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Bryce Lease

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Adapting Stig Dagerman's *German Autumn*: An Interview with Anna Takanen and Stig Hansén

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Abstract

In the Lilla scenen of Uppsala Stadsteater (City Theatre), a haunting echo of the past emerged, meticulously stitched from the pages of Stig Dagerman's raw recounting of post-war Germany, *German Autumn*, a series of articles for the newspaper *Expressen* collected as a book published in 1947 that has never been out of print. Dagerman was considered a wunderkind of the Swedish literary scene that included writers Erik Lindegren and Karl Vennberg. While many of Dagerman's literary works and plays have been staged, this is the first theatrical adaptation of *German Autumn*. The adaptation is less a homage to Dagerman than a critical engagement with his reflections on the immediate aftermath of the Second World War in Germany – referred to by Harald Jähner as the 'Time of Wolves' – often pushed aside in hushed tones and shameful silences. Director, Anna Takanen, and dramatist and journalist, Stig Hansén, have taken up the demanding task of adapting a work without the usual fictional scaffolding, crafting a cohesive narrative tapestry out of Dagerman's travel essays.¹ In this interview, Bryce Lease

discusses the adaptation with Takanen and Hansén about their exploration of loss, redemption, guilt, shame, and humour in a landscape laid waste by war.

Bryce Lease: It is the 100th anniversary of the birth of Stig Dagerman. Could you tell me about the choice to create a stage adaptation of his collection of journalistic essays, *German Autumn*, about his time travelling around postwar Germany. I'm really curious about choosing such a difficult book that does not have a fictional or linear narrative.

Stig Hansén: Yes, I've been interested in that kind of reporting for a long time. Anna and I started to talk about Dagerman a couple of years ago, without thinking about the 100th anniversary in particular. We read *German Autumn* again and we saw that maybe we could do something on the stage with it. Then, we got in touch with Dagerman's daughter, Lo, to discuss the possibility. Most of his works have already been adapted as a movie or radio play, except this one. We were a bit surprised, so we checked it out.

Anna Takanen: There have been reports, you know, that have been done in theatre, for example, *Voices from Chernobyl* by Svetlana Alexievich.² Pieces that are taken from real situations and from

1. For a review of this production, please see: Bryce Lease, "German Autumn" at the Uppsala Stadsteater, *The Theatre Times*, September 20, 2023, <https://thetheatretimes.com/german-autumn-at-the-uppsala-stadsteater/>.

2. See "Voices from Chernobyl" – Adaptation of the book by Nobel winning author Svetlana Alexievich, *The Theatre Times*, June 25, 2017, <https://thetheatretimes.com/voices-chernobyl-adaptation-book-nobel-winning-author-svetlana-alexievich/>.

journalistic reports – and I think that is because theatre is a place for witnessing. It is not, I would say, *documentary theatre* going on in Europe, but there is something going on within many groups like Rimini Protokoll and Gob Squad, who are working with documentary material. And in a way this is a documentary material, though it's not from today, but still, we have a connection with some kind of documentary material that Dagerman took and made into a literary reportage form. I have seen lots of performances like this and I've been also working with interviews as inspiration for contemporary play writing. I have made four performances that have been based on interviews with people on contemporary questions that writers have then developed into plays. When Stig showed me *German Autumn*, I could see we have voices of the witnesses. It was a process from that point about how to make it happen on stage.

10 years ago now, we worked on a play which was based on a trial by a man here in Sweden called Göran Lindberg. He was a big police chief, one of the highest one in Sweden. And it turned out that he was a predator. He was working with women's rights in his police career, but then it turned out that he was an abuser. So we took the trial testimony from him from the court, and then Stig wrote a piece from that.

SH: We took all the interrogation material and all the questions from the victims from him, but then we got to the point where I wanted to write more about it, but I couldn't get the whole picture. And then Anna said, 'Well, if you use a more fictional form, based on the truth, how can you then make it into something else?'

AT: When you make a dramatisation of a book, then you have a storyline or you have something which has been talked about or a film that has an obvious dramaturgy. *German Autumn* [Tysk Host] was made up of 13 essays, and this offers a theatrical freedom, to work with material that does not have a clear line. And then we talked also about Strindberg's *Dream Play*, which also has someone arriving to investigate the 'temperature', of how it is with humans. Dagerman is such a Cicero, someone who combines compassion with intellectual brightness and also has a literary quality. I've been working for 30 years as an actor and a director and I believe that language is a very important thing when it comes to the stage. It makes the actors come alive. It makes me as a director become clear. The language embodies the storytelling. This is what all great playwrights know something about.

SH: When you study the way Dagerman writes and the way he worked in Germany, he works very much

like an ordinary journalist. What is the price of the coffee? I mean, he takes all those facts, and then he uses all the tools from fiction writing when he reports it, so it's a very sophisticated kind of journalism. And the thing is, he's so young, he's only 23. The book is always in print, and it's been translated into many languages. In Germany, it's been translated at least three times. So, even in Germany, they read about what he saw during those two months in 1946 and they learn something from it (See [Image 1](#)).

AT: The process with our play has really been that Stig has been writing and I've been reading and working as a dramaturg. We have discussed it and we've tried it out, and we also had readings with the actors at a very early stage. It's been a process work, because Stig also has very strong language in his own writing. Simon Reithner, who plays Dagerman, was receiving new lines two days before the premiere. This has been a search for the script within the script of the script. I think that lots of new written dramas are like that, that we have to remember that it's going to be on stage. This is what Shakespeare knew – that it's going to be alive, it's not only 'readable' material.

SH: I write books and I'm always on my own. This was such a nice process: to see that something might look good on paper, but it doesn't work on stage. How can I redo it? That's been going on for months now.

AT: And it can also difficult sometimes. What is to be made and what is the core of the performance? Because the performance needs to stand on its own artistic – would you say like, building?

BL: Is there something about this adaptation that you have seen as the core of your project?

AT: The core of the project was to investigate the suffering of the guilty. How do we do that on stage without diminishing the guilt? And I mean, we have that in the Greeks as well. Theatre can be very cruel. We can work with characters that poke their own eyes out and kill their own mother and father. But still, of course, this is a postwar story, the meaninglessness afterward.

I am a daughter of a Finnish war child and I've been writing a book and making performances about that. My grandfather was shot during the war with the Russians and this is why my father was sent to Sweden.³ It was a very, very painful history for the

3. The 'Winter War' (1939–40) is also known as the Russo-Finnish War. The Soviet Union, fearing Finland would allow itself to be used as a base from which enemies could attack during the Second World War, invaded the country on 30 November 1939. Finland was forced to sign the Treaty of Moscow on 12 March 1940, which ceded 11% of its territory to the Soviet Union.



Image 1. Dagerman arrives in postwar Germany in 1946. Photo by Sören Vilks. *German Autumn* directed by Anna Takanen, adapted by Stig Hansén, based on the book by Stig Dagerman. Produced by Uppsala Stadsteater, Sweden, 2023.

family, the change of language and the experience of exile. I said, it takes four generations for a war to go out of a family. And then somebody said to me, no, you are too positive – it takes seven or eleven generations. This was what was important: peace does not just arrive one day and then everything goes well and everybody's happy. It takes a long, long, long time to become a resourceful society or a resourceful human being, because what war is doing, it's really killing us all for generations.

BL: These questions around the suffering of the guilty are interesting. Before I came over to Sweden, I was looking at different people writing about these questions, like Hannah Arendt and the Mitscherlichs. What other texts were you reading as you prepared the performance?

AT: We had a number of professors come into the rehearsal process, looking at German history, at philosophy and aesthetics in war. And then we had also, of course, books that we were reading about this like Hannah Arendt and Noam Chomsky and John Pilger and Martha Gellhorn. I'm educated in theatre that is also a learning process. You learn more about it through reading, but there are also

people that are investigating these things right now, and it was very helpful for the actors and for us all to speak with them. Ann-Judith Rabenschlag, lecturer in contemporary German history, came to talk to us about this time period in Germany from 1945 to 1949, which Harald Jähner called the 'Time of the Wolves'. She said as a historian she wants to work with facts, and we have lots of facts until 1945 and after 1949, but we don't have so many facts in this period, so there are still missing points.

We all learned a lot more about the complex situation – of course there is the question of guilt, and there were about 75 million Germans at this time and half of them were refugees in the wrong place. How do we think about guilt in relation to suffering and displacement?

SH: My background is why I'm so affected by this story on an emotional level – I'm half German, and my mother came here after the war. Every summer I was in Germany and so I got the war with me as I grew up. My grandpa was in a Russian camp for years and when he came back after the war, he was like a non-living person. And my mother, she was

seven when the war started and I mean, I've heard all those stories and therefore I think it's so interesting the way Dagerman tackles the war.

In the book, everyone tells him this must be the worst you've ever seen. And he says, 'No, I've seen worse'. But everyone thinks that where they live must be the worst place. So he gets in touch with those questions: how do you deal with everyday life after war? I mean during the war they could eat, after the war, when the peace came, they started to suffer. How to deal with some of the big moral questions? In Sweden, we let the Nazis go through our country but in Norway and Denmark where there was resistance they had to pay the price. Dagerman meets a woman and she says, Well, be my guest, write about the war for the Swedish people who don't know anything about the war. So he says, I'm going take Germany back to Sweden. That's what he wanted to do. Most of the people who went to Germany after the war to report wrote more about the political game play, while Dagerman was really down with the people in the basement. If you look at

his notebooks, it's very interesting. All the details from this poverty, from the suffering.

AT: Everyone at this time hated the Germans. This is what they talk about in the play too – the whole world hates us. It is interesting that Dagerman was married to a German woman who was a refugee, so he had German family, his sons and his father-in-law. He had never been outside of Sweden when he went to Germany, but he had a Germany in Sweden. The editor of *Expressen* said that we're going to send him out because he is an 'innocent', having never been outside the country, and he spoke German.

SH: If you look at his notebook, sometimes he was writing in German, and sometimes it's in Swedish. He doesn't know quite what language to use.

BL: Dagerman really deals with the complexity of the spectrum of German experience and guilt, as well as issues of class and the distribution of resources after the war. He meets people who are in the basement as well as people who are living in a villa, people who have access to gardens and live outside of the city as well as those who lived in the bombed-out tenements. I was really curious about the dramaturgical decision



Image 2. The German Chorus in *German Autumn* at the Uppsala Stadstheater (2023). Photo by Sören Vilks.

to make a German Chorus, because you were thinking to some extent about individuals, but also collective experiences (See [Image 2](#)). Could you say a little bit about this choice?

SH: When you look at the 13 different stories that he has, almost all of them are very concrete, about the way people live, so on and so forth. But every now and then he also draws a bigger arc across everything where he discusses the elections. It's not strange that people don't think about politics, they think about food. You get that through the very concrete things, and he meets this author who tells him, 'Well, I live a good life, why should I care about people who live a bad life? If they had only shut up, they wouldn't have any problems. In 100 years from now we will know what went on, but today why should we worry?' So, he brings in all these different aspects of everyday life.

AT: But why the Chorus? I would say it was because we had a discussion of the Greeks and also because of Dagerman's reporting, like Stig says. He talked about the German people, the German people in Hamburg, the German people in another city. Then we have a theatrical form for the German people. And it was also because as a director I did not want to have this kind of ordinary drama with actors simply changing costumes in a seamless way between characters. I knew quite well what kind of actors I was going to work with, and I know that they could do a wonderful chorus piece together. (Turning to Stig) And I know that when you wrote also you talked about the chorus representing Germany in a wider perspective.

SH: So they *are* Germany, when they say look at us, everything is broken – whatever it is they say, they are Germany. This comes from more than just themselves.

AT: They are part of the people – the people's voice.

SH: And that's why we needed one story to follow all the way around from the book and the rest of the stories could come in from the side. With these stories, we played with their placement – does it fit here, is this a good rhythm? That's the process we were talking about in the final months.

AT: But I would say that the chorus work is something that we have worked with in theatre for, I don't know, 2000 years. It's a part of the theatre to work with a chorus. And also to allow for the actor to openly change character. I've always loved that I can see the transformation of an actor on stage. It's not happening, you know,

when an actor leaves the stage and then comes in as somebody else. I love to see how the actor transforms and how a whole range of characters, ages, and experiences can go through the body of an actor. You can be representative as the chorus and then you go into a part and then we can see these little changes in the shoulder or in the voice and it's happening in front of our eyes. Theatre is a transformative art form happening in the body of somebody. It's very physical.

SH: Everyone was on the stage most of the time.

AT: Yes, we have been rehearsing with everybody in the room all the time. And this is how we've been working, with improvisation. I said nobody will leave the space. So this decision was made quite early: Stig Dagerman should be on stage, the Chorus should be on stage. it's the decision that was made quite early. That Dagerman should be on stage. The choir should be on stage, different characters from the stories should be on stage. This also came out of the letters Dagerman wrote home. In one letter to his wife he wrote that in the last hours in Berlin he was invited to a woman's house and it was the most important meeting for Dagerman, because she was the first unofficial person that invited him. During the half an hour he spent in her home the whole of Germany was there, because she was trading things, and this is where he encounters this painting she has, which is about longing.

BL: Yes, and we see this painting in the set. The set reminded me at the beginning of Tadeusz Kantor – the bare wood, the rusted metal, the old wheelbarrow, the suitcases. So I thought there was this visual language that helped us to see the destruction of the world through these objects. But the actors were also building, so we have the reconstruction process throughout.

AT: Kantor inspired us, also Artaud, and Anselm Kiefer. I said to our set designer, Tobias Hagström Ståhl, that I want to have very concrete material, steel, wood, concrete, that it should be as heavy as it is, that it should be real work for the actors. We have to build something, we have to make it happen, and it should be real, sweaty work; but it also needed to have references of Second World War, the colours of it, and the constant rain. The grey and the brown colours also helped us to find the language for the weather and that we are in a place that we have to reconstruct.

SH: Those two months that Dagerman was in Germany, it was very cold. It was very rainy. People

lived down in the ruins with water up to their feet, and then they would go outside and it would be raining.

AT: Tobias is also a light designer, and we made a very early decision that the space should somehow be an outdoor-indoor space and so the light is able to have a big influence on the space. So it's not like there is a fourth wall.

BL: You created a palimpsest – the structure keeps growing through the reconstruction process and then we see the anti-German warning appear that was communicated to the Allied forces ('Be on your Guard. Don't fraternise with Germans'). Later, the actors cover this over with an idealised painting of mountains and a woman looking out at a lake (See [Image 3](#)). Her back is turned to us, so we cannot see her face or her expression.

AT: It is a Norwegian painter that Tobias found. He said, 'This for me is a picture of what the Germans longed for, but couldn't reach, so it is also a "false" picture'.

SH: Heimat. The vision of a bright future. But you know the story about this teacher who

Dagerman comes to visit in the book – it is only one and a half pages. It's a very small piece, but we liked that so we built it up and gave more and more material to that story along the way.

AT: And why the painting is really important is that this is also a question of how you visualise such an important object on stage. She could have been standing with a small painting or she could have shown him a painting and it could have been somehow realistic. We wanted to make a strong visualisation of the end of the play, representing both a false dream but also a dream that was important for her to believe in. Even though she's not a Nazi. You know, this woman is a Polish refugee. She's a victim, but still she's a part of a dream.

BL: For me, the painting is part of the reconstruction, which begs a question about what kind of society is being created in postwar Germany.

AT: And this is why it is important that Dagerman takes a part of this painting down at the end of the show – that it doesn't end being 'solved'. So, where does it go? We don't really



Image 3. Dagerman stands in front of the painting depicting an idyllic landscape that covers over the sign: 'Be on your Guard. Don't fraternize with Germans'. Photo by Sören Vilks.

know. In 1946, much was still unknown and it took years to uncover and understand the extent of the Holocaust and its terrible consequences that still affect us today. The silence of the post-war trauma is a hard-to-heal wound. We didn't want to be sentimental – there are no easy answers to very difficult questions.

BL: The other element that's haunting is the music. You have this solo musician playing multiple instruments in a corner of the stage. Was the musician also in the devising process?

AT: His name is Simon Steensland and we have worked together almost 30 years. The first collaboration was in 1995, so he has worked on lots of pieces that I have directed. He's not always on stage, but he's always in the process. And he's this kind of musician that is more than a musician. He's a dramaturg in a way also. He follows rehearsals, goes home and creates and comes back, writing his pieces by hand. He's also a theatrical leader of a very famous free group here in Sweden. Since its inception in 2000, Simon has run *moment:teater* in Stockholm. He is a true theatre musician, even though he's also playing contemporary music. It has been a privilege to have him there, because he's also part of this live moment. We are not only making documentary theatre, we're working with expanding our art form.

BL: Dagerman speaks about the dark humour he encounters on his travels, and I noticed the audience laughing at several moments. What was your approach to humour and its role in telling this story?

AT: We discussed this – being a war child, and, Stig, we have discussed this also with your German family – there is some kind of raw humour. And of course, this is, this is –

SH: It's a way of surviving.

AT: It's a way of way of surviving and it's a way of using energy. I think when it comes to theatre, the tragic comical version is the only version that is somehow true. You know we are not living in black and white. Everything happens at the same time and this is what makes theatre delicate – we are working with a theatrical tradition that has certain tools. And we know that if people should feel real sorrow,

sorrow and laughter comes from the same point. So we have to be very brave when it comes to putting these elements together within ourselves to an audience and the audience will respond. But how do you make an audience become alive? When they come in and they sit down, we have to make them come to the room, to be a part of us, to be in dialogue. And I think the humour is important – it's okay to feel, there are no right or wrong feelings. You know, I remember when I was in a play by Suzanne Osten and we were making the performance in Montreal called *The Girl, the Mother and the Garbage*, and the audience started to laugh. There was one woman in the audience who became so angry that people were laughing because it was about surviving a childhood with a schizophrenic mother. And of course this mother, she was also mean and hilarious. And this is how I think also the common room with an audience and humour and tragedy should work. It's not obvious that people who feel sorrow will cry, some can laugh. This can make you feel more open and finally they can start to cry, because you get moved. All the actors in our ensemble have access to both. And I strongly believe that the audience is clever enough to grasp the different levels and to make their own analyses.

SH: And you see it in the book too. He's dealing with these problems all the time. What a crazy world, what an upside down world. He says, I have to go home so I can write about this. I need to get a bit of distance to it. Because while I'm here, I can't write about it. When he returns to Sweden he writes those 13 stories rather quickly.

AT: You know, Dagerman wrote a lot of theatre. He worked as a director and he talked about the figure of the joker. He understood the role of humour. I think that theatre was really his second home.

Notes on Contributor

Bryce Lease is Professor of Theatre & Performance Studies and Head of Knowledge Exchange at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.