

Father or Criminal: Ruth Zechlin's Post-Reunification Opera *Die Reise*

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The fortieth anniversaries of World War II, as well as the major changes to Germany in 1989, prompted a German literary movement of remembrance and an exploration of the past. This literary trend of Väterliteratur (or Father-Literature) explored the narrator's relationship with his or her father, often obliquely discussing the father's activities under fascism. In this instance, the father often represented Germany more generally.¹ Although many accounts of this literary trend focus on the father-son relationship, many female writers also contributed to the genre, including Christa Wolf with her *Patterns of Childhood*.²

Just as East German authors responded to the past in their writing, East German composer Ruth Zechlin expressed her feelings about this time in German history in an opera. Zechlin (1926-2007), a prolific and well-regarded composer, composed *Die Reise* on a libretto by East German dramatist Heiner Müller. The opera tells of a daughter struggling to relate to her father, a soldier living in exile. Just as in Väterliteratur novels, the relationship between the daughter and the father acts as an allegory for the relationship between Zechlin and German history.³

Die Reise

Zechlin began work on the opera in 1990. The libretto was drawn from Heiner Müller's eponymous 1951 play, finally published in 1977.⁴ The three-page text of the play is essentially

¹ Barbara Kosta, *Recasting Autobiography: Women's Counterfictions in Contemporary German Literature and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 111, 92.

² Susan Figge, "Fathers, Daughters, and the Nazi Past: Father Literature and Its (Resisting) Readers," *Gender, Patriarchy and Fascism in the Third Reich*, ed. Elaine Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 274. Also from the GDR are Monika Maron's *Pawels Briefe (Pavel's Letters)* in 1999 and Helga Königsdorf's *Ungelegener Befund (Inconvenient Finding)* from 1989. West German examples include Ruth Rehmann's *Der Mann auf der Kanzel (The Man in the Pulpit)* from 1979 and Barbara Bronnen's 1980 *Die Tochter (The Daughter)*. Austrian examples include Brigitte Schwaiger's 1980 *Lange Abwesenheit (Long Absence)* and Elisabeth Reichart's *Februarschatten (February Shadow)* in 1984. Reichart's novel is notable for its examination of the mother-daughter relationship. For more on these two books, see Maria-Regina Kecht, "Resisting Silence: Brigitte Schwaiger and Elisabeth Reichart Attempt to Confront the Past," *Gender, Patriarchy and Fascism in the Third Reich*, ed. Elaine Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 244-272. With the exception of Reichart's novel, the mother was often the neglected figure in these novels. See Erin Heather McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Rochester: Camden House, 2006).

³ Elke Domhardt, "Ruth Zechlin – Lebensstationen einer deutschen Komponistin," in *Ruth Zechlin, Komponisten in Bayern: Dokumente musikalischen Schaffens im 20. Jahrhundert 41* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 2001), 84.

⁴ Heiner Müller, *Germania Tod in Berlin* (Berlin: Rotbuch-Verlag, 1977). *Die Reise* was scheduled for the 1961–62 season with B. K. Tragelehn directing, but after the scandalous performance of *Die Umsiedlerin*, Müller was

identical to the libretto, with a few additions to expand the role of the chorus. The plot is summarized as follows:

A woman [Hitomaru] goes in search of her father [Kagekijo], who has rejected her as a useless child. She finds a beggar who is dying. It is her father, once a warring general who murdered with delight, raped, and still raves about the war. The daughter needs to decide whether to stay with the father who needs her help, or whether to turn away from him in disgust, to take revenge for suffered humiliation. The question remains open.⁵

Müller based his story on an old Japanese Nôh drama, *Kagekiyo*, by fifteenth-century writer Zeami Motokiyo, whose work was popular in German theater thanks to the influence of Berthold Brecht.⁶

Müller's reworking of the story is significantly shorter than Motokiyo's original, as the author removed much of the flowery language of the Japanese original. Moreover, he changed some plot details in order to draw parallels to the situation of postwar Germany in 1951. Most notably, Motokiyo's piece ends with plot resolution. His chorus speaks for the father and daughter, declaring that she will leave him, while he remains in exile.⁷ In contrast, Müller leaves the piece open-ended: "The daughter / Is silent. / Shall she leave him, whom no one helps at the end of his career? / Shall she stay with him, whose cheeks won't be filled with the blood he once shed?"⁸ This change better mirrors his feelings about postwar Germany's problematic relationship with the Nazi legacy, one without clear answers.

Müller himself was the one to suggest that the text be set musically. He knew Zechlin from their service to the Akademie der Künste in Berlin as president and vice-president, respectively. In 1990, Zechlin had proposed to write new incidental music for his

expelled from the Writer's Union, and Tragelehn was sent to work in a mine. Consequently, the planned performance of *Die Reise* was cancelled. Jan-Christoph Hauschild, *Heiner Müller, oder, Das Prinzip Zweifel: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2001), 199.

⁵ Uwe Friedrich, "Die Reise und *Dido and Aeneas* in Saarbrücken," for Robert Jungwirth, *Musik aktuell*, Bayerischen Rundfunk, n. d., transcript in the private collection of Claudia Paris.

⁶ In the 1920s, he had his assistant, Elisabeth Hauptmann, translate a number of plays from that tradition into German. Hans-Jochen Irmer, "Das Lehrstück als Reise-Stück und Mitteilung von Erfahrung," program notes, *Die Reise*, Saarländisches Staatstheater, Saarbrücken, Germany, February 21, 1998, 40.

⁷ "I remain' he says; and she 'I go' / The sound of this word / Was all he kept of her, / Nor passed between them / Remembrance other." Ibid., 41. English translation of Motokiyo's text from Arthur Waley, *The Nô Plays of Japan* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1922), 99.

⁸ Heiner Müller, *A Heiner Müller Reader: Plays, Poetry, Prose*, trans. Carl Weber (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 13. "Die Tochter / Schweigt. / Soll sie von ihm gehen, dem keiner hilft am Ende seiner Laufbahn? / Soll sie bei ihm bleiben, dem das vergossene / Blut nicht die Backen füllt?" Ruth Zechlin, *Die Reise: Kammeroper in fünf Teilen nach Motiven von Motekiyo*, libretto by Heiner Müller (Berlin: Verlag Neue Musik, 1992), 58. The change Müller made to make the piece relevant to the contemporary situation is ironically the opposite of the changes forced onto Brecht and Dessau for their *Lukullus* opera in 1951. Like Müller, Brecht and Dessau wanted the opera to remain open-ended, inviting the audience to examine the situation in a thoughtful way, but GDR censors forced them to make a stronger condemnation of the general Lukullus. Joy H. Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 126.

Hamletmaschine. Müller had declined,⁹ but offered to find a different text for her.¹⁰ The day after their conversation, Zechlin reported, Müller gave her the text literally on the street, after a rehearsal at the Deutsches Theater.¹¹

In preparation for composition, Zechlin and Müller met at least once, in 1991, to discuss the meaning of the text.¹² Zechlin reported Müller's intent to draw parallels to the libretto's time of composition and the contemporary politics. She wrote: "It is conceivable that Heiner viewed this text in the era of the *Wende* as particularly important. He found the parallels to the downfall of dictatorial states of interest."¹³ The text, provocative forty years before, had new explosiveness due to the events of German reunification.¹⁴

A biographer of Müller, Jan-Christoph Hauschild, has described the two themes of the text as "the fourth commandment [honor thy father and mother]" and the psychology of the soldier, both of which were very immediate concerns in post-War Germany of the 1950s.¹⁵ Zechlin promoted these ideas in her musical setting, using a number of modern compositional techniques to illustrate the conflicted feelings of the daughter and the military background of the father.

After a short introduction, the action of *Die Reise* is organized into five scenes. The daughter Hitomaru and the father Kayekiyo are introduced in scenes one and two, respectively. The father dominates the latter scenes in the opera with his vivid description of military service. The opera, of course, ends with Müller's open-ended questions, intoned by the chorus followed by a brief instrumental postlude, labeled coda, which features the harmonium.

⁹ The following year Zechlin set *Hamletmaschine* as a chamber piece for narrator, flute, oboe, percussion (marimba), violin, and viola. After Zechlin's setting in 1991, Georges Aperghis wrote the *Die Hamletmaschine-Oratorio* in 2000.

¹⁰ Ruth Zechlin quoted in Alexander Jansen, "Intuition und Reflexion: Ruth Zechlins Theaterwerke. Eine Ansicht," in *Ruth Zechlin, Komponisten in Bayern: Dokumente musikalischen Schaffens im 20. Jahrhundert 41* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 2001), 82. "'geeignetes' Theaterstück"

¹¹ Ruth Zechlin, "Anmerkungen zur Oper, Arbeit, Heiner Müller," program notes, *Die Reise*, Saarländischen Staatstheater, Saarbrücken, Germany, February 21, 1998, 51. "Heiner überreichte mir den Text buchstäblich auf der Straße. Es war nach einer Probe im Deutsches Theater, wir gingen anschließend zusammen in die Akademie der Künste, um eine Plenarsitzung vorzubereiten."

¹² Jansen, "Intuition und Reflexion," 84.

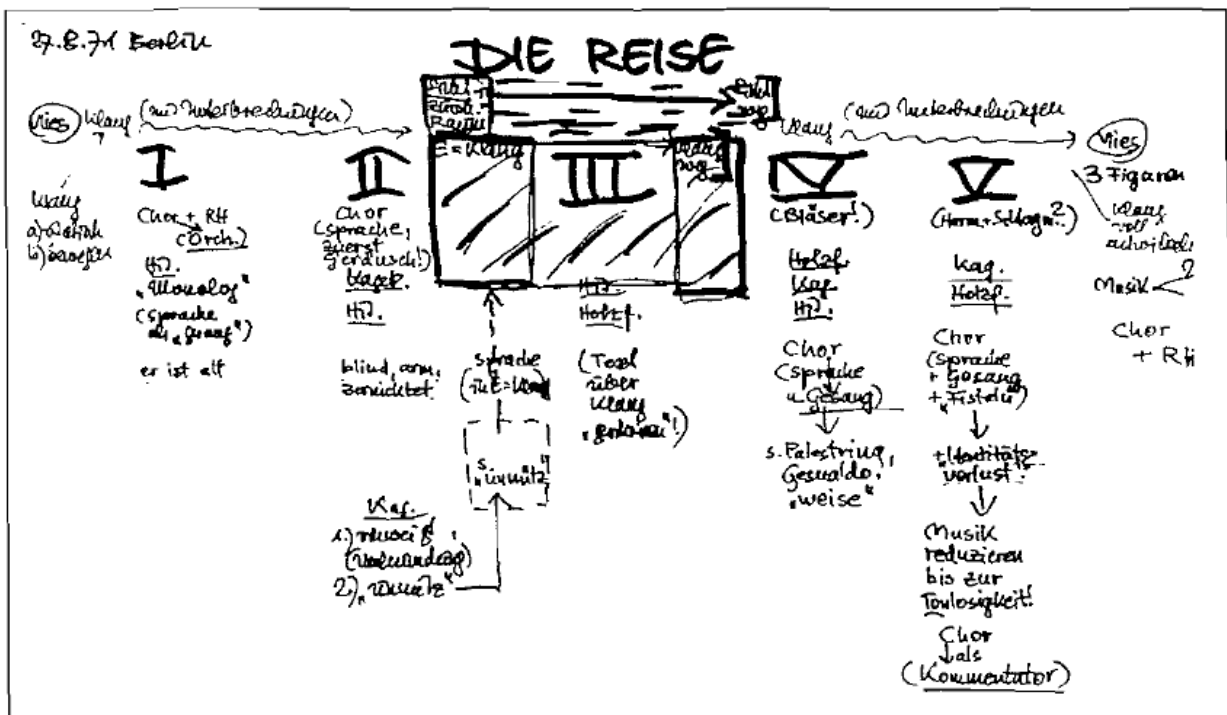
¹³ Zechlin, "Anmerkungen zur Oper," 52. "Der Text ist mittlerweile über vierzig Jahre alt; er schrieb ihn in der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit. Es ist denkbar, daß Heiner gerade diesen Text in der Zeit der 'Wende' für besonders wichtig hielt. Er fand die Parallelen zum Untergang diktatorischer Staaten interessant."

¹⁴ Jansen, "Intuition und Reflexion," 84. "neue Brisanz"

¹⁵ Jan-Christoph Hauschild, *Heiner Müller, oder, Das Prinzip Zweifel: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2001), 78. "Die Anspielungen auf Konstellationen und Generationskonflikte der jüngeren deutschen Vergangenheit sind evident. [...] Die Psychologie des Söldners, [...] das 4. Gebot [...] auch das ist, in einem in vieler Hinsicht gespaltenen Land, aktuell."

As can be seen in her graphic diagram of the opera's dramaturgy, Zechlin wanted to emphasize the central part of the opera, scene three, more than the others – see Illustration 1.¹⁶ This choice of emphasis is somewhat surprising, as it is only a short dialogue between Hitomaru and the lumberjack, who points her toward her father.¹⁷ The focus on the third scene can be explained, however, by Zechlin's new text for the choir, who arhythmically chant the word "useless (*unnu tz*).” "Useless" is significant to understanding the opera's plot, as it is stated in the program's summary of the opera three times: The daughter is useless to warriors in the battle, the warrior is useless to the princes in peace, the daughter, still, is useless to the old man who lives in his past.¹⁸ The focus on being "useless," especially in the case of the daughter, turns the focus of the opera on her. Indeed, it is Hitomaru who has undergone the journey and who must make the choice at the end.

Illustration 1. *Die Reise: Grundskizze* by Ruth Zechlin



The music of *Die Reise* is based on the juxtaposition of serial and aleatoric techniques. Zechlin structured the piece around seconds, both major and minor, and their inversions. These major and minor seconds often appear in clusters, both melodic and harmonic. As you can see in

¹⁶ She often used such diagrams as visual aids for her compositions, staged or orchestral.

¹⁷ This part is, in fact, one of the only true moments of dialogue in the play/opera.

¹⁸ Alexander Jansen, "Die Reise: Fabel," program notes, *Die Reise*, Saarländisches Staatstheater, Saarbrücken, Germany, February 21, 1998, 11.

Example 1, the woodwinds accompany the chanting chorus with sustained pitches on F, E, and Eb.

Example 1. *Die Reise*: Introduction, measures 8-9

flute-like, breath ad lib.

Flute *fff*

Oboe flute-like *fff*

Clarinet in B \flat flute-like, breath ad lib. *fff*

Chorus whisper without syllable stresses: Ka-ge-ki-yo Hei-ke My-a-z-aki Sa-ga-mi Ti-to-mo Hi-to-ma-ru *ppp*

Violin *ff*

Viola *ff*

Violoncello *ff*

* play at the frog with strong bow pressure

The patterns of seconds and sevenths are used also in the aleatoric sections of the work, in which the rhythm is indeterminate. Coupled with the use of clusters, the rhythmic chaos of these sections emphasizes the violence of the libretto. When Kagekiyo tells his story of war in scene five, the tenor and basses of the choir produce a cacophony that echoes Kagekiyo's dreadful story – see Example 2.¹⁹ In this section, the choir's noise eventually overtakes Kagekiyo's singing, their noise symbolically representing the violence of the battlefield of their text.

¹⁹ Walter Thomas Heyn also points out that these aleatoric sections might allow for theatrical openness: “In a Brechtian sense, the noted structures are “suggestions”: the author suggests various possibilities of interpretation, the score can also open for different solutions.” Walter Thomas Heyn, “Ruth Zechlin - Heiner Müller: Zugegebenermaßen subjektive Anmerkungen,” program notes, *Die Reise*, Saarländisches Staatstheater, Saarbrücken, Germany, February 21, 1998, 67. “Im Sinne Brechts sind die notierten Strukturen “Vorschläge”: Die Autorin deutet verschiedene Möglichkeiten der Interpretation an, läßt die Partitur aber auch offen für abweichende Lösungen.”

Example 2. *Die Reise*: Scene Five, measures 547-60

547 *marcato*

Trombone *f*

3 Tom-toms *ppp* *quasi legato*

Kagekiyo *marcatissimo* *ff* Un-se-rem Feld-herm ge-fällt nicht die Na-se des an-der-en Feld-herm. Ab-er sein

Tenor 1 *mf* Un-se-rem Feld-herm ge-fällt nicht die Na-se des an-de-ren Feld-herm. Ab-er

Tenor 2 *mf* Un-se-rem Feld-herm ge-fällt nicht die Na-se des an-de-ren Feld-herm. Ab-

Tenor 3 *mf* Un-se-rem Feld-herm ge-fällt nicht die Na-se des an-de-ren Feld-herm.

Bass 1 *mf* Un-se-rem Feld-herm ge-fällt nicht die Na-se des an-de-ren Feld-

Bass 2 *mf* Un-se-rem Feld-herm ge-fällt nicht die Na-se des an-de-ren

Bass 3 *mf* Un-se-rem Feld-herm ge-fällt nicht die Na-se des an-de-

Senza mizura

Continued: Example 2. Die Reise: Scene Five, measures 547-60

duration depends on the Director

554

Tbn.

554 *cresc. poco a poco* *cresc. molto* **fff**

Toms

554

Kagekiyo

Reisfeld ge - fällt ihm. Lauft ihr Hun - de!

T 1 *ad lib repeat, accel. molto*

sein Reis-feld ge-fällt ihm. **ff** Lauft, ihr Hun - de!

T 2 *ad lib repeat, accel. molto*

er sein Reis - feld ge-fällt ihm. **ff** Lauft, ihr Hun - de!

T 3 *ad lib repeat, accel. molto*

Ab - er sein Reis-feld ge - fällt ihm. **ff** Lauft, ihr Hun - de!

B 1 *ad lib repeat, accel. molto*

hermAb - er sein Reis - feld ge-fällt ihm. **ff** Lauft, ihr Hun - de!

B 2 *ad lib repeat, accel. molto*

Feldherm. Ab - er sein Reis - feld ge - fällt ihm. **ff** Lauft, ihr Hun - de!

B 3 *ad lib repeat, accel. molto*

ren Feldhern. Ab - er sein Reis - feld ge - fällt ihm. **ff** Lauft, ihr Hun - de!

Walter Thomas Heyn has suggested that Zechlin's use of aleatoric sections, that still retained control over pitch, shows the influence of Witold Lutoslawski,²⁰ a colleague of hers at the Akademie der Künste.²¹ Lutoslawski's "aleatory counterpoint" specifies the pitch and rhythm of individual parts, but leaves their coordination to chance.²² To be sure, Zechlin leaves the rhythm open, but like Lutoslawski, her aleatoric sections mostly use a very small range of pitches.²³ As you can see near the end of Example 2, the tenors' and basses' repeated line ("Lauft ihr Hunde!") uses only two different pitches to create the effect.

Zechlin also employs unpitched sections of aleatoric music to amplify the violence of military life. These sections require the orchestra to use extended techniques: In Example 3, her notation instructs the trombones to play glissandos, the flute and tuba to use flutter tongue "with no tone," the cellos to play pizzicato in the highest register, while the violas play arpeggios behind the bridge, and the basses play their lowest pitches *col legno*. In this section, the music becomes extremely chaotic and the father is stripped of his humanity and his brutality revealed.²⁴ The chaos produced by the extended techniques signifies the violence of the father on the battlefield.

²⁰ The composer Walter Thomas Heyn wrote that Zechlin's combination of serial and aleatoric techniques came from a dual influence from Hans Werner Henze and Witold Lutoslawski, respectively. Walter Thomas Heyn, e-mail message to author, July 23, 2010.

²¹ Domhardt, "Ruth Zechlin," 23-24. Indeed, Zechlin herself mentions the importance of Lutoslawski's work as a "model" for her own Ruth Zechlin, *Situationen, Reflexionen, Gespräche, Erfahrungen, Gedanken* (Berlin: Neue Musik, 1986), 43.

²² Charles Bodman Rae, "Lutosławski, Witold," in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/17226> (accessed July 21, 2012).

²³ Jadwiga Paja, "The Polyphonic Aspect of Lutosławski's Music," *Acta Musicologica* 62, no. 2/3 (May – December 1990): 185.

²⁴ Jansen, "Intuition und Reflexion," 85. "Ruth Zechlin demontiert alles Menschliche der Figur: Hinter der Maske des Greises stiert vital-primitive Brutalität."

Example 3. Die Reise, Scene Four extended techniques

senza misura

Dauer: 20-30", richtet sich nach der Regie!

44 **(28)**

Fl. 1
Fl. 2
Ob.
Klar. B.
Tromp.
Perc.
Tuba
Tempelbl. 3 Bongos
Tom-toms
Metallstäbe
Kageliyo
2 Viol.
2 Vla.
2 Vcl.
Kb.

1) Spattklänge ad lib.
2) TK prestissimo sprechen - ohne Ton
3) Spattklänge abwechseln mit Klappen prestissimo ohne Ton
4) stacc. prestissimo ohne Ton
5) abwechselnd in Mundstück blasen und prestissimo Klappen betätigen (ohne Ton)
6) ad lib. glissando, ad lib. atmen
7) frullato ohne Ton
8) auf den angegebenen Instrumenten prestissimo improvisieren
9) hohes Pizz. prestissimo
10) Arpeggio zwischen Steg und Saitenhalter (2+4 Saiten)
11) hohes pizz. ad lib., prestissimo
12) c.l. batt. tiefstmögliche Töne, prestissimo

The violence of the music is also used to characterize the father. In particular, the anvil plays an important role in the second scene – see Example 4. Hitomaru has just asked where her exiled father lives, and Kagekiyo won't respond. At this moment, the anvil is struck four times, and each time the silence between the strikes is longer. After the longest delay, an iron chain clatters to the ground. The anvil and the chain can represent the forging of swords, the sounds of battle, or the chains of captivity. Although Kagekiyo sings later in the opera, his introduction through sound effects, rather than pitches, implies an emotional distance from the music.²⁵ Zechlin's score does not imply that he could be full of remorse or even deserving of sympathy. As she herself describes, here "the music 'tells' that the military past means everything to the father."²⁶

Example 4. *Die Reise*: Scene Two, measures 231-36

231 *Senza misura*

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Bongos

Hitomaru

To Kagekiyo,
231 freely, *mezza voce*/Sprechgesang

Wo lebt Ka - ge - ki - yo, der für Hei - ki in die Schlacht ging,

232 235 let iron chain fall

Iron Chain

Anvil

with iron hammer

Hitomaru

Kagekiyo is silent

der Ver - bann - te?

In contrast, the music accompanying Hitomaru is much more delicate. Zechlin described many of these moments: the use of a string quartet was to make the daughter seem smart; a

²⁵ In fact, one reviewer saw Kagekiyo's past as "that of a butcher." "Musiktheater – Uraufführung," *Theater Zeit* (February 1998). "das eines Schlächters"

²⁶ Zechlin, "Anmerkungen zur Oper," 53. "[...] 'erzählt' die Musik, dass die militärische Vergangenheit dem Vater, welcher schweigt, alles bedeutet."

staccato marimba sound in scene four represented being “like a deer in the headlights;”²⁷ and lastly, – as illustrated in example 5 – the sparse oscillating sounds of the flute in scene two can be interpreted as Zechlin’s attempt to aurally illustrate the ethereal sparkle of “gold dust,” Müller’s prescription for the scene.²⁸ In the last case, Zechlin may be using the flute to evoke the sounds of Nôh’s accompanying ensemble, the hayashi-kata, which is comprised of three drums and flute. Yet, Zechlin makes no mention of Nôh music, or even of Japanese tradition, in her composition notes, and a heavy reliance on percussion and solo winds is indeed typical of her style. Thus, it seems that the resemblance to the music of Nôh theater is most likely a coincidence.

Example 5 *Die Reise*: Hitomaru and solo flute, Scene Two, mm 205-6

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Flute 1 and Hitomaru. The score is divided into two systems, each starting at measure 206. The first system shows the Flute 1 part with a series of notes and rests, marked with *pp* and *p*. The Hitomaru part has lyrics: "will ich nach mei -". The second system continues the Flute 1 part with more notes and rests, marked with *pp* and *p*. The Hitomaru part has lyrics: "ei - ei - nem".

The questions at the end of the fifth scene are both the conclusion and the dramatic climax of the work. The dialog ceases and the chorus asks whether the daughter should stay with the father or leave him. As Zechlin writes in her notes, “which is more important, father or criminal? Blood relationships or society?”²⁹ The questions are posed in two identical phrases, accompanied by the trumpet and trombone – see example 6. Each question appears as if it were an example of first species counterpoint: two lines (echoed at the octave) moving together. The accompanying line of the trombones, alto, and bass, is an inversion of the trumpet, soprano, and

²⁷ Ruth Zechlin, “Ausschnitte aus dem Werkstagebuch *Die Reise*,” program notes, *Die Reise*, Saarländischen Staatstheater, Saarbrücken, Germany, February 21, 1998, 62. “Kaninchen vor der Schlange [...] mechanistisch”

²⁸ Zechlin, “Anmerkungen zur Oper,” 52. “Manche seiner Bemerkungen inspirierten mich spontan, zum Beispiel: ‘es sollte klingen wie Goldstaub ...’” I considered the possibility that Müller might have been referring to Stockhausen’s work *Goldstaub* (1968) for ensemble. While it is quite plausible that either Zechlin or Müller knew of the Stockhausen work, a connection between the avant-garde music of *Goldstaub* and the solo flute and voice of *Die Reise* seems unlikely.

²⁹ Zechlin, “Ausschnitte aus dem Werkstagebuch *Die Reise*,” 63. “Was ist wichtiger – Vater oder Kriegsverbrecher, Blutsverwandschaft oder der Gesellschaft----”

tenor. Interestingly, for most of the line, the parts move only by major or minor seconds, often creating dissonant intervals. The line ends in a gesture that looks similar to a cadence, but is in fact only a leap down and up of a tritone, from a unison F to a unison B. This false cadence mirrors the inconclusive nature of the text.

Example 6. Die Reise: Scene Five, measures 595-96

always without expression

595 596

Trumpet in C *f* *p*

Trombone *f* *p*

Soprano *mf:f* Soll sie von ihm ge-hen, dem kei - ner hilft am En - de sei-ner Lauf - bahn?

Alto *mf:f* Soll sie von ihm ge-hen, dem kei - ner hilft am En - de sei-ner Lauf - bahn?

Tenor *mf:f* Soll sie von ihm ge-hen, dem kei - ner hilft am En - de sei-ner Lauf - bahn?

Bass *mf:f* Soll sie von ihm ge-hen, dem kei - ner hilft am En - de sei-ner Lauf - bahn?

C Tpt.

Tbn.

S Soll sie bei ihm blei - ben, dem das ver - gos se - ne Blut nicht die Back - en füllt?

A Soll sie bei ihm blei - debn, dem das ver - gos se - ne But nicht die Bach - en füllt?

T Soll sie bei ihm blei - ben, dem das ver - gos se - ne Blut nicht die Back - en füllt?

B Soll sie bei ihm blei - debn, dem das ver - gos se - ne But nicht die Bach - en füllt?

The Staging

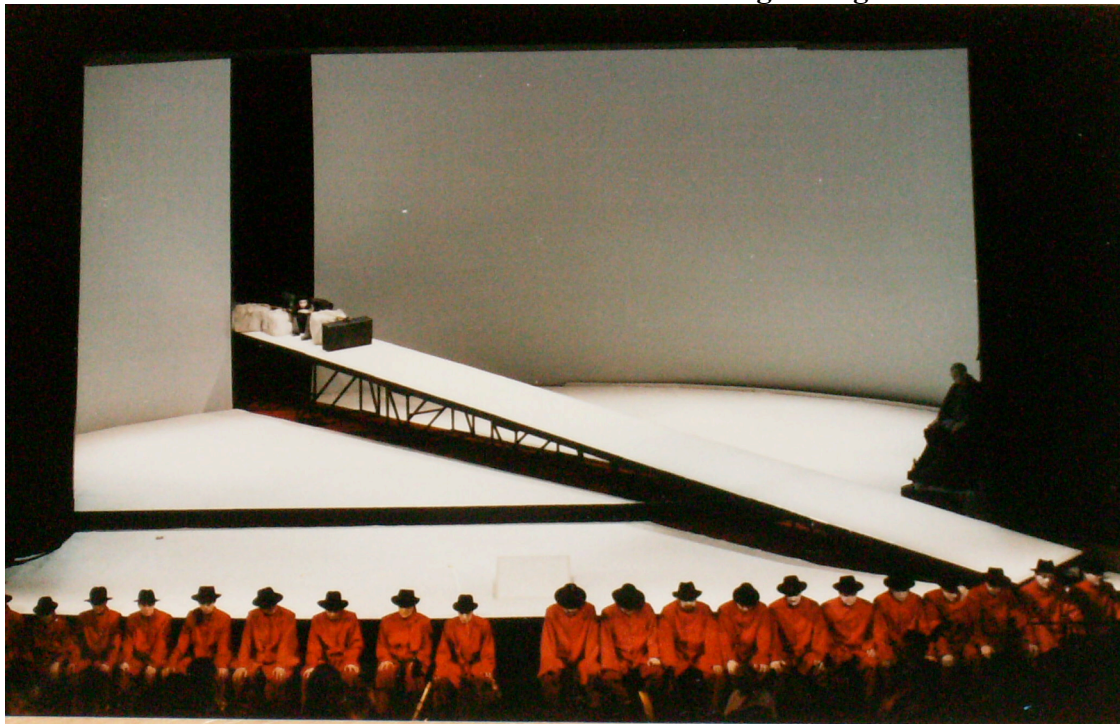
The opera was planned for performance in 1992 at the Leipzig Werk II, an arts space in a converted factory. The program was to be centered on Zechlin and Müller, and included Zechlin’s chamber compositions for voice and instruments on other texts by Müller.³⁰ But the

³⁰ “Peter Konwitschny: Verzeichnis aller Inszenierungen, Projekte und pädagogischen Arbeiten (1969 - 2010),” Akademie der Künste, <http://www.adk.de/de/archiv/archivbestand/darstellende->

performance never happened. It was then planned for Oper Leipzig for the 1994–1995 season, but again never performed.³¹ Given the tumultuous politics of the 1990s, it may appear at first that an anti-GDR bias may have been in play; however, it is more likely that the multiple cancellations were due to a post-*Wende* lack of funding for the arts, especially in former East German cities like Leipzig.³²

The premiere eventually took place in 1998 at the Saarländisches Staatstheater, directed by Christian Pöppelreiter, with Purcell's *Dido und Aeneas* on the second half of the program.³³ Brigitte Benner's set for *Die Reise* was all white, with a walkway stretching diagonally across the stage, sloping down from left to right.³⁴ At the base of the walkway was a rag-covered dais with an office chair, which represented the father's hut – see Illustration 2.

Illustration 2. *Die Reise*: Stage Design



kunst/kuenstler/Peter_Konwitschny_2.htm (accessed June 2011). The *Hamletmaschine* was premiered that year, though in Berlin. The *Der glücklose Engel I und II*, however, were not performed until 1997.

³¹ This was announced in the program for *Nachtwache* in 1993.

³² Walter Thomas Heyn, "Ruth Zechlin - Heiner Müller," 66-67.

³³ Frank Kämpfer, "Parabel des Unerledigten: Die Reise, Oper von Heiner Müller und Ruth Zechlin in Saarbrücken uraufgeführt," *Theater der Zeit*, 5 (May/June 1998): 77. Interestingly, The premiere, on February 21, occurred just days after Brecht's one-hundredth birthday on February 10. Many reviews chose to mention this fact, as it situated the opera in relation to the whole of GDR theater history.

³⁴ To be sure, it is possible that the plain white stage was inspired by Nôh theater.

The chorus wore all red suits and black fedoras. The lumberjack's costume was perhaps the most provocative: he wore a sharp black overcoat and black peaked cap, suggesting a twentieth-century general. The references to the twentieth century were strengthened by the appearance of machine guns. One picture shows the lumberjack holding a pistol to her head while she kneels on the ground – see Illustration 3. The father appears at one point dressed in a white overcoat and peaked hat with a bright red submachine gun. This still is likely a pantomime of Kagekiyo's time in battle during scene four or five: He makes the choir members, now in black coats, stand with their hands behind their heads and kneel before him while he brandishes the gun above his head – see Illustration 4. The modern uniforms of overcoats and weaponry remind the viewer that this performance was not to be interpreted as a fairy tale from early modern Japan, but rather as a statement on twentieth-century politics. As critic Frank Kämpfer wrote, it “very strikingly and inconclusively suggested Stalinist danger.”³⁵

Illustration 3. *Die Reise*: Hitomaru and the Lumberjack



³⁵ Kämpfer, “Parabel des Unerledigten,” 76. “sehr plakativ und wenig schlüssig suggerierte Stalinismus-Gefahr”

Illustration 4. *Die Reise*: Kagekiyo



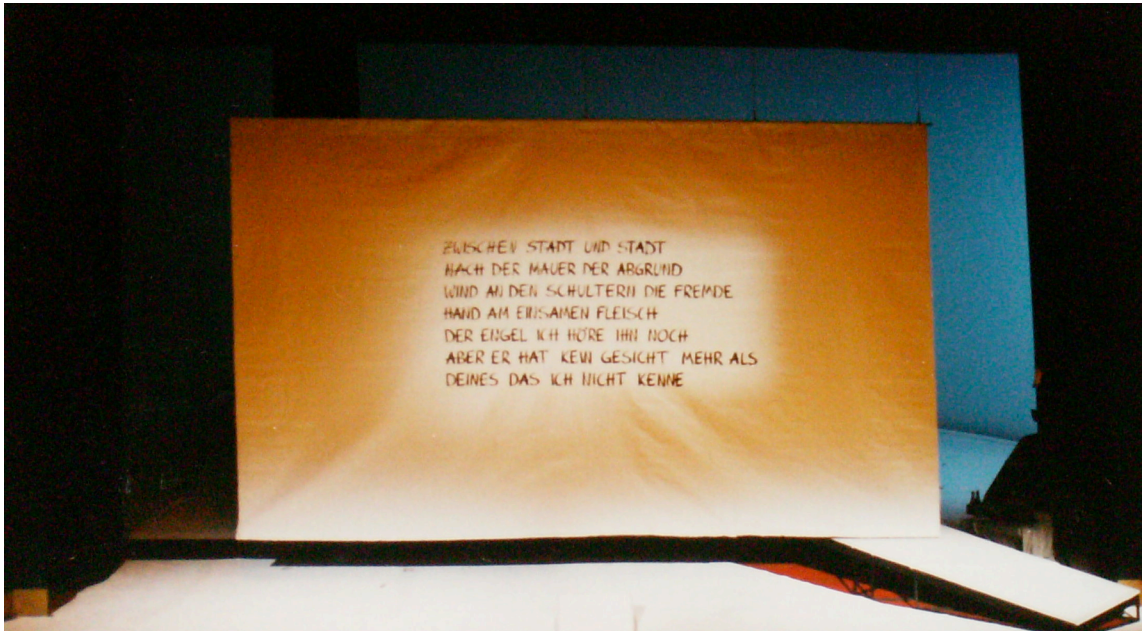
Interestingly, during the performance of *Die Reise*, Müller's poem "Der glücklose Engel II" was projected onto a tan screen that was lowered in front of the white walkway – see Illustration 5. In the poem, the faceless angel is caught in the wind "between city and city" and "by the wall is an abyss."³⁶ The space between cities by the wall is a reference to divided Berlin and its recent reunification. Evoking the *Angelus Novus* of Paul Klee and Walter Benjamin in his title,³⁷ Müller points to the disaster of history and by describing the current situation as an abyss, he offers no hope for the future.³⁸ Although the photographs do not make clear when this moment occurs in the opera; the statement is powerful. Choosing to frame the opera with this literary idea is another sign that the production can be read as a modern allegory.

³⁶ Müller, *A Heiner Müller Reader*, 57. "Zwischen Stadt und Stadt / Nach der Mauer der Abgrund"

³⁷ Frank Finlay and Stuart Taberner, *Recasting German Identity: Culture, Politics, and Literature in the Berlin Republic* (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), 94. Müller's *Der glücklose Engel* (1958) contains evident reminiscences of Benjamin's angel. Thus, Finlay and Taberner suggest that Müller's "Der glücklose Engel II," a response to himself, was also a response to Benjamin. *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

Illustration 5. *Die Reise*: “Der glücklose Engel II”



Conclusions

Just as Müller wrote the theater piece to help comprehend the legacy of Germany after World War II, Zechlin used this text to deal with the post-*Wende* vestiges of East Germany. She arguably showed her true feelings about the journey undertaken by Hitomaru in writing in her notes about scene four that “travel = death.”³⁹ Addressing the past has no positive consequence; the path should be forward. Just as Motokiyo wrote in the original version, the daughter needs to go, away from the father’s violent past. So too, says Zechlin, should Germany turn its attention to the future, rather than focusing on the mistakes of the previous century.

³⁹ Zechlin, “Ausschnitte aus dem Werkstagebuch *Die Reise*,” 63. “Reise = Tod.”