

## **Mentality X:** *Jugendtheaterbüro Berlin* and its Theatrical Space for Urban Youth of Color

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by Azadeh Sharifi

“Sie sagen Moslem gleich Terrorist, ich zeige Dir was Terror ist.  
NSU, NSA, Rollenscheiß, Blackface.  
Dicker, Trauer ändert nichts  
Mentalität, Malcolm X, Kopf runter, Faust hoch  
Unsere Wut ist haushoch!”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Back in 2008, I was working on my dissertation and while only working theoretically is not always fulfilling, I decided to help out in a youth theatre who were looking for some volunteers. The youth theatre which called itself, at that time, *Jugendtheaterwerkstatt* (youth theatre center) was placed in the margins of Berlin – or that was how I perceived it. Although on the map Moabit is part of the centre of Berlin, the district is conceived of as a periphery of the city. The inhabitants of Moabit are mainly migrant workers or migrants who are part of the lower class. The children and young adults who participated in the theatre were migrants of the second generation; their families came from Lebanon, Palestine and ex-Yugoslavia. They were born and raised in Germany but the experience of their parents of violence and war and being stateless and refugees was part of their

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<sup>1</sup> “They say Muslim equals Terrorist, I’ll show you what terror is. NSU, NSA, stereotypes, Blackface. Sorrow doesn’t help a thing, Malcolm X mentality, head down, fist high, our anger is rising up.” Refrain from the HipHop-song “MentalitätX” by Jaydonjam.

perception of the world. Another important aspect of their experience was being seen by society as outsiders, criminals and social welfare benefiteres. When I met them, most of them had experienced discrimination on different levels. The spiral of violence which surrounded them was part of their personal stories; institutional and structural racism was part of their everyday life.

Ahmed Shah, a theatre artist from the UK, and his then assistant and later theatre pedagog, Cigir Ozyürt, had the same experience of structural and institutional racism during their own child- and adulthood. They founded the theatre and embraced the experience of the youth of color by trying to transform these stories to empower them and give them a possibility of expressing themselves. When I joined the group, they had already created their second piece, a play called “Der Sprung” (“The Jump”) which had three different threads of a story. The play started in a school room where the students were harassed by their teacher for being not German, they jumped to Dschenin where they met with Juliano Mer Kamis from Freedom Theatre, and finally go to the life of Hedy Epstein, a Holocaust survivor who dedicated her life to the Palestine-Israel-freedom-movement. The triangular story created a sum, an idea of where the young adults got their inspiration from and whom they saw as empowering individuals. The play was invited to different places in Berlin but it was also invited to schools in the Western part of Germany. The “tour” to three different cities became afterwards a legend among the young adults because it gave them a sense how important and appreciated their work was. After their performances the young actors would sit on the stage and talk about their work and the teachers and other students would listen to them. The way they talked about themselves and their experiences, but also about the artistic work and how it helped them to understand and appreciate their own abilities, was very powerful.

A few years later, after I already had finished my PhD about representation and self-representation of migrants in the German state theatre, they contacted me

again. They asked me to do a workshop with the young adults where I would share my academic expertise to demask structural and institutional racism in German theatre and encourage the teenagers to use this knowledge for criticizing the system in their performances. This was the point where I got involved again in the work of the *Jugendheaterbüro Berlin* and learned how many different artistic methods and also political instruments they had developed to endow the young adults of color with the ability speak for themselves through music, mainly HipHop, theatre and art. Their work is exceptional on a practical but also on a theoretical basis. They claim to be inspired not only through the artistic but also the political notions of HipHop, rooted in the Black Power movement in the US. This can be obviously seen in their names for their spaces (“TheaterX”), their narratives (“GenossenschaftX”) and aesthetics (“MentalitätX”).

In this article, I am going to look into the work of *Jugendheaterbüro Berlin* as theatrical and public political spaces of empowerment for urban youth of color. In analyzing how they claimed these spaces, and have created narratives and aesthetics, I want to reflect how their work has reshaped the image of the youth of color and challenged the cultural institutions in Berlin.

### **Otherness, Urban youth of color and the arts**

Otherness is the result of a discursive process where the in-group or majority constructs an outer-group or minority in order to distinguish – real or imagined – differences between the self and the other. The Other is fundamental to the constitution of the self. Bhabha argues that 'fixity', “as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism”, is an important feature of the construction of otherness. It implies rigidity and a fixed order as well as disorder. Stereotype as its main discursive strategy, is “a form of knowledge and identification” that oscillates between what is always “in place”, already known, and something that must be fixed (Bhabha 1983, 18).

In the creation of nation identity the fixed order of the “imagined political community” (Anderson 2006, 6) relies on the very notions of the Other as the counterpart. In recent decades, in Europe and its inconsistent European nations racialized minorities, migrants and refugees serve as the personification of non-Europeaness and a unifying threat. The German government, for example, has still not succeeded in facing the social reality of its nation. Germany has for most of its time denied being a country of immigration and is still struggling with it. To everyone’s surprise, the conservative cabinet of Angela Merkel has recently opened Germany’s borders to refugees from Syria although it is closing them again since the overwhelming right-wing radicalization of the population, particularly in Eastern Germany, has made them step back from their progressive program. Race and religion function as central but largely invisible factors. While race is a highly problematic category entailed from Germany’s history of Third Reich, it is still not diminished and still serves as the main right of citizenship (*ius sanguinis*). Hence indications of structural racism like racial profiling are still legal German police procedure, although in 2012 a court decision opened a controversial public debate.<sup>2</sup> Religion, on the other hand, has been part of the political and media debates, while most German citizens would call themselves non-religious and the debates do not involve their “own” religion. It is rather created around the very old European debate of the threat of Islam (Said 2003, 59). The German debate circles around the demonization of Islam and the fetishized idea of the Muslim’s religion not being part of the German national identity. It is worth mentioning that only 5 percent of the German population identify themselves as Muslims.

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<sup>2</sup> In Germany racial profiling, the act of suspecting or targeting a person of a certain race based on a stereotype about their race, is not explicitly clarified by the law and jurisdiction. In 2012 the court in Koblenz, Rheinland-Pfalz ruled over the case of a 25 year old Black German student, who had been controlled by police in a train without been given a reason. The court declared the actions (*Verwaltungsgericht*) by the police legal, but was later overruled by a higher court (Oververwaltungsgericht Rheinland-Pfalz) for violating the anti-discrimination provisions in Art. 3 GG and the General Equal Treatment Act of 2006. (TAZ 2012)

The more obvious debate is around “integration,” where on one side there is a demand that migrants integrate into the German *Leitkultur*. Despite this postulation, the migrants are never fully allowed to integrate into the nation through different kinds and levels of exclusion — while simultaneously being accused of denying the ‘offers of integration’. Exclusion happens discursively through the long-lasting ascription as *Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund* (person with migration heritage) and legally through the denial of citizenship which reinforces structural racism like unequal access to labor market, social services, etc (Liebig 2009).

In “European Others,” Fatima El-Tayeb locates the consequence of the precarious position which migrants and their descendants take within the nation, as they are defined through an excess of movement while simultaneously experiencing an extreme lack of it.

They are perceived as being in transit, coming from elsewhere, momentarily here, but without any roots in their host nation, living instead in a parallel society, refusing to either fully integrate or finally return. At the same time, the everyday life of this group is often shaped by severe limitations to its mobility, some of them economic, some legal, or more frequently a mixture of both. (El-Tayeb 2011, 23)

Especially the young adults of color are affected by Othering within the national identity. Under the guise of integration and the accusation of being integration-refusers, especially Muslims are seen as the disrupter in the German society.

Ilka Eickhof points out that within anti-Muslim racism, being a Muslim operates as a stigma (Eickhof 2010, 9). Arabic or Turkish names or what could look – in the literally sense – like a Muslim, i.e. non-White person, seems to be sufficient to feed the image of the criminal and aggressor male Muslim. Honor killing (*Ehrenmord*), being a member of Daesh (or any other terrorist Islamic groups) as well as sexist and homophobic notions seems to be inscribed in the bodies of Muslim men. On the other hand, the female Muslim, or the women and

girls with headscarves (*Kopftuchmädchen*), has become an established racist term for media and political debates about “oppressed” Muslim women in Germany. The term appeared initially in the book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany abolishes itself) by the Social Democratic party member Thilo Sarrazin, where he used pseudo-biological arguments to create the myth that the immigration of Muslims would have catastrophic aftermaths for Germany.<sup>3</sup>

But instruments of empowerment and self-empowerment were always found in the arts. Art has been a very successful tool for marginalized voices to be seen and heard. Fatima El-Tayeb has, for example, highlighted that Hip-Hop as a counter-strategy has become essential to the urban youth of color.

The emergence of a continental hip-hop culture facilitated the move from a local to a translocal sense of community by pointing to commonalities that were not based on ethnic or national identifications or ascriptions, but rather on the common effects of racialized economic exclusion, on similar strategies of resistance in Europe’s urban ghettos. (El-Tayeb 2011, 29)

Hip-hop has made a dialogue possible among and between minorities and it worked as a lingua franca that enabled minorities to explore their similarities beyond ethnic differences and language barriers.

Hip-hop’s appropriation in Europe allowed for the creation of a remarkably fluent movement that has engaged in the process of building a community that avoids the seemingly unavoidable retreat to an essentialism differentiating between “us” and “them”—not by denying that there are fundamental differences running through European societies, but by insisting that these differences can be named and dismantled. (El-Tayeb 2011, 29)

In the case of *Jugendtheaterbüro Berlin* not only Hip-Hop but also Theatre is a powerful source. Contemporary theatre is apparently often selected as a medium to deal with issues (ethnic, cultural, religious, etc.) of the minority, to negotiate social injustice and discrimination or to present topics of general interest

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<sup>3</sup> The Turkish Union in Berlin-Brandenburg filed a criminal complaint against Thilo Sarrazin at the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In the opinion of the UN Anti-Racism Committee of 26 February 2013, Sarrazin’s statements were racist and the UN Committee concluded that the Federal Republic of Germany had violated the Convention by letting Sarrazin spread Hate Speech.

for discussion from the perspective of the marginalized. Theatre is a privileged place in which traumas of the past can be illuminated, in which the disposition of one's own identity can be explored and challenged. Theatre can contribute to the catharsis (reactivation) of the crisis of the group's collective identity and is thus a crucial space and a chance for the marginalized to make themselves seen. Theatre is also the space in which "pre-defined" identities in a historical, economic, social, or cultural context or in the context of colonialisation can be contested (Gonzalez 2010, XXII). *Jugendtheaterbüro Berlin* has contested these pre-defined identities through HipHop and Theatre which are forced on the urban youth of color by media, politics and society. They have intervened through musical and theatrical performances, interventions, occupations.

### **Creating theatrical and political spaces**

A very profound shift in the work of *Jugendtheaterbüro Berlin* took place when they got a space in the office-building of the *Reformationskirche Berlin-Moabit* (Church of Reformation). Space is in many ways a symptom for power struggle and the hegemonic order. In the case of *Jugendtheaterbüro*, space includes the geographical space, the safe place (or safe space) and also a theatrical and political space. Within the meaning of geographical space it enabled the *Jugendtheaterbüro* to have a regular place for the young adults of color to meet, have discussions and rehearsals or be together. Beside the geographical aspects the space became a safe discrimination-free space where experiences of everyday racism were excluded. Racism in this context is understood as "a social practice" (Hall 1989, 919), a differentiation which is based on "racist" characteristics. Racism makes it possible to "produce identity and to safeguard identification". It is a component of the consensus and consolidation achieved by one social group in opposition to another group subordinate to it. In general, this is described by Hall as a construction of the "Other" (Hall 1989, 919). By stereotyping the

“Other,” the construction of a society seems homogeneous in which the “Other” does not fit. Racist ideologies always arise “when the production of significance is linked to power strategies, and these are used to exclude certain groups from cultural and symbolic resources” (Hall 1989, 913). These exclusion practices can often be traced back to a naturalisation, i.e. the depiction of certain cultural or social circumstances as natural characteristics. In this sense, the concept of race is understood as a social construct whose pseudo-biological classification structure is based on skin colour and other external characteristics like body shape, hair structure, etc., and is solely used to rationalize and justify unequal treatment.<sup>4</sup> *Jugendtheaterbüro Berlin* created a safe space where racial discrimination is deconstructed by the youngsters themselves and questioned in their everyday activities. There they can talk about their experiences and they will be heard, something they are not allowed in schools, in the public and in other art spaces.

And finally with their new space gave them the possibility to establish their artistic and political work. They define their Theatre as Community Theatre which uses the theatrical practises of Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*. *Jugendtheaterbüro* uses those techniques and practises to educate themselves in ways of fighting against oppression in their daily lives. Boal says “theater is a weapon [...] a weapon of liberation” (Boal 1979, IX). The theatrical act by itself is a conscious intervention, a rehearsal of social action based on a collective analysis of shared problems of oppression.

While knowing that their own space would give them the possibility to create their art, they quickly realized that in order to be artistically and politically seen they need to go into already existing places and make their work seen by a wider audience. They started looking for support in State Theatres and established Cultural Institutions. And because they didn’t want to be the “suppliants”, they

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Gilroy describes this in the following way: “For me, ‘race’ refers primarily to an impersonal, discursive arrangement, the brutal result of the raciological ordering of the world, not its cause” (Gilroy 2005, 39).

demanded, through different artistic interventions, access to “big theatres.” After a few months of campaigning in front and inside of different theatres in Berlin like *Schaubühne* and *Deutsches Theater Berlin*, the cultural institution *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* offered them their space for a festival. *Jugendtheaterbüro Berlin* then decided to not only show their own work but to share this opportunity with other youth theatre groups. They created a youth theatre festival called *Festiwalla* which would have taken place over three days and where the young adults of color would be responsible for the whole process - from curating the festival to sound and light design. Unfortunately, *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* decided to take back their offer – mostly because their agreement was not to “surrender” their spaces to them. This decision enraged the group, and they started their now famous campaign *KulTür auf!*<sup>5</sup> where they demanded access to established cultural institution for young urban adults of color from disadvantaged suburbs. In their manifesto, they wrote:

We know who we are. We heard it all. WE are the ones, you are talking about. WE are the foreigners/strangers, WE are the migrants, WE are the social welfare benefitters, WE are the urban youth without jobs, WE are the headscarf wearing Muslims, We are the problem cases, who are hamper your lives!It doesn't matter what name you give us you will never find the right stereotype for us!We are no longer willing to be patronized – not on stage, not on the street – nowhere! We want you to open the doors of the cultural temples called state theatres. WE want to have a stage for self-representation, WE want to have structural changes in the way the funding is distributed, so that the artistic work of the youth is regularly funded, WE want more artistic and social projects for the youth, WE want a remix of the German culture without discrimination and WE want access to the cultural production houses where we can we been trained and gain experience without fearing that we are mistreated because of our ethnicity, our skin or hair color, our gender and sexual orientation or our religion. Look at our talents/abilities and stop putting us in stereotype boxes! (Das Brennpunkt Manifest 2011, translated by the author)

While access meant, in their demand, to literally be part of the established institutions, they also postulated that in order to create access it also needs better

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5 ‘Open the culture!’ But it also means to open the doors.

funding, theatre spaces in the suburbs and the possibility of job training and experience within the cultural institutions. The protest and the campaign showed off and *Jugendtheaterbüro* literally occupied *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* for their festival. The first *Festiwalla* - a combination of the word “festival” and the Arabic word “walla” - became a great success because it was the first self-organized festival by young adults of color and it showed art productions by other young adults of color with their topics, narratives and aesthetics. Marie Güsewell has emphasized that the “big stage” of *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* can be seen as a bigger articulation space (Güsewell 2014) which, in the sense of Rancière’s stage metaphor for politics, becomes the “specific[...] space of visibility” (Rancière 2002, 37). Now *Festiwalla* takes place once a year and shows art from all around Germany.

### **Creating narratives and aesthetics**

While spaces in the centre are important, the stories and practices of creating art define how they will be seen and heard. *Jugendtheaterbüro* is creating new and untold stories through their own aesthetics. In the past ten years, a new theatrical category called “postmigrant theatre” has been established, a very important inspiration.

For a long time, there seemed to be the need of a venue where a collective voice of marginalised artists could be heard; a place where perspectives and positions of artists of colour could be continuously staged and diaspora experiences and their narratives of displacement could find their own aesthetic. Shermin Langhoff and few other artists founded *Ballhaus Naunynstraße*, which is located in the heart of Kreuzberg, historically a district of immigration. Stuart Hall calls places like *Ballhaus Naunynstraße* “a very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalised peoples” (Hall 1989, 223). It became a place of self-representation and new aesthetics for artists

of colour. *Ballhaus Naunynstraße* was called by the founding artists “postmigrant theatre” since it showed “stories and perspectives of those who are not immigrated, but who have a migration background as a personal history and as a collective memory” (Langhof 2011, 400; translated by the author).

Initially, the term ‘postmigrant’ had been used by American academics to describe German-born authors whose work could not be denoted by their migration background (Haakh 2011, 3). The rationale of the concept was to dissociate them from the often racist use of the term ‘migration’ and, at the same time, to appropriate the discourse by self-definition. Post-migration does not refer to a historical period but is an analogy to the various ‘post-’ conditions of the twentieth century. As a theoretical term, it brings a critical notion to the discourse of migration (Lornsen 2007, 211).

*Ballhaus Naunynstraße* became well known internationally as a postmigrant theatre. They inspired other artists and practitioners to use the term of post-migration, for instance the European project *Europe Now!*, which is a collaboration of theatres dealing with Europe from postmigrant perspectives. Playwrights, directors and producers from five theatres – *Riksteatern* (Stockholm), *Talimhane Tiyatrosu* (Istanbul), *eater RAST* (Amsterdam), *Arcola Theatre* (London) and *Ballhaus Naunynstrasse* – came together to develop new plays in dialogue with each other.

*Ballhaus Naunynstraße* is a very political theatre since the artistic productions have a huge impact on the German discourses of “migration and integration”.<sup>6</sup> In this sense the artistic work of *Jugendtheaterbüro* emanates from postmigrant perspectives on society and arts. They use theatre as a *Sprachrohr* (loudspeaker) or microphone (Güsewell 2014, 92) to make themselves and their

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6 Nowadays the term postmigration is used by academia, media and politics to describe the conditions of the German society, i.e. Erol Yildiz, Naika Foroutan.

art visible and heard. Their recent production, *Schwarzkopf BRD*<sup>7</sup>, is a collage of their own experiences as marginalized subjects in a predominately white society and about the Nazi Terror cell NSU<sup>8</sup> as a synonym of structural racism in Germany. Through their research the young adults draw parallels between U.S. history and German situation:

If the school does not teach us how to deal with life, then we make our own researches and our own lessons of history. We take inspiration from the Black Movement in USA to Berlin. What would Malcolm X have said, if he was a Berliner today? What would he have said, about the fact that for more than 10 years of killings by Neonazis, the victims were treated like the criminals -and no one knew anything? We break the silence and we call the problem with its name: racism! (Schwarzkopf BRD 2015)

*Schwarzkopf BRD* starts with a history lesson in which the teacher wants to give her students an insight about the colonial history and the resistance through the Black Movement in the US. The teacher is stopped by the school director who thinks that colonialism is not appropriate for the German school curriculum since it is “not” part of German history. While the teacher and the students fight for their right to know their story, reality bursts abruptly on the stage when Ibrahim, one of the actors, receives the notification that he cannot stay in Berlin.<sup>9</sup> Due to German law, the 17 year old asylum seeker from Guinea has to leave because he is assigned to another refugee camp in Dortmund in the West of Germany. A new energy invigorates the group and the messages of such heroes as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Angela Davis become even stronger. The young actors use the lessons they learn from their role models to empower themselves but also

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7 The translation is “Black Head Germany” and refers to the stereotype of people of color having black hairs and black or brown skin.

8 The Neo-Nazi cell NSU (National sozialistischer Untergrund) carried out a series of racially motivated assassinations across Germany, in cities spread around the country. Between 2000 and 2006 the group killed eight Turkish and one Greek businessmen, as well as a police officer. Until 2011, the German police criminalized time the victims until the Nazi group distributed a video where they confessed their killings.

9 This situation is really true for the actor, as well as part of the play. With the help of other theaters Ibrahim could stay in Berlin but is still under threat that his application as an Asylum seeker can be rejected any time.

the audience. It's the intertwinement of reality and fiction in their art is a result of the urgency of dealing with reality that cannot be dissolved and where theatrical and artistic interventions seem a necessary part of re-action. The connection can be seen within the narratives: the everyday issues of urban youth of color such as being disadvantaged in schools and universities, gentrification and displacement, and police and state violence are the resources of the theatrical work. The topics are put on stage almost immediately after the young adults face them. The narratives of *Jugendtheaterbüro* are artistic and political comments to current occurrences for people of color and especially young adults of color in Berlin but also in Germany. The intertwinement is also visible within the aesthetics: on stage the productions are created based on Agitprop, Hip-Hop-culture and theatrical techniques of *Theatre of the Oppressed*. While some criticize their work for being very pedagogical and having some dogmatic morals, when the audience is full of young adults of color the impact is very palpable. It's their own story which is told on stage and it's their way to make it sensible. *Jugendtheaterbüro* is, beside *Ballhaus Naunynstraße*, one of the very few theatres in Germany that challenge the images and stereotypes of urban youth of color and changes them with their young artists and their artistic interventions.

### **Creating the future: TheaterX**

Germany continues to imagine itself mainly as a white society, at times challenged but fundamentally unchanged in its perception of various Others who remain forever outside. Fatima El-Tayeb observes that the

colorblind society in which difference is marked along lines of nationality and ethnicized Others are routinely ascribed a position outside the nation, allowing the permanent externalization and thus silencing of a debate on the legacy of racism and colonialism (El-Tayeb 2014, 14)

Those who are seen as "Others-from-Without" (Wright 2004) like people of color always are really (also) "Others-from-Within". Postmigrant theatre has

prominently questioned this perception of Germany's "Others" in many ways. The artists and their artistic work have scrutinized into the narrative of Germanness and inscribed it with post-migrant German history. Along these lines, *Jugendtheaterbüro* has done this especially for urban youth of color. And to ensure that ongoing project they are building a community theatre. The staff of *Jugendtheaterbüro* have wanted to establish, for quite some time, a community theatre and although for a long time it seemed impossible, they reached a point of fame, where the government (or the municipality of Berlin) cannot reject their demand for their own stage. As I have already mentioned, they have a space at the reformation church which is not a proper stage, and since one of the aims of the *JugendtheaterBüro Berlin* is to give the urban youth of color the possibility to learn all the theatre jobs from scratch – they want to build their own theatre.

For their community theatre they wrote a – another – manifesto which was inspired by the US Black Movement and they call their theatre *TheaterX*. In the manifesto they describe how the staff and the urban youth of color want to work together. They have create a *GenossenschaftX* (cooperative) where every one of them has an equal part. The cooperative consists of a committee of young adults and the staff, who decide the central matters of the theatre. In order to challenge the hierarchical order, which can be found in other theatre buildings, they have created working groups. The *AG Intendanz* - the working group for the directorship – consists of five areas of operation: the management, the production and programming, technical management, the dramaturgy and the artistic direction. The working groups insists on at least one young adult and one person from the staff.

The X stands for the inspiration which comes from MalcolmX, explained in their first paragraph of the manifesto: "X stands for self-empowerment, self-representation, active resistance and the rediscovery and the writing of our own story from the bottom up" (Das Brennpunkt Manifest 2011, translated by the

author). Their approach of theatre making and how to empower themselves and others they call *MentalitätX*.

In the light of rising fascist parties in Germany and also all around Europe, created through a fear of Islam and terrorist attacks as well as the rising of anti-Muslim racism as well as racism in its different occurrences, theatre groups like *Jugendtheaterbüro* and their artistic interventions seem more than needed.

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