



A DRAMA OF IDEAS
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The book project I was supposed to work on during my year at the Wiko is called *The Drama of Ideas*, a study of intersections between theater and philosophy starting with Plato's dialogues. But because I had had to postpone my Wiko year several times, I arrived with the book more or less completed. Instead I worked piecemeal on various projects and, towards the end of the year, spent much time with a large editorial undertaking, a new edition of the six-volume *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, whose title betrays its impossible scope and explains the many attendant headaches it has caused me over the years.

At first, I was dismayed by the prospect of not having a single neat project to focus on during this welcome sabbatical from teaching and administration. But soon I began to realize that this year was going to unfold under the sign of the drama of ideas after all. Not so much the book project, which nevertheless accompanied me through talks and presentations, including one at the Wiko colloquium, but the thing itself: the drama of ideas. For it turned out that Wiko was an institution devoted to staging precisely such a drama every year.

Philosophers such as Plato pay attention to the scene, the need to create a setting amenable to the engagement of thought. Spanning a period of almost thirty years, the Wiko has become expert at creating an ideal setting for a drama of ideas. The central scene is of course the *Dienstagskolloquium*, where different dramatic actions unfold, including heated debates on method, objects of study, and modes of presentation. This year's highlights included the question posed by a primatologist to an art historian, "How do you know that what you say isn't wrong?" and the assertion that the world is a Turing machine. We also had whistling dolphins, a playing octopus, and all kinds of social insects. One biologist – yes there were *many* biologists, though who would say, *too many* (some, after all, became friends) – was dismayed by the frequent references to Plato and echoed Ford's famous dictum that "history is bunk".

Most participants were constructively minded most of the time despite sometimes trying – and comical – circumstances. Page upon page of quickly scribbled math formulas was one; humanists using PowerPoint for the first time and reading long blocks of text from the screen, another. The fact that one of us had just published a polemic against PowerPoint did not prevent such scenes, but we must have provided him with fodder for future editions of the book.

Some people feel that every play needs a grand confrontation, a *scène-à-faire*, but our drama also included less predictable constellations. One example was a discussion on method that we organized halfway through the year, which revealed a number of interesting connections, for example a kinship between biology and history, which both deal with temporal developments.

Even more important than the *Dienstagskolloquium* were the many sideshows and *entr'actes*, from luncheons and dinners to evening lectures and the many formal and informal discussion groups that formed throughout the year. On the more formal end was our 1930s working group, composed of literary historians, philosophers, musicologists, and art historians; on the informal end, a *Timaeus* reading group. For my own thinking, the

most important such sideshow was a small conference I organized with Dieter Thomä on theater and philosophy, which yielded many pages of notes for future use.

In the theater, you need not only scenes and actors, you also need a director, stage managers, set designers, and much more. Here Wiko's team proved incredibly professional and enabled the 40 guest actors who suddenly descended upon them in late summer to play the roles they had been engaged to perform. Without their kind and efficient engagement, our performance would have fallen flat.

For me, the drama of ideas was not confined to the Wiko even though that remained its central location. Over the last twelve years, I had immersed myself in New York theater, with its overwhelming number of theater productions, which are arranged in several parallel universes that rarely meet (Broadway, off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway, etc.). I used this year to sample Berlin's theater world from our local theater, the Schaubühne on Ku'Damm, all the way to the Volksbühne at the Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz and Sasha Waltz's wonderful space, Radialsystem on the Spree. Berlin theater is smaller than New York theater, but it is more interconnected. One has the impression that everyone involved is watching each other, responding to each other, making fun of each other. The master of this intra-theatrical game is René Pollesch, whose theater, at once fascinating, symptomatic, and maddening, sums up for me this year of Berlin theater. Pollesch's approach to theater is to use theory – mostly a Marxist and neo-Marxist critique of capitalism – and put it in the mouth of actors let loose in a mad meta-theatrical universe. It's an acquired taste, to be sure, and after many Pollesch productions, I'm not sure I quite acquired it. But it definitely was yet another version of a drama of ideas.

My book emphasizes the tendency of the drama of ideas towards comedy. Perhaps appropriately, the year found its conclusion in the end-of-the-year party, where we did a sketch based on Monty Python's Philosophers' Football applied to the various protagonists of our very own "humanists versus scientists" drama. The Wiko show must go on, should go, and will go on – and I feel very fortunate to have been a bit player during its 2009–10 season.