

“Only if you know what makes plays work, will it be possible for you to go beyond and experiment with more modern forms of playwriting”

Interview with Dr. Kirsten Hertel, Lecturer in English literature, Playwright, Director and Producer of the Hot Shorts - Short Play Festival from Heidelberg, Germany

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Abstract: The present interview with Dr. Kirsten Hertel, the director and producer of *Hot Shorts - Short Play Festival* organized by the *Schauspielgruppe des Anglistischen Seminars, e.V.* at the Theatre im Romanischen Keller (Theatre from the Roman Cellar), Heidelberg University, was conducted by e-mail in July 2016, immediately after the first international edition of the *Hot Shorts* festival (2-9 July) drew its curtain. Our discussion focuses on the organization of the short play festival, its impact on the participants and the future projects of the organizers, as well as on the high educational value of such an event, on the importance of familiarizing students not only with the craft of playwriting, but also with the rigor of the stage.

Keywords: theatre festival, playwriting, directing, stage management, future projects

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Seminars, e.V.), director and producer of the *Hot Shorts – Short Play Festival*, and has written two short plays for the 2011 and 2016 shorts festivals (*Frankenstein Lives!* and *The Last Tape*); she has also co-written and directed *Campus Rose*, a full length play performed in 2014.

Eugen Wohl: *First and foremost, Dr. Hertel, congratulations on what I think can be considered a very successful first edition of the Hot Sho(r)ts – International Short Play Festival! Please tell us, how did the idea for such a festival come about and why, in your opinion, is the English Department from the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg and the Schauspielgruppe an ideal platform for such an endeavour?*

Kirsten Hertel: Thank you Dr. Wohl, for congratulating us and for having been such a keen audience member over the festival week. This was already our third time of performing short plays written by students; the idea originated in 2010 when I was asked by students and members of our drama group whether we could be doing a production with new 10-20 minute plays and whether I could be teaching a class on playwriting. This is how the *Hot Shorts – Short Play Festival 2011* came into being; at the time, the plays were all from Heidelberg. Because of its immediate success, we did a similar thing in 2013, but selected the best six plays, again all from Heidelberg. Even though playwriting is not part of our normal curriculum here at the English Department, I think we have almost ideal conditions, since we have an active drama group, students of English and a student theatre, the *Theater im Romanischen Keller*, right next to us.

E.W.: *The cities represented in this international festival – Dublin, Dunedin, Heidelberg, Iowa City, Norwich – are all part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN). How important was the affiliation to and partnership with the UCCN in creating the festival?*

K.H.: The idea to go international with our festival was born out of Heidelberg's application in 2014 to become one of the UCCN. The City council asked us and other members of the university to submit project ideas and my colleague, Peter Bews, came up with the idea of doing another Short Play Festival and possibly a short story collection together with other English speaking creative partner cities. Our project was accepted and when

Heidelberg became Creative City, we started on the networking. In other words: the affiliation to and partnership with the UCCN was decisive in creating this year's international festival.



Fig. 1. Poster of the *International Hot Shorts - Short Play Festival, 2016*

E.W.: Please tell us a little bit about how the festival was structured and the idea behind presenting the plays into the four groups. Has there been a preliminary selection of the plays?

K.H.: For quite a while, we didn't know the number of plays that would finally be submitted. The only thing I knew six months ago was that there were fourteen students in my writing-for-the-stage class and that the aim was to have every student's work in the festival. This time – as in 2011 – there was no preliminary selection of plays, since I wanted to give every student the possibility to experience the process from writing to final production first hand. When we finally knew that we had 23 plays altogether (15 from Heidelberg and 8 from abroad), we tried to group them according to criteria such as: length, genre, and thematic aspects. Our aim was to create groups with a good thematic variety in order to make them as entertaining as possible. Furthermore, the guest plays from Dublin and Dunedin had to be in the first group, since most of the guests were only able to stay in Heidelberg for a long weekend. Hence, groups 2-4 were filled with plays from Heidelberg and Iowa City.



Fig. 2. Kirsten Hertel during the Festival, July 2016, Photo: Laura Hopp



Fig. 3. Festival Production Team (Left to Right): Katrin Pfändler, Laura Hopp, Annie Mannherz, Melanie Leyrer, Photo: Pia Schlotthauer

E.W.: *How was the work on preparing the festival? How did the student playwrights, directors and actors meet and collaborate in the realisation of the twenty-three short productions presented?*

K.H.: Out of my writing class, eight of the writers decided not to participate in the directing, but there were others who either directed their own plays or one of the other ones; some decided they wanted to try directing as well as acting and others saw their strength more in helping me with the organisation and production process. We held two nights of auditions at the end of April and the rehearsal period was a short and intense two months. Since many of the directors and actors were newcomers, our more experienced participants were also involved in mentoring the less experienced ones and in watching rehearsals and giving feedback. The collaboration went incredibly well and smooth, taking into account that there were round about 50 people involved.

E.W.: *It is clear from the title that the festival was designed first of all as a celebration of the **play** and the **playwright**, encouraging young people to manifest themselves artistically for the stage. From your experience – you teach a **Writing***

for the Stage course at the Anglistisches Seminar – how important is it to familiarize students with the craft of playwriting? Even more so, to do it in English, which, for the majority of them, is a second language. How did you decide to create such a course and what are the benefits of giving students an opportunity to experiment playwriting in English?

K.H.: I think it is incredibly valuable to give students of language & literature the opportunity to work creatively – not only playwriting. We also have an extra curricular creative writing class here, where students meet once a week and give each other feedback on poems and short prose works they have written. I believe that to experience the writing process themselves, will also give them a different perspective on the writing of the ‘masters’ they are studying, and will give them a sense of personal achievement very different from the usual academic work they are being trained for. That all this happens here in a second language is sheer coincidence, since we happen to be an English department. It obviously means more work for the students (and the teacher and language editors!), but the experience, once again, is very valuable.

E.W.: *What is the situation of the new drama currently in Germany? Are theatres eager to include new plays in their repertoires?*

K.H.: I can really only speak for Heidelberg, since I rarely go and watch German theatre in other German cities, but for Heidelberg the answer is definitely YES. Heidelberg Theatre regularly includes new writing in their repertoire and in their annual festival, the *Heidelberger Stückemarkt*, young playwrights get the chance to show their work.

E.W.: *The festival opened with Prof. Stuart Young’s lecture on **Creating Theatre of the Real: A particular form of Verbatim Theatre** and some of the plays were tributary to this documentary theatre form. Do you consider **Verbatim Theatre** an essential tool in teaching playwriting? How does this theatre form contribute to developing the students’ writing skills for the stage?*

K.H.: Yes, thanks to Prof. Young from Dunedin we had a brilliant lecture on *Verbatim Theatre* in the Festival. I was very grateful for it, since this specific form of theatre is not being taught very often here in our department, and it was definitely an asset for our students to also be able to see some examples of this form of documentary theatre live on stage. I’m not of the opinion, though, that it is a necessary or essential tool in teaching playwriting, especially if you teach a class for beginners. On my mind, it is important for beginners to start

thinking in terms of the traditional way plays have been made – in order to learn the craft. Only if you know what makes plays work, will it be possible for you to go beyond and experiment with more modern forms of playwriting.

E.W.: *You are not only the organizer and coordinator of the Hot Shorts Festival, but you are yourself a playwright. You wrote and directed *The Last Tape*, presented within the festival. Was the play written especially for this festival? Just to help us understand the experience better, how do you feel, as a playwright, when you hear words written by you uttered on stage?*

K.H.: Yes, I wrote *The Last Tape* especially for this festival. Ever since submitting my first short play, *Frankenstein Lives!* to the festival in 2011, I have felt the urge to continue playwriting. My next experience was the full-length play *Campus Rose* in 2014, which was co-written with Amanda Emanuel Smith, a friend of mine. The experience of hearing words you have written uttered on stage is definitely a very unique one for a budding playwright. But if you happen to be the director, too, you start focussing on so many other levels of the production – like character, voice, body and facial expressions – that the words somehow become one of the many facets that bring a play to life. On the other hand, I sometimes (still) detect myself wincing when my actors start improvising on the text during a performance. I want to shout: “no, this is not the way I wrote it...”, but then, once a play is on stage it is not ‘yours’ any more. It now ‘belongs’ to the actors.



Fig. 4. Kirsten Hertel with the cast of *The Last Tape* during rehearsals



Fig. 5. Nawel Herbrechter and Michael Shiels in *The Last Tape*

E.W.: *What would your recommendations be for anyone who desires to write for the stage? And for anyone willing to teach writing for the stage?*

K.H.: If you want to find out what playwriting is like, I'd recommend to just do it or to find a workshop that will teach you the basic principles of the craft. There are also lots of books written on the art of playwriting, some better than others. My experience with books as well as with professional teachers is that they are very helpful for beginners to find out about the most important rules and 'dos and don'ts' of the craft, not to mention the feedback you will be given on your work. Afterwards, and with some experience behind you, you will continue doing what feels right for you and you will also be able to pass this experience on to other students of playwriting.

E.W.: *What is next for the Hot Shorts - International Short Play Festival?*

K.H.: Well, we're hoping now that one of our partner creative cities will continue the *International Hot Shorts* in two years' time. That was our original idea, anyway; we wanted to start it off in Heidelberg, hoping it will be continued elsewhere on a regular biannual basis. Maybe other non-native-English speaking Creative Cities could be included next time, too!

E.W.: *Thank you very much for this interview!*

K.H.: Thank you very much for your interest in our festival, Mr. Wohl!



Fig. 6. Kirsten Hertel during the Hot Shorts - Short Play Festival, July 2016.
Photo: Laura Hopp

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