

Bernd Lafrenz and his One Man Shakespeare Theatre

by Yvonne Jäckel

Inspired by a dream, Bernd Lafrenz began his solo acting career in 1982 performing mask theatre in the squares of Florence and Venice – the same year in which he, together with Andreas Balzer, founded the “König Alfons” clown theatre.

But it was not long before Lafrenz discovered his love for Shakespeare, whom he venerates for his worldly wisdom, for his capacity “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature”.

When his solo production of *Hamlet* premiered in 1983, it bore many traits of street theatre, including improvisation and audience involvement. In addition, his work reflects the artistic influence of his teachers – the clown Johannes Galli, the Argentinean actor and stage director Benito Gutmacher and the French acting teacher Philippe Gaulier.

Today, almost 30 years later, he is still performing *Hamlet*, as well as 7 other Shakespeare plays staged over the years, playing all the roles himself!

Now as then, the spectators are encouraged to join in, forming the soundscape for his acting. And when requested to speak small parts, Lafrenz makes sure that they are never made to look the fool; rather, they are invited to take part in the play – and the fun.

A second element from the early days has been retained in Lafrenz’s Shakespeare productions: the masks, borrowed from the commedia dell’arte. However, he employs them not merely – as can be expected – at the Capulets’ feast in *Romeo and Juliet*, or at the banquet created by Ariel in Act III of the *Tempest*, but also in less obvious places. In *Hamlet*, each mask symbolizes a character, and after putting them on briefly during the opening scenes, they remain pinned against a black wall in the background throughout the remainder of the play, like mute and immobile reflections of the action on stage. Similarly, in *Macbeth*, masks feature as suitable apparel for the witches in Hecate’s realm.

Another trademark of Lafrenz’s Shakespeare adaptations is his way of presenting the plays from the point of view of a minor character, singled out to guide the viewers through the complexities of the plot. Lafrenz’s scripts are thus mixtures of his own texts interspersed with Shakespeare quotations, making the tension between modern and Shakespearean language – the shift from one to the other often marking the transition from comedy to serious drama – one of many intriguing features of his plays.

Bernd Lafrenz’s theatre is popular theatre at its best. He achieves maximum effects with a minimum of stage props. The reason for this is, as he explains to the *Mindener Tageblatt* on the occasion of the opening of his latest production, *The Taming of the Shrew*, “that we, my director and I, would like to remain faithful to the tradition of Elizabethan theatre: to stir the spectators’ imagination so that they will see the places we describe in words in their mind’s eye. Moreover,

just like the touring companies of 16th century England, we would like to remain mobile; therefore, our stage design cannot be too bulky. Sometimes I have to carry two or even three plays in my car on one weekend.”

In this way, Bernd Lafrenz keeps the Shakespearean spirit alive, following in the Bard’s footsteps as actor, author and theatre manager in one.

His most striking talents are, on the one hand, his enactment of all of Shakespeare’s key scenes by such little means while getting to the very heart of Shakespeare’s themes and characterization, and, on the other hand, his breathtakingly fast-paced role switch, complete with facial expression, gesture, posture, voice and costume prop.

Whereas his early productions, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*, were written and directed by Lafrenz alone, from 1994 onwards the part of the director was taken over by Abel Aboualiten, Paris, a student of Marcel Marceau. The adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew* were written by Lafrenz and Aboualiten together.

Lafrenz’s performances entertain audiences throughout Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and France not only in German (see www.lafrenz.de) but also in French (see www.berndlafrenz.com). He was invited to the World Exhibition *Expo 2000* in Hanover (*Macbeth*), to the Shakespeare conference of the Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft in Weimar (*Macbeth*, *Othello*), to the Shakespeare Festival at the Globe, Neuss (*Macbeth*), the Shakespeare Festival in Carqueiranne, and to many other international theatre festivals including Avignon, Paris, Cannes, Monaco, Vienna, Berlin, Stuttgart, Dresden, Leipzig, Hamburg and Cologne.

In 1992, his *Othello* received the Audience Award (Publikumspreis) of the Stuttgarter Theaterhaus and the Outstanding Achievement Award (Preis für herausragende Leistung) of the German community in St. Vith, Belgium.

For *Macbeth*, he was awarded 1st Prize at the International Touring-Theatre Festival in Dresden-Radebeul in 2001, and for *The Tempest*, once more the Audience Award of the Stuttgarter Theaterhaus in 2002.

An early version of his *Hamlet* was published in Prof. Dr. Gerhard Müller-Schwefe, *Shakespeare im Narrenhaus. Deutschsprachige Shakespeare-Parodien aus zwei Jahrhunderten*, Tübingen: A. Francke, 1990.

And as if it weren’t enough to bring Shakespeare’s plays to the stage one at a time, in his anniversary production, *Liebe, Lust und Leidenschaft (Love, Lust and Passion)*, which contains the best scenes from seven Shakespeare adaptations, the versatile actor embodies no less than “44 parts on two legs”. Bernd Lafrenz, it seems, is Bottom the Weaver revisited: “Let me play the lion too!”

What the Experts Say (translated to English by Yvonne Jäckel)

Part 1 – theatre managers (interview excerpts from the forthcoming Bernd Lafrenz biography):

Dagmar Korth – artistic director Freie Kulturinitiative Höxter:

“Bernd Lafrenz guarantees a packed audience. His plays make people laugh and enjoy themselves, whilst, for all that, they have a high level of sophistication. A grammar-school teacher, who attended a performance together with his class, said to me: ‘*That’s* the way to get the students interested in the “boring” classics!’ Personally, I value Bernd Lafrenz’s ingenious ideas. In *King Lear*, for instance, he lets two armies enter combat in the shape of wooden sticks tied to his forearms. Then, there’s his rapid change from one persona to the next; and you buy into them ALL. And it’s still Shakespeare in all his diversity and supremely sensitive characterization. One can imagine: that’s what theatre was or may have been like during Shakespeare’s lifetime.”

Gundula Ott – artistic director Capitol Bremerhaven:

“Bernd Lafrenz’s productions are rooted in street theatre and have evolved from there. Over the years, however, his play has gained in seriousness; he explores the depth of Shakespearean drama to a much greater extent. Nonetheless, he has succeeded in maintaining a particular lightness in his plays for the benefit of the audience, which enables you to relate to Shakespeare’s themes, even if you are not familiar with the plays and are no Shakespeare expert. I am extremely grateful to Bernd Lafrenz for doing what he does; because I have attained access to Shakespeare through him.”

Siegfried Keuper –retired artistic director Theater Itzehoe:

“In late 1998, Bernd Lafrenz played *King Lear* at the STUDIO of our theatre in front of approximately 50 people. The spectators, including myself, just loved it! He found his way into the hearts of both Shakespeare-devotees and young people alike. From 1999 onwards, he performed on the big stage (more than 300 spectators). I particularly like his metamorphosis into various characters by the use of language, gestures and facial expressions. Over the years I was able to observe that his acting has become more confident, more differentiated and partially even more comical.”

Bernd M. Kraske – artistic director Kulturzentrum Reinbek and Executive Member of the INTHEGA¹ Managing Board:

“Our audiences mainly consist of subscribers – here in Reinbek, we are spearheading the age pyramid – and the number of theatregoers who are repeaters increases each year. People were in high spirits today; many came to thank me in person after the show, asking: ‘He *is* going to come back next year, isn’t he?’ – I don’t have a personal favourite among his plays; that would be unfair. At the end of the day, it’s always the piece you last saw. I quite simply value what he does.”

Part 2 – the press:

GERMANY: *Westdeutsche Zeitung, Düsseldorf*: “A master of metamorphosis in a speed rush...”

Nordbayrische Zeitung, Erlangen: “Bernd Lafrenz masters the art of letting his sophisticated play look all improvised.”

Schwäbische Post, Ahlen: “‘To be or not to be’ – there is no question. The man on stage is! He is completely! He explodes for sheer enthusiasm, and every single physical expression is charged with the full intensity of his emotion.”

Heidenheimer Neue Presse: “Bernd Lafrenz – he is a hilariousness-spilling whirlwind, a pantomime-clown by sublime grace, a smile-collector and chirpiness-generator...”

Westdeutsche Zeitung, Neuss: “By the means of the ‘*commedia dell’arte*’, a seemingly inexhaustible repertoire of pantomimic and acrobatic ideas, and with a charisma virtually possessed, operating via Lafrenz’s eye dynamics, he entertains the Globe all alone.”

Der Tagesspiegel, Berlin: “Lafrenz, a nonpareil virtuoso of transformation...”

Bietigheimer Zeitung: “You don’t know what to rate higher: his talent as a comedy writer or his magnificent achievement as a conglomerate actor.”

Bonner Rundschau: “Enchanting, playful, and with unabashed reverence for Shakespeare.”

Westfalen Post, Siegen: “Acting proficiency, entirely without make-up or costume change – the spectators were swept away and gave standing ovations.”

¹ *Interessengemeinschaft der Städte mit Theatergastspielen = Community of Interest of the Cities with Guest Performance Theatres; i.e. the most influential theatre organization in Germany.*

BELGIUM: *Grenz Echo, St. Vith*: “Full of boundless playfulness Lafrenz bounces back and forth between breaking the illusion and alienation. This is the way theatre may have been understood and performed at the turn of the 16th century, when an actor from Stratford, before fabricating plays of his own, perkily and wittily started adapting the plays of others.”

SWITZERLAND: *Zuger Nachrichten*: “No, Shakespeare would not turn over in his grave – he would leap for joy.”

Badener Tageblatt: “Lafrenz gives Shakespeare his due – only in his very own, *idiosyncratic* manner. Because he doesn’t just recount Shakespeare’s great plays, he *plays* them – theatrically, comically, captivatingly. Lafrenz *loves* the great dramatic genius from Stratford fervidly and brilliantly manages to infect his audience with this love.”

FRANCE: *Dernieres Nouvelles D’Alsace, Strasbourg*: “Director, actor, pantomime, dramaturge, improviser, Lafrenz takes over every aspect of his production from A to Z... The actor knew how to preserve some moments of tension and suspense in this parody, of which it is not exaggerated to say that they denote a fine and subtle comprehension of the work of the great English dramatist and poet.”

Hamlet:

FRANCE: *Lyon Poche*: “And in one second, Lafrenz is all the parts all by himself: he is the abominable Claudius, the perfidious Gertrude, the tender Ophelia, he is, with the complicity of the audience, the dark forest of Elsinore, he is the revenge tragedy and the usurpation restored to the dimensions of the farce, which is never bereft of a certain Shakespearean tone. A performance ... fragrant with talent and humour. Don’t miss it!”

Macbeth:

Kölnische Rundschau: “Bernd Lafrenz achieves a small stroke of genius by including Shakespeare himself in the spectacle.”

SWITZERLAND: *Badener Tagblatt*: “During those more than one and a half hours, Bernd Lafrenz accomplishes an acting-miming clowesque tour de force, standing, riding, fighting, murdering, screaming, laughing, bewitching and much more, all alone on stage. He does it effortlessly and as a matter of course. Yes, that Lafrenz is a true renaissance man; watching him and listening to him is pure bliss.”

Othello:

Der Tagesspiegel, Berlin: “In a heated sea battle, the spectators are up to their chins in blue canvas, fighting the Moor-general as Turks and pirates. When the herald enters his six-lined scene, there’s no end to the cheers. *Othello* from the little herald’s point of view looks bewitchingly enjoyable. ‘As you like it’, in terms of Shakespeare. And forsooth, we do like it.”

Romeo & Juliet:

Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, Bernburg: “With captivating humour and Italian effervescence, Lafrenz raises rapier and mobile phone between the Montague and Capulet families. And full of recklessness and exuberance, full of devotion and grace, he plays the lovers of either sex.”

King Lear:

Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, Bernburg: “When the audience does a cheerful body count, it’s King Lear dying. ... The actor divests the original classic of its horror, but not of its dignity. ... He constantly walks a twinkle-toed tightrope between the complexity of the originals and the boiled-down essentials of his adaptations. Those do not only whet the audience’s appetite for more of Lafrenz, but also pique the curiosity of the uninitiated for the original.”

The Tempest:

Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, Bernburg: “It was an evening that warmed the soul. ... He *is* the tender, amorous maiden, just as he is the crude savage; he is the playful, mischievous spirit just as the scheming, ruthlessly power hungry king’s brother; mourning king, drunkard, fool... Every small movement, every facial expression he uses to breathe life into his characters, hits the mark.”

A Midsummer Night’s Dream:

Heidenheimer Neue Presse: “Bernd Lafrenz is an actor without limits. ... Eventually, everybody wondered whether this exceptional actor by any chance happens to be endowed with the ability to perform magic like Oberon and the fairy queen herself...”

The Taming of the Shrew:

Badische Zeitung, Freiburg: “When Lafrenz prompts his spectators to chant on the cue of ‘Verona’: ‘la piú bella città d’Italia’, they do it directly and full-throatedly. ... Petruchio tames his Katharina like a bull in an arena in a visually strong scene. ... A turbulent burlesque – this time offering a romantic finale.”