



NOTHING TO DO WITH PATIENCE

Michael Thalheimer

Interviewed and translated by Jonathan Kalb

*Michael Thalheimer's rise to the top ranks of the directing profession in Germany has been swift and decisive. Born in Frankfurt am Main in 1965, he set out to become an actor and studied acting in Switzerland. In 1997, with no directing training, he began staging plays, and he caught his major break in 2000 with a controversial production of Molnar's *Liliom* at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg that was derided as "ruthlessly minimalist" but also invited to the Theatertreffen, Germany's annual juried festival of "ten remarkable productions." Intelligent reductionism has been Thalheimer's trademark ever since, through a flurry of invitations and awards and a prestigious recent appointment as head director and member of the artistic board at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin.*

*Thalheimer habitually dispenses with most scenery, props, subplots, and secondary characters, and all mannerisms, expressions, and conversational attitudes in his work are invariably contemporary. His 2001 production of Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (which visited the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2005) was focused on sex and set in an unpainted wooden trapezoid with high walls and a single opening upstage through which all the characters entered like models on a fashion runway. His radically shortened versions of Goethe's *Faust I* (2004) and *Faust II* (2005)—celebrated by some critics as a sharp, refreshing antidote to Peter Stein's twenty-one-hour marathon of the same works uncut in 2000—focused on the mutually reinforced egomania of *Faust* and *Mephistopheles*. In *The Oresteia* (2006), a one-hundred-minute*

*show that omitted almost all of *The Eumenides*, the actors were soaked in stage blood and slipped about precariously on two narrow strips of stage backed only by an enormous plywood wall. Thalheimer returned to BAM in November 2007 with his 2004 production of Wedekind's *Lulu*, which featured nude lust-addled men and, for its set, a plain white wall that moved gradually closer to the audience. The following conversation, translated from German, took place in Brooklyn the evening before *Lulu*'s New York opening.*

JONATHAN KALB *Your directing method has been described as reducing plays to their essence or core. In *Die Zeit*, Georg Dietz called you "the nutcracker among theater directors. . . . He cracks the play and looks for the kernel." Do you think this description is fair or justified?*

MICHAEL THALHEIMER Yes. You know, I don't seek any descriptions for my work myself, though of course journalists and critics do that. Yet I'm actually in agreement with that perception. I think it's fair. I do in fact try to investigate the kernel of a play, meaning that I reduce the text and always try to search for what the author's motivation was in writing the play, and for what an equivalent contemporary translation for it might be. And that takes a lot of time and great concentration, searching for what the play, the text is really saying. For that reason I find the description correct.

Lulu, directed by Michael Thalheimer, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, 2007. Photo: Richard Termine

German theater productions in general tend to be very long, yet your productions tend to be short. Your Oresteia is one hour, forty minutes. Lulu — which was almost five hours in Peter Zadek's production — is under two hours in your version. And your Faust I and Faust II are both two hours. Your actors speak very fast, and then there are extensive cuts. To what extent are you reacting to the shortened attention span of the media age?

Not at all. I don't believe that the length of a production is any mark of quality. A very long production can be very bad, and a very short one can also be very bad. We can't say that all productions that are short are great, or that all long ones are great. It's extremely variable. I don't have the inclination when I'm working to say ahead of time, "Oh, it should be only two hours." I also think spectators today are perfectly capable of watching theater for five, six, or seven hours. This is something that happens during the work. I am the sort of director who can't stand intermissions or interruptions during a play. Very few productions of mine have an intermission. I don't want to let spectators go, I don't want to send them out to drink sparkling wine and chat about the weather, then come back into the theater. I like it when a play is very compact and compressed and exact, when it drives to a point without letting the spectator go, as if poured from a single casting. But as I said, it's not as if I sit there at rehearsals and say, "My next play has to be under two hours." It just happens through the rhythm, through what I discover with the actors.

How much patience do you have in the theater as a spectator? Have you seen longer productions that you've liked?

Yes, of course. But I'm not a spectator, and also not a director, who compares himself with others. There's a lot of good theater, though I

seldom see anything I like and I don't go to the theater that often. The theater is a workplace for me. I go once in a while to see colleagues' work, or when I have time. I've seen productions that are six hours long and found them wonderful. But it's a totally different sort of work and a different impulse toward making theater. This has nothing to do with patience.

And nothing to do with attention span?

No. I believe that, because I have compressed a play to within two hours, I am unbelievably patient as a director. When it's short, that has nothing to do with impatience. It could be compared with cooking. Some people can cook a soup in a half hour, and there's plenty to spare. But someone else can cook it eight or nine hours and come up with just this much [*gesture indicating a small amount*]. Chicken, vegetables, everything was in the water, it cooked eight hours, and then you got what is called an essence: it's a very deep, hot soup boiled down to the essence. For that you need patience. In exactly the same way I need patience while directing.

Brecht had nasty things to say about the metaphor of cooking in theater. He spoke with contempt about "culinary theater" that people consume and enjoy like food.

Well, he made that comparison in another sense. He wasn't speaking about theater work but rather the spectator, as far I'm aware. He meant the spectator, not the work but the result. I think Brecht is right. One shouldn't just serve up something enjoyable to the spectator but rather offer argument, discourse, pain, miracles — all of that. The theater isn't there to amuse people. For that there are other media: television, musicals, Broadway, but not my kind of directing. And not *Lulu* by Wedekind.



Your productions employ very spare settings. You once told an interviewer, referring to your work with the scene designer Olaf Altmann: "I like very bare spaces, even to the point of empty stages. We are always asking ourselves the question, which setting is first of all better than the empty stage or the empty space?" Why this preference for sparseness?

The question that Olaf and I ask is a very sensual one. A good actor, or a good text, needs nothing at all to begin with. A very good actor can stand onstage and speak a Shakespeare text with nothing but a spotlight and open up a whole world for the spectator. In order not to thwart that you have to be very

careful and clear with the setting. It mustn't be decoration. It must always come from the actors' work and the thought in the text. Great thoughts are often very simple and plain, and that is what Olaf and I seek together with these spaces. In *Lulu*, there is a white, empty canvas which in the course of the play moves from the background closer and closer to the auditorium until it's all the way down front, and at the end a projection is shown on it and it moves back again. It's a very simple mechanism, but it has a very great intellectual effect. That's what Olaf and I always aim at: to be plain and compelling and not decorative.

The Oresteia, directed by Michael Thalheimer, Deutsches Theater, Berlin, 2006.
Photo: Iko Freese

The phrase “empty space” recalls the title of Peter Brook’s book.

I’ve read all of Peter Brook’s books and seen many plays done by him. Of course Brook influenced me regarding spaces, and also the strength of actors and the power of imagination. But beyond that our work is completely different. You can find a similar phrase in the title of Grotowski’s book *Towards a Poor Theater*. Grotowski also speaks of empty spaces and naked actors. He speaks of the exhibited actor in the same way Olaf Altmann and I discuss the settings for my productions. The actor has nothing other than himself, his partner, and the author’s text. Other than that he has nothing he can hold onto. That’s what I mean when I speak of the naked actor—not simply without clothes, that’s not the right translation for “naked,” but rather spiritually naked. That’s why I pay admission to theater, what I enjoy about being a spectator. It’s really to see vulnerability on the stage, not to see the art of playing but rather how the human being and the actor are vulnerable.

*Your settings are not only empty but also sometimes very narrow. I’m thinking of *The Oresteia*, which is staged entirely on two thin surfaces in front of a plain plywood wall pushed close to the audience, and also the first half of *Faust I* and the last scene of *Lulu*. What’s the reason for this?*

There are different reasons. In *Lulu* it has to do with the fact that we begin with a very large space that becomes smaller and smaller, thinner and thinner. It has to do with the mind and story of *Lulu*, which become more and more claustrophobic. There’s no more escape, no more way out for her. And in the end, when she has died, the space opens up again, because the death of *Lulu* is also a liberation. Life opens up and everything is once again thinkable, everything is possible, and the space opens up again. In *The Oresteia*, it has to

do with a certain antique thinking. You know, the word *Szene* comes from ancient Greek; it means wall, nothing like our *la scène*, or a scene in a play, but rather *Wand*, or wall. This wall in the middle of the auditorium recalls an ancient theater, in which the protagonist plays not only before a public but rather in public. That’s why this wall is not just on the stage of the Deutsches Theater but rather crosses straight through the auditorium.

But we’re in the twenty-first century, not in antiquity. What effect were you after there?

Everything that has happened in the theater through the ages, all the perceptions that have been handed down, come to us as associations. They play a role in the theater now as then. I mean, I’m not an anthropologist, but I have studied the ancient theater. What does *Szene* mean? What does “Off-*Szene*” mean? Behind the wall? What would a translation be for this today? That thought is what led Olaf Altmann and me to come up with this wall. Beyond that—and this may be the most important reason—we built the wall in the auditorium and put the chorus behind the audience, so that the chorus would be heard but not seen.

It’s up in the second balcony.

Yes, in the second balcony. The audience is between the violence of the chorus and the violence of the protagonists, right in the middle, squeezed there with no chance to flee from the story. In the course of the evening it becomes a part of the story. Furthermore, I’m of the opinion that such strong texts as these old plays by Aeschylus barely need settings. What counts is the power of thinking, the strength of the spoken words, and I wanted that energy to carry over to the spectator. So that’s the reason for this narrowness and for the enormous weight of this wall standing there in the theater.

There must have been a reason for the physical distance between the chorus and the characters beyond making a sandwich with the audience in the middle. I had the feeling that the chorus wasn't really a part of the society represented in the play, that it existed in another world apart from Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Was that your intention?

Well, since *The Oresteia* is a trilogy, the choruses in the three parts have different functions. The chorus was made invisible to give it a unity, which was also done in antiquity. Originally the chorus in the first part was made up of old men left behind during the war. In the second part, it's a chorus of women who bring libations to the father's grave with Electra. In the last part, it's the revenge gods, the Furies, which transform into the Eumenides. All these have very different functions. But what's important is that the chorus is always a commentator that on the one hand pushes the story forward and on the other hand appraises it, always acting as if it had nothing to do with the story. Translated to today, the chorus is the bourgeoisie, the people, and there I find it fascinating to place the chorus among the spectators, to have it speak as if from the heads of the spectators.

Some critics have said that they find your productions cold. What role does emotion play for you in theater?

I think that the people who consider my productions cold are on the wrong track. It's not true. Anyone who comes to see *Lulu* will see that though it's very analytically thought out and clear dramaturgically, the actors are also emotional in the extreme. Why do so many people leave my productions crying, happy, furious, or excited? Certainly not because they're cold. I think it's because they're emotional in the extreme. When my productions are good, I think it's because I touch the heart of the play, not just the kernel. This sensuality is carried over to the spectator, I believe.

An interviewer for the Hamburger Morgenpost asked what you thought of Peter Zadek's premiere production of Lulu in 1988, in which Susanne Lothar played the title role mostly naked. In your response you said that Zadek's approach wouldn't work today because "the image of women has changed since 1988." What did you mean by that?

First of all, I found Zadek's production totally, totally great—an excellent production. And I think even Zadek would do the play differently today, twenty years later. The nudity of Susanne Lothar was very provocative back then. Today no one would be interested anymore, at least in Germany. We're not so politically correct or puritanical; it wouldn't wake anyone up. There are plays today with twenty naked people on the stage, and they smear themselves with blood and whatnot—that's no longer provocative. This has to do with the changing image of nudity in the media, which also affects theater; it's no longer a taboo. I believe that the strengths and yearnings of the modern woman—and Fritzi Haberlandt is a very young Lulu—have changed. What she wishes for in life, or what I imagine she does, is emancipated. Until now the image handed down for the Lulu performer was that she had to be either Lolita or a femme fatale, but that is an incredibly male view that I have completely avoided. Lulu is no Lolita and no femme fatale for me. And Fritzi Haberlandt is not a typecast Lulu. Instead, she brings with her exactly this yearning to live that I've described. I didn't want to show Lulu as a projection surface for the men but rather as a free woman. That's what I find exciting today.

In many situations your characters avoid direct eye contact with one another. Faust, for example, almost never looks Gretchen in the eyes. Why is that?

That occurs frequently, and it may be a distinguishing mark of my work with actors, or you could reproach me with having a certain



Emilia Galotti,
directed by Michael
Thalheimer,
Brooklyn Academy
of Music, New York,
2004. Photo:
Richard Termine

style. But there are definitely also other reasons for it. Faust, for example, certainly can't look Gretchen in the eyes. Gretchen tries again and again to get a clear view of him, but Faust lies, and he doesn't trust himself to look at Gretchen. He's afraid that he won't be able to bear the look. So there are different reasons for every character. But I observe this also in life, in myself and others. We don't look each other in the eyes when we speak. People often speak without looking directly at their partners, although they're in dialogue. So I also find it banal to insist that two people speaking with one another always have to look at one another. That's not what I observe in life.

Several of your productions begin with the main character entering and then simply standing there not saying anything, sometimes for several minutes. What's behind these still openings?

Quite a bit. I love stillness in the theater, and sometimes it's in a public entrance. The audience expects something. They expect to be entertained or they have a particular expectation of the story because they've read it, or seen it before somewhere else, maybe when they were young. And sometimes this stillness before a play begins is needed in order to make that expectation happen. I need this quiet, this concentration, because something new is starting. Also, it's often the case that the actor,

during this stillness, actually thinks through the whole story that's coming from beginning to end, and that carries over to the spectator. It's the calm before the storm. But I don't do it in every production. It varies. In *Liliom* the actor stood there and did nothing for six minutes, until the audience got very upset.

Six minutes. That's an eternity in the theater.

In *Lulu* there's a quiet moment for almost a minute, then Lulu walks off and things start immediately at a fast tempo. That's also a calm before the storm. Lulu collects herself, and we observe her doing it. It's a beautiful effect, this quiet: when every spectator looks at this one character, Lulu, as the light changes and it gets dark, and every single person in the auditorium thinks about her, although she's apparently doing nothing. Yet she is present, and her presence produces an incredible concentration and frees the spectator's imagination. That's the most beautiful goal there is in theater: not to deliver images but to admit the images the spectators have inside them. The spectator should be able to immerse himself in the story with his own reality, his own biography, his own experience, so that he sees what I don't show at all. That's what I consider important theater art. If I put a tree on the stage, you will see a tree and say, "Yeah, there's a tree." But if there's no tree on the stage and I succeed in making you believe you're in a forest, that's great theater. That's Peter Brook.

Is that what you mean when you speak about the problem of illustration in the theater? You've said that you don't want to illustrate Lulu or Faust, for instance.

Yes, exactly that.

Would you go further and advocate an obligatory prohibition on images in the theater, as a reaction to media domination and image swarm?

No, not obligatory. Prohibition would be too strict. I'm not such a strict person. I'm only saying that you have to be careful with images, particularly in theater and art, because we're so overloaded with images. What I object to is arbitrary illustration in a production or a story, because then the spectator can't think about anything other than what he sees. That's a shame.

What do you mean by arbitrary?

Exchangeable. One too many. As far as I'm concerned, the form that illustrates the most is the Broadway musical. That's one image after the other. It kills all imagination, it even kills the terrible music of the musicals; it ruins everything. The spectator sees nothing but what is actually there, and is amused by what he sees. It's very culinary, as Brecht said, but with a terrible aftertaste. Nothing remains afterward. You see people flying through the room and don't have to think at all. When there are so many images, I think the spectator doesn't think anymore — there's almost a prohibition on thinking. For two hours you say, "Ahhhhhhh, that's great!" But it's not theater. It's just a show.

Given what you say, how do you feel about theater artists like Robert Wilson or Robert Lepage, for whom images are central?

I have nothing against very strong images. Robert Wilson in the 1980s and 1990s brought splendid images to the stage, but those images were never arbitrary. They were made with a consummate strength with respect to content, and in the end they were very simple images, very clear. I haven't seen so much by Robert Lepage. But Robert Wilson is also an artist

who deals with reduction, with gestures, with the symbolic power of gestures, with choreography that has strong content, with strong lighting. He always achieves an incredible focus, and that focus is a reduction. That's what I always found breathtaking in Robert Wilson, not only the great images but the whole language of images.

I'd like to get back to your productions. What was your interest in directing Faust? What do you find especially contemporary or interesting about this work at the moment?

Well, I am a German, and its interest for me is undoubtedly different than it can be for an American. *Faust* is the German national poem. He is a German national hero, and I wanted to investigate him. It's exciting to me as a German to investigate such sacred material, and the Faust character is itself fascinating, especially given that audiences often confuse which is sacred, the character or Goethe's poem. The poem is magnificent, but the character Faust is not magnificent. He is no hero. He is a miserable, egomaniacal, egoistical, egocentric perpetrator, a murderer and criminal. And that is the reason why I did *Faust*, this major connection with being a German. The Faust figure places his hubris at the center of the world and says: "I want to know what holds the whole world together at the core." That is so egomaniacal, and it's something that I perceive everywhere in our time too: the isolation of people, individuals who feel like God. There's no humility anymore in our society, and this is by the way true not only in Germany or Europe but also right here in America. A whole value system has broken down, questioning faith in the state, faith in the family, faith in God, what religion is. In the capitalist world we have succeeded in placing the individual in the center. The greatest virtue we postulate is self-actualization, and

I regard that very critically. Is that really the highest goal? Is there really, over us or beside us, nothing else? Is it all really about me, me, me, and after this it's me?

Where, or what, is heaven in your production?

In *Faust*, I cut heaven. In the beginning and ending scenes I cut God, and for the simple reason that the character of God, who enters at the beginning in Goethe, is just the counterpart or the counterimage of Mephistopheles. Faust has nothing to do with God, only Mephisto does, through the wager. But Mephisto to me is not a character apart from Faust: they're one and the same. Mephisto is unthinkable without Faust, and Faust is unthinkable without Mephisto. Mephisto is evil, the evil temptation, but the evil temptation doesn't lie outside us; it's within us, a part of us. We're not just always good people. Sometimes we're also very bad people, but we have to accept responsibility for that. If you view evil as something external to Faust, then humanity can excuse Faust everything: "I wasn't evil, it was Mephisto who was evil, and Mephisto has nothing to do with me." Then you accept no responsibility. You know, people also asked the question in Auschwitz: where was God? Or where was the devil? Wrong question. Why ask that at the most terrible time one can imagine? When the most terrible thing that happened in the world took place in Auschwitz, then we ask where God is? But in the happiest moments we forget the question. Of course, he has either always been there or he was never there. One or the other is the right answer. But what happened in Auschwitz the Germans have responsibility for. That wasn't Mephisto or Evil, nothing external. It was the evil in human beings. And that's why Mephisto and Faust are an absolute symbiosis, one and the same figure. So when I explain what's important to me, I have to leave



out the figure of God. Heaven is often empty for me, because I pose the same question in my own life: is there God or isn't there? I don't know.

That's interesting, but Faust isn't only about good and evil. It's also about human striving.

Progress.

If you like. But in your production neither Faust nor the audience experiences redemption in the end. No claim is made, and no proof offered, that human striving is valuable or important.

That's not true. You sense it within the production. In any case, you first get a feeling for what the striving is in *Faust II*. Faust's incentive is his thinking about progress. You sense throughout the production that that's something worth striving for. But he's not redeemed, that's true. Mephisto has the last word. I'm not particularly proud that there's no redemption, that Faust's soul doesn't go to heaven. For me, what's important in the end

Faust, directed by Michael Thalheimer, Deutsches Theater, Berlin, 2004.
Photo: Iko Freese

of *Faust II* is that it's not resolved who wins, Mephisto or Faust. It's a draw.

The setting for Faust I was very interesting: a large, slowly revolving, black cylinder behind the black-curtained forestage. What was the idea there?

In *Faust I* one speaks about two different parts of the play: the learned tragedy and the Gretchen tragedy. The learned tragedy we play down front on this narrow stage, and behind Faust an entire world is turning and he seeks what holds this world together at its core. The world opens up and it's Gretchen's world—described as a very small world, actually. We show this small world as a very large one because that's how Faust experiences it. It's something he has never seen before, a person like Gretchen with all her virtues and passions: he falls in love. He feels love for the first time in his life, in a large space where there's only a bed and a cross. And at the end this space closes up again because he has destroyed it, since he was incapable of enjoying it. He destroys Gretchen, he kills her mother, he's guilty of Gretchen's misfortune, her brother's death. He speaks about this space in the second part. He remembers Gretchen again and again. It's a great trauma for Faust. He couldn't bear this love and he destroys everything. In the beginning of *Faust II*, in the "pleasing landscape" monologue, you see how devoid of conscience he is. He regrets nothing.

When Faust is rejuvenated in your production — in the "Witches' Kitchen" scene, which is basically cut — he dances and plays air guitar to Deep Purple's "Child in Time." What significance does this song have for you?

For me and for many others it's an evergreen of rock music. I listened to it during puberty and I still listen to it. My parents know the song and my son knows the song. For me its significance with respect to the play is that it's all about youth. Faust hears music for the first time and dances for the first time, he's physical for the first time, this intellectual laborer begins to discover his body. And that song has to do with youth. It's better than the actor in makeup going to wash it off, to get the white out of his hair. That would be the illustrated lie again.

One last question about Lulu. You said before that great thoughts are sometimes very simple. What is the great simple thought in Lulu? What's the kernel of the play? What exactly is Wedekind saying about relations between men and women?

That is really hard to answer, because these relations are, to this day, still not clarified. It will always remain a question: what's the nature of our relations with one another? I can only say that I believe men and women are very different, and despite the fact that we live in the same world, we invent differently, we think differently, and that's just terrific. I think men and women should never act as if they're the same. It's the difference that makes things exciting between them. So that's not answerable, and I believe that Wedekind didn't want it answered. What's important to me is that Lulu is a creature who wants nothing other than to live, with every drop

of blood in her body. She shouts for life. And the men fall in love with her one after another as they fall into confusions. Again and again they project their wishful thoughts onto her: she should be the femme fatale, or Lolita, or the respectable wife. But Lulu hasn't the slightest interest in any of those roles. She just wants to be a woman and savor and enjoy life. The men want, over and over, to possess and restrict her, not allow her the freedom she feels, which is fascinating in itself. But what's more fascinating is that Lulu—and possibly this would happen with anyone who lived as uncompromisingly as she—has no alternative but to burn up, because there's much too much energy. And I think that Lulu knows that from the beginning: it will be her end, she won't be or can't be there anymore in the end. I think the meeting with Jack the Ripper is a very knowing one. He is the first man she meets with whom everything is possible, even unfortunately murder too. But everything is possible. It's exquisitely written by Wedekind. It's a sort of love scene between her and Jack the Ripper until it comes to murder. Everything is still possible.