


# At a Berlin Festival, Avant-Garde Theater from Europe and New York

Companies bring body horror and political statements to Berlin's FIND festival of new international drama, where the Wooster Group is the "artist in focus."

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The play "Burnt Toast," which is on view at the FIND festival in Berlin, mixes sardonic comedy and splatter horror. Alette Schei Rørvik

**By A.J. Goldmann**

Reporting from Berlin

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We all walk around with baggage. For some, that's holding onto the past or worrying about the future, but for Danny Iwas — the main character in the outlandish play "Burnt Toast" — it means carrying an aluminum briefcase containing the remains of his dead mother. The case is even handcuffed to his wrist: that way, he'll never misplace it.

Written and directed by Trine Falch of the Norwegian theater group Susie Wang, ["Burnt Toast"](#) is a high point of this year's edition of FIND, the international festival of new drama held each spring at Berlin's Schaubühne theater. By accident or by design, a large number of the entries in this festival, which runs until April 30, unfold in confined spaces. In many productions, the very setting feels like a main character.

I can safely say that I've never seen anything quite like “Burnt Toast,” which mixes sardonic comedy and splatter horror and which was staged on the Schaubühne’s small studio stage. A clammy and rigorously precise chamber work, it takes place entirely in the lobby of a sinister hotel. (The stage-spanning carpet is blood-red.)

Shortly after Danny checks in, he meets Violet, a mother who is nursing her infant. In the unpredictable and unclassifiable play that ensues, Falch unspools a disturbing yet tender tale of love and cannibalism. The English-language dialogue is a mix of the mundane and the outrageous, which the three main actors recite with an exaggerated Southern twang.

There are the fingerprints of other directors here — [Susanne Kennedy](#), Toshiki Okada and Falch’s countryman Vegard Vinge — but the unsettling tone of the piece feels unique. “Burnt Toast,” which premiered in 2020, is Susie Wang’s first work to be staged in Berlin. Featuring David Cronenberg-style body horror, pregnant infants and dismemberment, “Burnt Toast” certainly isn’t a show for everyone, but it left me hungry for more.



“A Pink Chair (In Place of a Fake Antique)” from the Wooster Group is one of the plays on view at the FIND festival. Steve Gunther

For the past several years, FIND has featured an “artist in focus.” Following [Angélica Liddell](#) in 2021 and Robert LePage in 2022, this year’s guest of honor is the revered New York experimental theater company the Wooster Group. In Berlin, the Woosters are presenting two recent shows staged by their artistic director, Elizabeth LeCompte, including [“Nayatt School Redux,”](#) which revisits one of the group’s early seminal productions and arrives during the festival’s closing weekend. (Four additional productions are also [streaming](#) online until Sunday.)

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In [“A Pink Chair \(In Place of a Fake Antique\),”](#) from 2017, the Woosters pay tribute to Tadeusz Kantor with a re-enactment of one of the towering Polish theater artist’s final plays. Along with Kantor’s daughter, who appears in a recorded video interview, the actors go in search of the director through a painstaking reconstruction of his play “I Shall Never Return,” their movement and dialogue (much of it lip-synced) matching up with archival footage of a 1988 rehearsal that plays on a television screen behind them.

There’s no doubting the finesse of the production, but the technique is so finely honed and executed that it borders on self-parody. Only in the last 20 minutes, when the troupe launches into a fairground-booth version of Homer’s “Odyssey,” does the show feel fresh and transporting.



At FIND, Tina Satter’s play “House of Dance” was staged in German for the first time. From left, Genija Rykova, Henri Maximilian Jakobs, Holger Bülow and Hevin Tekin. Gianmarco Bresadola

On the stage of the Schaubühne's more intimate [Globe](#) theater, FIND hosted another influential American theater practitioner's work: Tina Satter's 2013 play "[House of Dance](#)," staged in German for the first time.

Satter was at FIND [last year](#) with the remarkable "Is This A Room?," which later became her gripping filmmaking debut as "Reality," premiering in February at the Berlin International Film Festival. She returned to FIND with this utterly different yet equally impressive play, the first work she has directed in German.

"House of Dance," set in a tap dance studio in a small American town, has a four-person cast drawn from the Schaubühne's excellent acting ensemble, and is an exuberant chamber drama largely fueled by music and propulsive tap numbers. Satter and her actors make us viscerally feel the dreams and frustrations of the dance studio's students and teachers in this stripped-down, focused production. (The play remains in the Schaubühne's repertoire, with performances [through July](#).)



In the hyper-realistic play "Fortress of Smiles," a group of fishermen meet daily to eat and drink. Shinsuke Sugino

On the Schaubühne's main stage, the hyper-realistic "[Fortress of Smiles](#)," from the Japanese writer-director Kuro Tanino, had a far more monumental set. Two houses with identical layouts stand side by side: In one, a rambunctious group of fishermen meet daily to eat and drink; in the other, a middle-aged man cares for his senile mother with the help of his reluctant college-aged daughter.

Closely observed, with naturalistic, slice-of-life dialogue, "Fortress of Smiles" was the most conventional entry in FIND's first week. And while the acting was among the finest I saw at the festival, the play itself sometimes felt static and stifling, like watching a dramatization of a [Yasujiro Ozu](#) film, albeit one that lacks the immediacy and deep pathos that characterize the Japanese master's best work.

The only production at FIND that tried to break free of the confines of the stage was the Swiss production [“Vielleicht”](#) (“Maybe”). Over two hours, its lead actor, Cédric Djedje, delivered a history lesson about Berlin’s “African Quarter,” a district whose street names celebrate Germany’s colonial advancement in southwest Africa. With a heavy dose of docudrama and autobiography, this performative lecture given by Djedje and the equally charismatic Safi Martin Yé was highly didactic but rarely engaging as theater. (It was both more substantive and less entertaining than another recent work confronting Germany’s colonial history, the film [“Measures of Men.”](#))



Our critic found the Swiss production “Maybe,” starring Cédric Djedje and Safi Martin Yé, highly didactic but rarely engaging as theater. Dorothee Thébert Filliger

A far more absorbing work of political theater came from Iran. The writer-director Parnia Shams’s [“is”](#) took us inside a high school for girls in Tehran, where constant surveillance — or the fear of it — makes the stage’s classroom feel like a prison. In the play, cast entirely with young women, a new girl who transfers to the school midyear is tormented by her classmates. When the best student in the class defends her, the others close ranks against them, accusing them of having a sexual relationship.

Shams's play, which she co-wrote with Amir Ebrahimzadeh, was first seen in Tehran in 2019. The way it dramatizes themes of power, coercion and repression feels provocative, and yet it's hard to locate an explicit social or political critique. But while much is left unsaid, the production gained renewed meaning in the aftermath of protests that have roiled Iran since the [death of Mahsa Amini in September](#).

It certainly felt like a statement when the actresses took off their head scarves for the curtain call. For a brief moment, a stage in Berlin seemed to encompass the world.

*FIND 2023 continues at the Schaubühne through April 30.*

