

# With a Pool and an Airport Hangar, an Opera Company Gets Nomadic

In Berlin, the Komische Oper is experimenting with its performance venues while its theater undergoes a multiyear renovation.

**By Ben Miller**

Reporting from Berlin

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It was high noon in a disused hangar at Tempelhof airport, near the center of Berlin, and the Komische Oper was troubleshooting its new swimming pool.

The director Tobias Kratzer, speaking into a microphone, stopped a group of extras and chorus members during a rehearsal of Hans Werner Henze's "The Raft of the Medusa," which will open the Komische Oper's season on Saturday. And the raft, made up of benches designed to look like they're floating in the water, was refusing to close on cue.

This hangar, part of a complex built by Hitler's regime in the 1930s, has been used for art installations and sports since the airport closed nearly 16 years ago. Now, it has been outfitted with 1,600 seats and a 15-inch-deep swimming pool stage.



Gloria Rehm and Günter Papendell rehearsing the opera. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

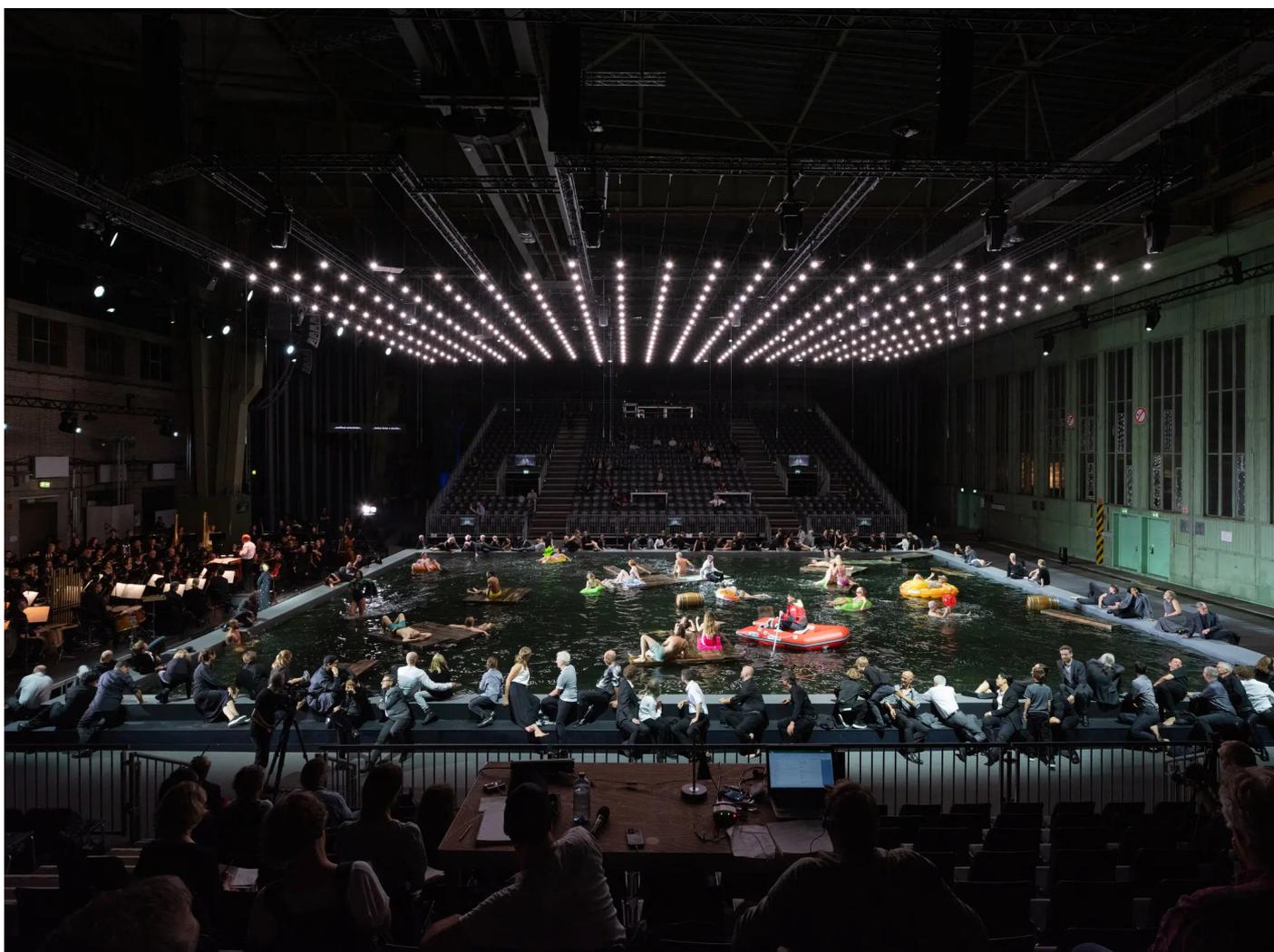


The stage has been outfitted with a 15-inch-deep swimming pool. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

And while the Komische Oper, one of Berlin's three major opera companies, embarks

on a multiyear renovation of its theater, the hangar is the first of many sites — including a temporary base at the disused Schiller Theater, a former brewery and a tent outside the city hall — where it will mount performances.

“The Raft of the Medusa,” an oratorio, was inspired by the 1819 painting of the same name by Théodore Géricault, which was itself based on the 1816 wreck of the French naval ship Medusa. Lifeboats were used by officers and priests, and the roughly 150 enlisted men were left on a hastily built raft made from what could be salvaged of the ship. After a few miles of being towed by the lifeboats, the raft was cut loose by officers looking to save themselves. For 13 days, the survivors floated adrift with little food and water, eventually resorting to cannibalism to stay alive. Only 15 were eventually rescued, and by accident. The events became a symbol of the recently restored French monarchy’s indifference to the masses.



The hangar, which has been used for art installations and sports in recent years, has 1,600 seats for the “Medusa” performances. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

Henze, who chose the subject matter for the oratorio in the heated political year of 1968, subtitled the piece “Requiem for Che Guevara” and scored its ending with the rhythm of the protest chant “Ho-Ho-Ho Chi Minh.” At its premiere, students hung Che

Guevara banners from the conductor's podium; communist and anarchist groups raised red and black flags, and fought both bourgeois audience members and one another; a choir from West Berlin refused to sing under the red banner; and police violence led to the performance being canceled before it began.

For Kratzer, the piece has political and artistic importance well beyond the 1960s. "It gets more universal year by year," he said. "From a distance from the politics of the day, it can be read as being about the crisis of refugees."

At Tempelhof, the hangars next to the one where the Komische will perform, as well as parts of the airport's tarmac, have been used for refugee housing since 2015.



"The raft can be read as a metaphor for every country which will remain inhabitable after the climate crisis," Kratzer added. "And then it's also a metaphor for man in space, for being on a finite planet in the eternal universe. The further you are away from the concrete scandal of '68, the more all those elements open up."



Rehm, foreground, in rehearsal. She will portray Death, tempting the lost sailors to give up. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times



The mezzo-soprano Idunnu Münch plays Charon, based on the boatman from Greek mythology. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

Starting with “The Raft of the Medusa,” each of the next five Komische Oper seasons will open with a large-scale performance in the hangar. That is how long the renovation of the company’s house, in the center of Berlin, is expected to take. The building’s backstage and many technical systems date from the 1960s; the goal is to renovate and preserve the atmosphere of the 1892 operetta theater while adding modern stage technology and a new wing with accessible lobbies, new rehearsal rooms and dressing rooms.

“The current house is not up to today’s standards,” Susanne Moser, the company’s co-director, said in a German-language interview with her leadership partner, Philipp Bröking. “Thankfully the Berlin Senate has agreed to make a major investment in the Komische Oper, Berlin and the art of opera. And what luck that Berlin has an empty theater, the Schiller Theater, that can be a base for us.” (Most performances will take place there.)

Disruptions like this are always expensive, as well as risky. The company — whose repertory is broad, including musicals, operettas and operas — sold 90 percent of available tickets last season, and has spent recent years saving money to pay for site-specific performances and a reduction in seats per season during the renovation. And although “The Raft of the Medusa” is hardly standard-issue fare, its six-show run is sold out.



“The Raft of the Medusa” was created amid the political upheaval of 1968, but the director of the current production feels that it has grown more universal, and today can be read as a commentary on refugees. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

“Our public loves the quality of productions,” Moser said, in noting that even revivals get a minimum of four weeks of rehearsals. “They love difference. They want to be surprised.” Komische Oper attendees, she added, are likelier to be regulars at a variety of cultural events rather than only opera fans.

Kratzer said in an interview that the scale of the Tempelhof hangar makes it possible to stage the Henze in a representational way. “You can have this image of 154 people on this tiny raft in the water,” he said. “On a stage it would always look too big. Here, you can see the scale.”

Each singer will be equipped with a microphone. The baritone Günter Papendell, a Komische Oper stalwart who will portray the Everyman sailor Jean-Charles, described in an interview the challenges of swimming, fighting and dancing in the shallow water while keeping a microphone dry.

“If the microphone gets wet, then the tone will cut out, and no one will hear me,” Papendell said in a German-language interview. “So I have to be up to my neck in water, do some water acrobatics, and keep everything from here up dry.”

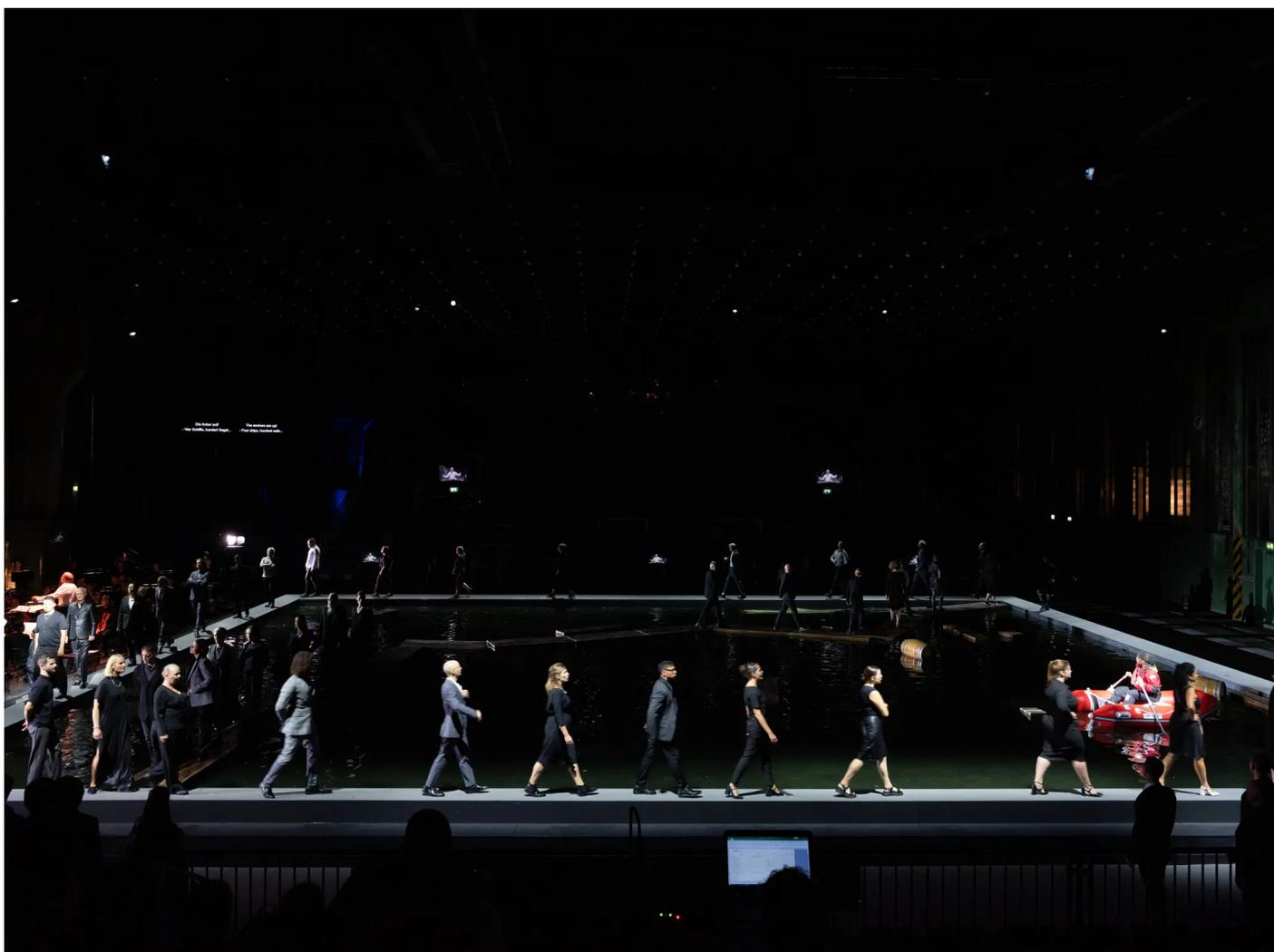


Titus Engel conducting the orchestra during a rehearsal. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

The score, however, is gentler to sing than some contemporary music, said the soprano Gloria Rehm, who will portray the mythic character of Death, a siren who tempts the lost sailors to give up and stop fighting to survive. In a German-language interview, she laughed and let loose some spiky coloratura. “It’s not like that, but almost bel canto in how it sits in the voice,” she added.

Bringing Henze’s oratorio into the present involved rethinking the role of the narrator, named Charon, after the Greek demigod who brings souls from the land of the living to the land of the dead. Usually cast with a patrician (and white) actor, here it is played by Idunnu Münch, a mezzo-soprano of color; the audience will see something of a reversal of the typical sight of a white narrator describing people of color in crisis.

In a German-language interview, Münch said that her reading of her part would emphasize its musical qualities. “There are many places in the score where speech is rhythmic, and many places where specific pitches are marked,” she added, “and I’ve never heard them on recordings.”



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Kratzer has directed the character to be less of a passive observer. “Less Brechtian,” he said. “As soon as you do it scenically, she can’t be neutral.” Singing much of the time from a small lifeboat rowing around the wrecked raft, the character will be in the familiar position of witnessing disaster and feeling unable to help.

“Empathy alone is not enough,” Kratzer said. “She would love to help, but there are more than a hundred on the raft and even five would sink her lifeboat. This is the tragic dilemma.”

Despite the risk of a wet microphone, Papendell described his hopes for “The Raft of the Medusa” and the Komische Oper’s coming nomadic period with a laugh and one word: “Revolution!”

“It’s good to leave our home behind for a while and play in some other places. In a place like this,” he added, gesturing around the hangar, “to be able to make music theater — I feel unbelievably happy.”