

Jens Hillje, Speech at the opening of the 2023/2024 season at Sophiensäle

Berlin, December 07, 2023

I am Jens Hillje, one of the two artistic directors here and, together with Andrea Niederbuchner and Kerstin Müller, part of the new team of directors at Sophiensäle.

I would like to express our gratitude for this moment of new beginnings that we've gathered here for, and I hope to do so with appropriate humility by anchoring our thanks in the history of this building.

Drawing on this sense of place, I would then like to conclude by formulating some of our wishes for the future.

The room we are in right now was in fact the canteen of this building when it was opened in 1904/05. The building was constructed by the Berlin Craftsmen's Association, a group that was founded almost 180 years ago, in 1844, by master craftsmen and journeymen, and it is an important part of the history of this city — an important part of the history of democracy in this city. During the Revolution of 1848, the Craftsmen's Association opened its doors to apprentices and mobilized 20,000 members (in today's terms, that would equate to 200,000 Berliners).

After the revolution failed, the Craftsmen's Association was punished for its pro-democratic role and was placed under an operational ban.

This would happen again in 1933.

But until that time came, the craftsmen were undeterred and continued their work once the ban was lifted by the Prussian state. Their activities were guided by a broad, trade union-inspired educational philosophy that encompassed not only vocational training and advanced learning, but also political organizing and societal discourse. Central to their endeavors was a constant drive to evolve from mere workers into citizens — citizens of a republic founded on freedom and equality.

This idea and practice of a sustained and far-reaching process of social democratization can still be seen today in the architecture of this building. The entrance is simple and at ground level. Here, next to the canteen, stood the former library. Upstairs was a banquet hall where speeches were held, as well as rooms for seminars and meetings. Upstairs there was also a wedding hall where parties took place, and in the basement was the famous bowling alley (or Kegelbahn). In short, the historic Sophiensäle acted as a common space for all aspects of a social, communal life: a constructed social utopia of learning and participation that was suitable for everyday life.

After the Revolution of 1918, in the era of the Weimar republic, the Sophiensäle experienced a number of highlights. Here Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin delivered speeches, right above us, in the banquet hall. It was here in the 1920s that Erich Mühsam first spoke of the dangers of impending fascism. Yiddish theater also played upstairs in the banquet hall. This building is located in the heart of the historic Jewish Scheunenviertel district, where migrants from the east arrived and began a new life in Berlin.

Until 1933, these walls bore witness to a history of persistent and patient self-empowerment towards a freer life.

With the fall of democracy and the seizure of power in 1933 by the Nazis — who misused this building to hold Ukrainian forced laborers — this exciting and immensely productive work towards a more democratic society came to a temporary end.

For us, as those now in charge of this venue, the historical context of this space in today's new, reunified Berlin calls for a clear political stance based on humanism and anti-fascism.

An anti-fascism that opposes anti-Semitism and racism and all other hostilities towards our fellow human beings, because hostility toward a specific group is the breeding ground for all fascisms — including those of the future.

A humanism that is aware of its complicated legacy and that can tolerate differences while celebrating what unites us.

In order to do justice to this responsibility rooted in history, we must continue to break the silence about our past.

We must
speak
speak
speak
With each other
With patience and precision
With good will and an open heart
So that we may share different experiences
So that we may understand different perspectives
So that we may recognize different stories
And, ultimately, find what unites us.

And that is what we want, especially in these difficult times, marked by stark polarization.

Like many, I come from a German family steeped in silence:
Silence about the Nazi part of the family
Silence about the communist part of the family
Silence about the Jewish part of the family
And, finally, silence about the queer part of the family...
That would be me, the gay son.

I took refuge in art, in making theater, to escape this silence and to counter it with something:
openness.
With saying everything.
And listening to everything.

For me, openness is the promise of the rehearsal and the essence of theater making. The rehearsal is a process, and it takes time. If the rehearsal succeeds, openness arises. If openness arises, then the rehearsal succeeds. And hopefully so does the production.

What we wish for the future of this venue — for our team, our artists, our audience — is to be open to:

questioning our own perspective,
to changing our own position,
to further advancing our own thinking.

In 1996, after the Reunification, this place was saved and preserved by artists as a theater for the city. For this, we owe our thanks to Sasha Waltz, Jochen Sandig, Jo Fabian, and Dirk Cieslak, among others.

In the nearly 30 years of its existence, the Sophiensæle has become an important artistic venue for the independent performing arts in Berlin.

Yes, this is a space for art. And we are adamant about that.

We are not politicians.

We are not journalists.

We are artists.

We need openness.

And as artistic directors, we want openness for our artists and the positions they express on our stage.

The openness we want from you, our audience, is the art of looking closely and listening patiently. Afterwards, we can meet in the canteen and talk and argue about it:

With precision and patience

With goodwill and an open mind.

Because in every new work of art that imprints itself on the history of this building

and on the city,

there is always a small, radical hope

for a greater understanding

and more openness.

So, those are our wishes.

Thank you.

Translation by Kevin St. John