned. Compromises, fine, whatever. So long as he's working. And happy.

Yesterday I stopped by the photographers' to look at the second set of photos. Weird: the black-and-white prints all look like album covers and film stills. The color shots all look like David is advertising something. None of it looks real. Why is that? He's really working, no?

Well, no. Not in these shots. They're from the rainy day, and in most of them David is photographed between tasks, which is often the state on display in he-man advertising: *on my break from rustlin' cattle, I'm thinkin' about my wristwatch; on my break*

Bauerntheater, 2007.
Photo:
Helena Giuffrida



from felling timber, I'm thinking about my cigarette; on my break from yelling at foremen, I'm thinking about my cologne.

OK; he's taking his breaks in character. But how does the camera *know* that? Joe told David to look at the camera as if

he'd never seen one before—as if he was a real, rural farmer from the twenties, something out of August Sander. But maybe an actor looking at a camera like he's never seen one before exhibits an invisible quiddity, something unseen when a civilian does it; thus he turns into an album cover.

This raises a question of what these potatoes are going to be like. Will they taste somehow insincere, given the fact that they were planted by an actor, acting? When they're harvested, I plan to donate a bag, anonymously, to every theater in Berlin.

May 19, 2007, Berlin

It's funny how all the farmers, who I worried would be so insulted by this piece, are fine with it, but people from Berlin cry exploitation. David's getting paid more than a farmer would be paid and probably more than he'll be paid for hauling cinderblocks at the workshop. . . . So where's the exploitation? Is he exploiting himself? Possibly.

My girlfriend points out that everyone who's bitching about exploitation is a "creative" from Berlin and suggests that they're all getting hung up on it because it reminds them of how their own artistic impulses just get ground down into the brutal, underpaid monotony of one graphic design or set-dressing gig after another: step-drop-step-drop-step-drop. . . .

Panel today with curators, land artists. An objection that it's too Romantic. Everyone keeps citing Millet, Caspar David Friedrich: the drama of the lone man against the landscape. It's true. David does cut quite a figure: the homburg extends his neck up into the back of his head; the suspenders accentuate both his waist and shoulders. No matter what's behind him at any given moment his presence converts the view into a postcard. What's fucked up about this is that he's dressed as a *DDR* farmer. So why is a figure from a specifically twentieth-century, socialist, Eastern-bloc context automatically evoking images created under conditions of nineteenth-century capitalism? Is that man-against-the-landscape gestalt so powerful that it overrides historical differences? When people were dirt poor in the colorless, collectivized, industrialized *DDR*, did they also look that beautiful and inspiring at sundown? Did the sight of them make fellow communists that nostalgic? Wouldn't forward-looking socialist aesthetics have precluded that?

Or again, is it just because he's an actor?

Everyone has a great time except maybe my students from Berlin, who cannot figure out what the big fuss is over a guy farming.

May 20, 2007, Berlin

Elinor Fuchs says it's beautiful from up top, although it looks a little sadistic from down below, as though we'd deprived David of the proper tools. I defend the dramaturgy, but David does sometimes seem to buckle under the strain. When we shoot footage of him at home, I can kind of get it. Flint, he says, at least has a wife, whereas he has to be his own *frau*—basically, after ten hours of working in the field, he goes home, makes himself dinner (which, after ten hours of work, needs to be massive. And since all he lets himself eat is vegetables, it needs to be DOUBLE massive), and has to prepare a similar volume of food for the next day's lunch. His bedroom stinks of the landlord's cheap air-freshener, and the overall taste is—well, *DDR* gothic. He also clearly misses just about everything from home.

I had imagined it would be lonely for him. I also imagined he'd be able to take it. And he does, but he's also acting out his frustrations with the project. This from an actor who, under normal circumstances, is the most professional performer I've ever met. But if he's making me miserable, I can say with equal certainty that I am making him miserable, and I've known this ever since that day when I realized he was scared to tell me we needed to change planting procedures. So is this all some kind of actor torture? Like the rest of my pieces: rob an actor of an audience; rob them of lines; increase the frequency of the performance-loop to the point that you can't even pretend the show is something special. What is my problem with these people?

May 23, 2007, Berlin

The project is almost over. The potato flowers are blooming, which is pretty damn impressive. David is almost done, and so is slowing down the planting work to concentrate on weeding what's already there. People are still coming and giving him advice, but he laughs it off. He is also starting to take a really sick pleasure in killing the potato beetles that have recently begun gnawing on the leaves of his "babies." He's a VEGAN. He's blaming it on the character.

May 25, 2007, Berlin

An e-mail from Frank Kroll, Müller's publisher. I call him back, and he says I violated our agreement not to actually stage the play. He says, "It's right here in *Freitag*." ("Müller Takes to the Field," by—who else?—Max fucking *Glauner*.) I tell Kroll I'm not responsible for what a journalist writes and that I adhered strictly to our agreement. None of our PR says anything about Müller. Kroll indicates that they're incredibly displeased and claims we're profiting off Müller's name. He concludes by saying, "Well, Mr. Levine, you've done very well for yourself. I've seen your press all over town. Congratulations."

May 26, 2007, Berlin

We were still missing someone for a panel discussion regarding the project and Heiner Müller, so I invited Max Glauner. Because I figured the panels to date had all been too cheerful and that we needed someone who thinks this is bullshit.

Like everyone else, he immediately brings up the Thai rice field piece by Sakharin in this year's Documenta. Only he brings it up as a paragon of social art-making, whereas my guy alone on the field is at once too isolated and too Romantic. I respond that what's Romantic is, in fact, the idea that something authentic is going on when artists do manual labor. My feeling is that by openly using an actor, I'm at least neutralizing this romanticism (and the attendant condescension) by getting rid of the *possibility* of authenticity. Or by freezing your tendency to think of process-based work as authentic. I actually see my piece as quite cold and cynical.

Max and a Müller scholar named Joachim Fiebach mixed it up mightily over the issue of whether or not this had anything to do with Müller or *Die Umsiedlerin*—or whether it could make legitimate claims to. The old guy was open-minded. The young guy was stodgy. I finally couldn't take it anymore and tried to explain that it *isn't* theater, that it wasn't intended to be theater. It was intended as a question and as a test. Later I find Max at one of the field viewing stands, smoking a cigarette, watching David work. He says, meditatively, that the whole thing would have been perfect if we had had loudspeakers running Müller's text on a sound loop, while the guy worked. I explain that that would have been *stupid*. That it would have posed no questions whatsoever, and one of my questions is, indeed, can one still say that this is by Müller?

May 28, 2007, Berlin

LAST DAY: At 3:30 p.m. Julia blew a big work whistle. A crowd had gathered, from Berlin and from the region. All the Joachimsthalers seemed to know that the farmer, whom they've taken to calling "Herr Flint," was finishing today.

Voilà. David stuck the hoe in the ground, took a deep bow, both to the tower and to the crowd at ground level, and walked off the field. After breaking character for the last time, he gave a press conference. During the Q&A the farmer who "saved his wrists" got up and saluted David's heroism. He then said that "those who organized the project" might have made David's life easier if we had just visited the local farming museum down the road to see how it was really done. He then hawked copies of his own self-published book. He then apologized for having to run pick up a friend at the station.

Earlier in the day, a family had come by and put flowers in David's hat (after yelling, in broken English; "David Barlow! Why are you doing this?!?"). Teenage girls brought him posters to sign. He was a fixture in the local landscape for a month. They all really wanted him to succeed.

May 29, 2007, Berlin

I'm not sure if the performance actually ended. Does it end when he walks off the field, or does it end in September, when the potatoes are harvested? Were the potatoes part of the stage, and if so, does the fact that they're still growing mean the performance is ongoing? Or were they, in some extreme sense, Barlow's audience—in which case the measure of his performance is their response? If he did a good job, he gets a standing ovation. If not, the potatoes just sit there, in the ground, a dead audience if ever there was one.

The thing about conceptual projects is that, in the end, they're complete the moment you think of them. So although I was totally flattered, I found it bizarre that theater magazines sent reviewers: what are you going to review, after all? I'm not sure that you can say very much. *Bauerntheater* was, conceptually, what I intended it to be. It probed a bunch of questions, and while I can't say it answered any of them, I do think it allowed me to see their outlines more clearly.

I will say one thing: in the end, of course, the jackass from the last day was WRONG. The potatoes David planted Henrik's way are growing beautifully, one foot out of their mounds. The potatoes planted according to the "dot method" are straggly—when they grow at all.

Here's to good dramaturgy.

Special note: The Bauerntheater catalog, containing full-color images, excerpts from essays by Thomas Irmer, Maika Pollack, Daniel Wetzel, and others, is available from www.bauerntheater-projekt.de/.