

Panther Glass, a performance made of shards to ‘fiercely lay bare’ Heiner Müller’s body of work

In O Público by Mara Gonçalves

On stage, a barricade begins to take shape. ‘Hope has not been realised,’ and the streets are teeming with the spirit of rebellion. Above a monumental, fallen bust of Heiner Müller (1929-1995), the actress performing the scene not only leaves us ‘amidst the odour of the crowd’s perspiration,’ throwing ‘stones at police agents, soldiers, tanks, bulletproof glass’, but she also takes us up to the ‘balcony of a government building,’ dressed in a frock coat that ‘does not suit us,’ stifled ‘by fear and contempt’, before she brings us down to the body of the ‘soldier in a tank turret,’ a ‘database’ of the carnage that one foresees after the ‘ringleaders are hanged.’

Directed by Igor Gandra and designed by Amândio Anastácio, *Panther Glass—Shards of Heiner Müller* was co-created by Teatro de Ferro and Alma d’Arame, two theatre companies led, respectively, by the director and set designer. For this show that is now premiering at Teatro das Figuras in Faro (Friday and Saturday), the directors could not resist bringing to the stage ‘that whole part’ of *The Hamlet Machine*, a play written by the German playwright and poet in 1977. It is ‘a magnificent text,’ argues Igor Gandra, that transports us ‘to both sides’ of the barricade, while highlighting the ‘ambiguity’ that runs through the life and work of the author, ‘at once a rebel and a government figure’ of the former German Democratic Republic, in a world divided by the wall of the Cold War.

Thirty years after the death of Heiner Müller, completed on the penultimate day of 2025, they felt it was time to ‘revisit’ the German author, one of the most influential figures in European theatre during the second half of the 20th century, and to create ‘a kind of lightning-visit’ to his universe. ‘We invited Miguel Ramalheite Gomes, a researcher who has delved quite deeply into Müller’s universe, to help us with the dramaturgy. He also allowed us to broaden our possible sources and parallel readings, both direct and indirect ones,’ recalls Igor Gandra. The director began ‘doing theatre more or less around the time’ the writer passed away, which coincided with his staging of another version of *The Hamlet Machine*. ‘This is an author whose work has always resonated within me.’

Inspired by the fragmented, multi-referential, and self-referential writing style adopted by Müller from a certain point onward, a style that reached its peak in that text from 1977, they stage ‘a play made of shards,’ a collection of excerpts from plays, poems, interviews, theoretical texts, biographical details, and anecdotes shared by the poet and playwright, which embody the ‘various Müllers within Müller.’ Masks, busts, and puppets give form to the persona he cultivated—black, thick-rimmed glasses, dark sweater, leather jacket, a cigar dangling from his fingertips—multiplying and fragmenting into the ‘caustic,’ the passionate (and dispassionate), the political, the paranoid, and the ‘comical as well.’

We come face-to-face with Müller’s ‘dark’ side: spectres are evoked to speak of death, violence, the impossibility of History’s redemption, the ‘humiliated bodies of women,’ and the ‘scars of the battle of consumption,’ words pronounced on a stage that is shared by both performers and audience members sitting at the edge of the stage. But we also encounter ‘a lesser-known side,’ a ‘kind of Müllerian humour,’ a dark and scathing humour that emerges here and there throughout the play, notably in the film that interrupts the movement on stage: a version of *The Holy Family*, an excerpt from *Germania—Death in Berlin*, inspired ‘by the format and codes of the sitcom,’ featuring a laugh track and Joseph Goebbels, the father of Nazi propaganda, in labour. ‘Our play features this somewhat dizzying approach of crossing very disparate references and alternating between erudition and vulgarity rather swiftly,’ emphasizes Igor Gandra.

The ‘biggest challenge’ of *Panther Glass—Shards of Heiner Müller*, confess the director and set designer, was finding the ‘collage logic’ that would tie the entire show together. A logic materialised not only in the themes of the selected texts, but also ‘by the set of languages, the stage space, the music, and the interaction among actors.’ The set design itself, in its unabashedness, takes on that role; it is also a ‘recycled mash-up of other set designs,’ fragments that pile up and are scattered on the stage, representing different signs in each scene.

The title of the show, *Panther Glass*, is the remnant of a translation error, which led Igor Gandra from *Panzerglass*, the German word for ‘armoured glass’, to *Panther*, a type of tank from World War II. ‘Sometimes, a mistake leads to a great discovery; *Panther Glass* also has to do with this idea of ferocity and transparency, of fiercely laying bare, and Heiner Müller’s theatre is very much like that.’ A theatre that is, on the other hand, ‘feline in a certain sense’, insofar as ‘it does not let itself be grasped; we never fully understand it.’

‘One thing that also motivated us to return to Heiner Müller was that he was an author who witnessed a great political transformation in the world,’ recalls Igor Gandra. ‘The idea of great tectonic movements in geopolitical terms and of how subjectivity and artistic creation manifest themselves in this context also seemed relevant to us today. Things are not the same or even similar, but I believe we are also living through times of great transformation in the general organisation of world power, and it is also interesting to return to Müller in this context.’ The barricade, he cites as an example, could either evoke a scene from that time, or a scene in today’s Minneapolis or Tehran.

In the kaleidoscope featured in this performance—which returns to the stage on 5 March in Montemor-o-Novo, then in Lisbon at the end of May, as part of the International Puppet and Animated Forms Festival (FIMFA), and finally in Porto in October—each audience member will end up going on ‘a rather individual journey,’ between the original references they detect and the ‘other things that resonate within us.’

‘You want me to talk about myself? Who is this me you speak of? Who am I?’—these are questions that echo repeatedly throughout the performance. What kind of Heiner Müller rises from the shards of today?