

“As a woman, you have to speak out loud”

Sophiensæle director FRANZISKA WERNER on breaking the glass ceiling. By Cornelia Brelowski

When it comes to Berlin theatre, there's no denying it's a man's world.

Yet while the prestigious, state-funded houses are run exclusively by men, a few impressive women have made inroads in the independent scene. As director of the Sophiensæle, Mitte's respected stage for interdisciplinary theatre and dance projects, Franziska Werner is one of them. She spoke to us about sexism, the gender divide and what it takes to wield power in a male-monopolised industry.

You took over from a team of three women, and Sophiensæle was actually co-founded by a woman, Sasha Waltz, in 1996. This is pretty exceptional for Berlin...

It is somehow easier for women in the independent and dance scene, where the overall way of thinking and working is a lot more open-minded and allows women to rise more easily into higher positions. At HAU, for example, they have a lot of women dramaturges and choreographers, and soon they will have female leadership there again as well, with the Belgian theatre curator and producer Annemie Vanackere.

Why do you think that is? Well, it is always more prestigious to run a big state theatre than a house in the 'free scene', of course – that's crystal clear. To be honest, it has more to do with pay than anything else. There are simply a lot of men who would never work for this kind of money, as sad as it sounds. It makes me sick even to think about that! It is sad that even nowadays, men get almost all the big contracts as artistic directors.

And the women are just passed over? I know so many great women who work within the state-funded theatre scene. The situation there can be hair-raising. They say, "Enough! I can't deal with those sexist remarks any more!" And on top of that, actresses complain of having to play clichéd submissive and suffering roles. I hear that again and again... So personally, I know why I would never want to work in the big institutionalised theatres: I simply refuse to deal with problems that shouldn't even be a topic anymore in this day and age. I know they're still there, but

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ASTRID WARBERG

at least they are not directly surrounding me in the 'free scene'.

So you personally never encounter these problems? Sometimes. For example, at big symposia you still have to deal with prejudices, with remarks against certain women, not because what they are saying doesn't make sense but because they are women. No matter what, you have to hold tight against that and speak out.

So women can advance in the state scene, but only so far? At big state-sponsored theatres, it's pretty clear: when it comes to the artistic director position, there's a point when you suddenly reach what I call the 'glass ceiling', and there is no way through that as a woman. You have the feeling that you can rise, but actually the resistance gets so strong that it's not possible. They want women to stay in 'their place' – which simply means one level below! By the way, this does not only apply to women – also to people from poor social backgrounds. If you are not born into the privileged, educated middle class it can be tough as nails. I mean, people with working-class upbringings? Do they ever get into the state theatre scene?

What inspired you to go into theatre? I witnessed the 1990s scene in Berlin with the Castorf and Schlingensiefel productions at Volksbühne and people of the 'free scene' like

Christoph Marthaler and of course Sasha Waltz. I loved the urban space projects that were happening all over the city, through Sophiensæle and later HAU as well. All of that was more about performing arts than the actual art of acting, and that's exactly why I chose the way into the 'free scene', because the traditionalist state theatres do not allow an interdisciplinary approach.

Do you make an active effort to support female artists? Yes, both I and the rest of the team have an open mind toward female artists and what they have to say, maybe more than other houses. A good example is *La dernière crise – Frauen am Rande der Komik* (Women on the Verge of Humour), in which Vanessa Stern articulates the whole stage sexism issue by inviting women from the German state theatre scene to Sophiensæle. In May, she will include [actresses] Elisabeth Baulitz and Judith Huber.

What would be your advice for women who want to enter the theatre scene? Don't let anything or anyone stop you. Speak out loud if necessary. And go on, move forward, always move forward! ■

LA DERNIÈRE CRISE – FRAUEN AM RANDE DER KOMIK May 16, 21:00 & May 17, 22:00 | Sophiensæle, Sophienstr. 18, Mitte, U-Bhf Weinmeisterstr.