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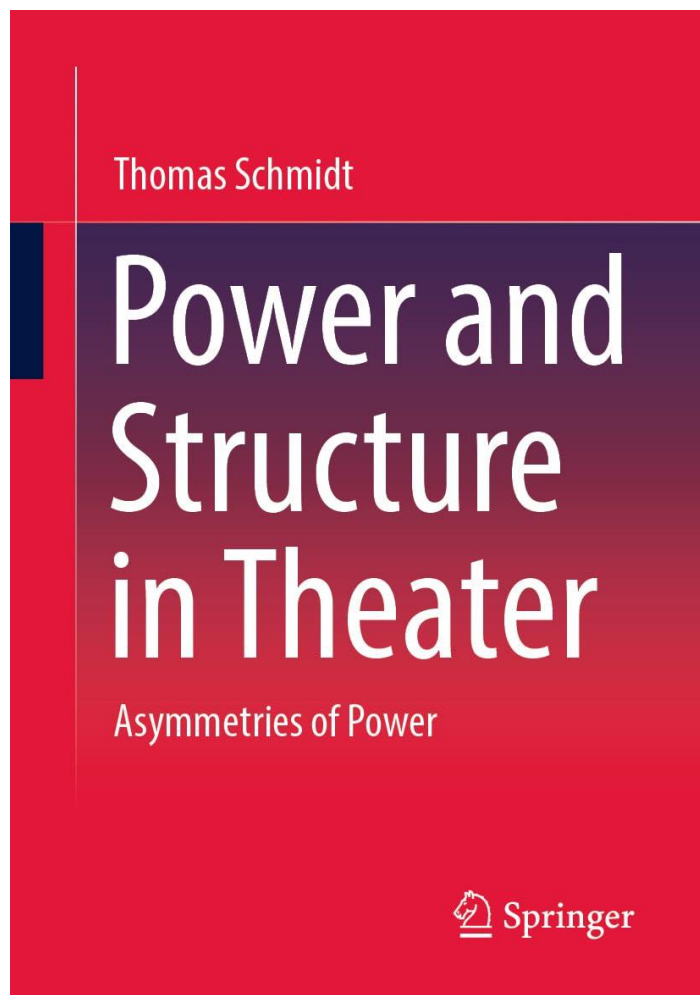
Thomas Schmidt: Power and Structure in Theater. Asymmetries of Power.

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von **Lisa Niederwimmer**

In recent years, abuse of power in the German-speaking theatre landscape has emerged as a prominent topic of discussion. A variety of initiatives by artists, journalists and academics work have brought the problematic structures underlying this phenomenon to the attention of the public, cultural policy makers, and those within the institutions themselves. Thomas Schmidt's research on *Power and Structure in Theater* – published in German in 2019, followed by the English translation in 2023 – is the first comprehensive study to thoroughly investigate why and in which ways the current system of German state and city theatres is prone to misuse of power. Schmidt's study is based on a survey of 1966 participants conducted in 2018. He analyses the organisation and structure of theatre institutions and investigates the relationship between those structures and instances of misuse of power, transgressions, and abuse.

Schmidt, Professor for Theatre and Orchestra Management at Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts, previously held positions as producer and dramaturg (Neues Schauspiel Erfurt) and as managing and artistic director ("intendant") (National Theatre Weimar). His study is informed by his background in theatre practice and builds upon prior publications, i.e. *Theater, Crisis, and Reform* (Schmidt 2016) and *The Rules of the Game* (Schmidt 2019). In *Power and Structure in Theater*, Schmidt argues that asymmetrical structures prevalent in theatre institutions are concurrent with the considerable influence that artistic directors hold. This combination serves to establish power as the central tenet of theatres, with the potential to create a "toxic organization" (p. 15). From the outset, Schmidt identifies the "intendant-centered theater model" (p. 8)



as the most structurally flawed. Consequently, the study's objective is not limited to revealing problematic working conditions, instances of abuse of power, and sexual assault within the publicly funded performing arts sector, or to analyse the ways in which these issues are created and maintained. Schmidt also presents specific recommendations for how theatres can transcend the constraints of their historical development and become ethically managed cultural institutions.

Towards this objective, the study is divided into six chapters. Following the outline of the research (ch. 1), Schmidt introduces the current structure of theatres (ch. 2). After discussing his theoretical models (ch. 3), the main part of the book contains an in-depth analysis of the survey (ch. 4). Subsequently, he offers a comprehensive overview of the collected data (ch. 5). In conclusion, Schmidt finally puts forward a series of propositions for reforming theatres' structural framework (ch. 6).

Schmidt begins by outlining the status quo of hierarchical theatre management and offers initial ideas for addressing the issue of asymmetrical power distribution. In discussing the "Peculiarities of the German Theater System" (p. 23) it becomes evident that Schmidt has practical knowledge of both organisational and habitual structures within theatres. His cultural management perspective is highly beneficial in identifying key aspects of current management practices that require change. For instance, he suggests the introduction of a "team-oriented organizational structure" (p. 37) and emphasises the importance of an ethical and less hierarchical structure, resulting in a "distribution of power" (p. 55).

In the following chapter, the author presets the theoretical basis of his research, initially drawing upon various concepts of power (ch. 3.1–3.2), complemented by theories of management and organisation (ch. 3.3–3.6). His references include Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu, in varying degrees of detail, to address power dynamics within theatre institutions. In doing so, he establishes a connection between the Machiavellian strategy of keeping power with all means necessary (regardless of the ethical implications of one's actions) and the behaviour of artistic directors who have remained in their positions for years or even decades (most prominently, Frank Castorf and Claus Peymann). Referring to Pierre Bourdieu, Schmidt demonstrates how the artistic director's position is sustained through symbolic power and rituals. He proceeds to examine damaging and toxic aspects of power, including abuse, narcissism, and structural violence, and explicitly asserts that misuse of power and the exercise of power itself are not synonymous: When used constructively, power can be "a legitimate means to enforce the interests of organizations or individuals" (p. 76). Abuse of power, however, "is always about moral, physical, psychological, and/or material *boundary violations*" (p. 79, emphasis Schmidt). Consequently, categories of abuse of power are established, representing the author's broad approach. The concept of power abuse is not limited to manipulation, exploitation, blackmail, corruption, and physical or psychological violence. It also encompasses arrogance or

a lack of empathy. This theoretical perspective enables the author to capture a wide range of behaviours under an overarching concept of abuse of power. Considering the troublesome structural state of theatre institutions, this illustrates the complex entanglements of power and theatre. Yet categorising any form of misconduct as power abuse carries the risk of (in some instances) relativising abuse due to the subjective nature of classification, which in turn relies on the author's and the study participants' perception. Schmidt's approach purposefully centres subjectiveness as a methodological tool, as he aims to "capture and analyze the participants' own experiences and perceptions" (p. 164) of abuse of power.

The book proceeds with the analysis of the data gathered by the survey. Divided into eight sections, with a total of 38 questions and additional comments by the respondents, the survey opens with a description of the social contexts and job situations of the participants: the majority of them (71.5%) are ensemble members and artistic staff. 60% of the participants are theatre employees, about 30% are freelancers, and less than 10% are students. The collection of data on monthly income reveals (gendered) asymmetries in remuneration, which also indicates that half of the employees live in financial precarity.

The findings presented in sections three and four provide disturbing insights into the current state of Germany's subsidized theatres. Over 50% of respondents indicated that they had experienced some form of abuse of power, including verbal, psychological, physical, or sexual abuse. One-third of the study participants reported having experienced sexual insinuations. According to Schmidt, this form of assault is indicative of theatre folklore and a "paternalistic culture" (p. 186), complemented by the finding that 60% of participants confirmed that "attractiveness is an important and often decisive factor in the selection for roles and engagements." (p. 189) In cases where offers of sexual favours in return for certain advantages (role, directing, wage) were made, they mainly originated from men (96.5%) and primarily affected young actresses. The crossing of boundaries and violation of personal rights can occur in various settings, such as during rehearsals, live performances, auditions, or not

directly artistic spaces such as the cafeteria. Verbal or physical assault by colleagues has been reported by almost 60% of participants, and almost 40% state they have experienced sexually compromising situations, e.g. during scenes involving nudity and physical intimacy. In his analysis, Schmidt includes acting students at art colleges, who are exposed to a series of "boundary crossing and violent intrusion" (p. 238) commonly referred to as the "*breaking of students*" (p. 238, emphasis Schmidt) during the course of their studies. The potentially toxic working environment they will encounter in their profession is thus already introduced during their training phase, with sometimes devastating psychological consequences.

To mitigate theatre's susceptibility to abuse of power, Schmidt puts forward a series of proposals. These are aimed at structural changes ("Team and Process-Oriented Structural Reform", p. 351) and at the implementation of an ethical management model. He recommends management training for artistic directors and an obligatory assessment to ensure the applicants are mentally suited to the job requirements. In addition, Schmidt advises the introduction of a code of conduct and the monitoring of working conditions. With "*participation and balance of power*" (p. 359, emphasis Schmidt) he highlights two crucial elements of prospective theatre management, which ideally would be embedded in a decentralised structure with flat hierarchies.

From the outset, Schmidt notes that theatre as an organisation is permeated by asymmetrical power

structures and identifies the intendant-centred model and its accompanying steep hierarchies as the primary issue. The study offers valuable empirical data which substantiates this argument and can be used for further investigations. Future research could, for instance, consider small-scale forms of power abuse between colleagues of the same status group, or between actors and assistants. Additionally, it would be beneficial to extend the organisation- and structure-oriented perspective by integrating the staging process itself, with its blend of aesthetics, narratives and societal norms. Combining these factors could facilitate a broader, interdisciplinary analysis of the underlying causes, which in turn extend beyond the hierarchical structure of theatres: the theatrical canon, the kind of stories performed, their authors and performers, the aesthetics they follow, and the society they emerge(d) from. A wider contextualisation of power abuse and discrimination based on gender, age, race, nationality, and further categories, could facilitate the development of supporting strategies in parallel to the structural reform demanded. Schmidt's study is an important contribution to the discourse and provides impulses for various disciplines engaging in power critical investigations of the performing arts.

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