

Open Letter from Concerned Cultural Actors about Recent Discussions Surrounding the Directorship of Volksbühne in Berlin

Dear Mayor Michael Müller,

Last week we read with interest and dismay the open letter authored by 90 staff members and 80 freelancers of the Volksbühne in Berlin in opposition to the appointment of Chris Dercon as the incoming director of the theater. In normal circumstances of employment-related dispute between members of management and staff, we would have taken a more circumspect view of this letter.

However, because the main goal of the open letter was intended as a mechanism to reverse the directorial mandate vested in Mr. Dercon by the Berlin Senate, we did not want to stand aside and witness a miscarriage of justice being perpetrated. Nor did we want to sanction, without public comment, the tactic of public denunciation undertaken by Mr. Dercon's detractors to damage his professional credibility and impugn his personal integrity.

Indeed, one can grant the authors of the open letter the fact that Mr. Dercon comes from the museum world and not the theater field. That is not in dispute. Nevertheless, for signatories of this letter to make the claim that his association with museums is liable to bring to Volksbühne "a global consensus culture with uniform presentation and sales patterns" is risible, as is the claim that there is one single truth presided over by those who signed the open letter. Given its derisive tone and the a priori judgment of a cultural programme that has not yet been realized, the substance of the open letter makes it clear that there is a different agenda at work.

A cursory reading of the complaints and the charges leveled within the letter reveals clearly that the motive is not about jobs or the defense and protection of the legacy of the Volksbühne; nor is it about art and the fearless engagement with ideas. At its crudest, the open letter is about power, and the abuse of the privilege conferred by public employment to defeat an individual's vision. In the single-minded pursuit of an agenda of public co-optation, the signatories of the letter have bypassed all objective standards for serious debate and have descended to employing fear and censorship to oppose ideas they may not support.

The concerted public circus that surrounds the appointment of Mr. Dercon, the lack of decorum in the reception of his appointment, and, above all, the inability of his detractors to accord him even the most minimal courtesy, should be professionally embarrassing and damaging to a city of Berlin's global stature. If the city accedes to a narrow-minded and self-interested coup d'état, it will have succumbed to cheap innuendo and failed to defend the professional basis upon which Mr. Dercon was appointed. Berlin will also relinquish all claims to being an open city, a cosmopolitan

place where professionals can accept an appointment in good faith with the freedom to think adventurously and create beyond the conventional bounds of institutional structures.

At the risk of restating the obvious, Chris Dercon brings with him to Berlin strong record of visionary leadership in the museum field over three decades. He has built and skillfully managed strong and thriving institutions, and has a global view of the importance of art and ideas in instigating change. As a highly respected figure in the field of contemporary art he has supported, nurtured, and realized the critical visions of artists; he has relentlessly demonstrated a commitment to experimentation and risk-taking; and in so doing earned the trust and admiration of peers.

In lending our support to Chris Dercon, it is our hope that common sense will prevail over alarmist sensationalism. We also wish to note that every change of leadership by definition is a vote for creative rupture. To bring excellence and vitality to culture we must constantly dare to appoint new stewards of institutions, who are charged to challenge and reimagine their place in our cultural, political, and moral reality. Given his record of accomplishment over the last three decades, we believe that Mr. Dercon is not only eminently positioned to lead the Volksbühne; he is also a bold and inspired choice. We applaud the Berlin Senate for inviting him to Berlin. Furthermore, we are convinced that Mr. Dercon will leverage his prior experience in some of the world's most respected and renowned museums to reinforce and enhance the deserved reputation of the Volksbühne.

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