



## Ssst!

Theatre with objects  
for children aged 2 +

**The curtains open** to a clownish couple. The pockets of their trousers and jackets are of endless depths and they manage to conjure the most amazing things out of them. Pockets of such size also have their secrets, some of which even the twocomedians didn't know about: A tiny white rabbit. Not a usual rabbit but one of the kind normally living under a magician's hat. The rabbit appears and disappears on its own terms.

What are we supposed to do with this surprise guest? With hardly anything but a great sense of humor, some tricks, an electric guitar and musical themes by Franz Schubert, the audience is being taken on a trip into fantasy. Under the masterly hands of florschütz & döhnert, the tiny becomes grandiose, the meaningless unique and the stage a cosmos where anything might happen..



„Companies such as florschütz & döhnert have much to teach about the imaginative possibilities of theatre.“

*Sunday Herald, 16 May 2010*

Theatre company florschütz & döhnert is based in Berlin, Germany, and tours around the world. Artists Melanie Florschütz and Michael Döhnert have been working together since 1996: Melanie studied the art of puppetry in Stuttgart, Germany; while Michael Döhnert is a composer, guitarist and singer.

At the centre of florschütz & döhnert’s productions is the idea of the actor as author. In their numerous productions for children they always seek a synthesis of the music, the various means of expression of puppet theatre, and human acting. The subject of the play determines the theatrical form it will take, always aiming for poetry and diversity.

Shows for children aged 2+

**Ssst !** (2012)

**Mr & Mrs Sommerflügel** (2010)

**Rawums (:)** (2007),

Winner of the IKARUS Award 2008 for an extraordinary play for young audiences in Berlin and invited to the festival 10. AugenblickMal! as one of ten best shows of the year 2009 in whole Germany

**Hare Moon Hare Night** (2004)

New show for children aged 4+

**A hole in the air and everywhere** 2015)

## Rabbit in the pocket

„Ssst!“ is the name of the half-hour piece, the second show in Bern by the duo after „Rawums (:)" was shown three years ago, and it picks up the little ones at the circus: a little bit of slapstick, some clownish acting and some magic (show) as we know it. But then, after finding a handkerchief in a trouser pocket, an enchanting fantasy begins to develop – with a white rabbit that keeps the human world on its toes and that finally wants to travel to the moon below a little table.

You can see all that and still you cannot because Michael Döhnert and Melanie Florschütz know how to use the little equipment they have very effectively and artfully, just as well as they deal with the children's imagination. It is the same with the drums you hear although Döhnert does not play them. Or with the little rabbit that manages to escape gravity by its own force through high jump training – though it still remains in Florschütz' hands.

So it is puppet and object theatre; without words, very refined. And somehow already post-dramatic: Here the action on stage shows and reveals the means and methods by which it is being constructed.

*Daniel Di Falco in Bund, Daily Newspaper of the city Bern in Suisse, 17.1.2014*

## Simply experience

### The festival „theater 2+“ at SCHAUBUDE BERLIN

Melanie Florschütz and Michael Döhnert are pioneers on the field of theatre for the very young. They are opening the festival with their production „Ssst !“ And the title fits perfectly. It stands for volatility and the quick, non-verbal communication of two gentle clowns. Their acting space is marked as a bright circle of light bordered by movable panels of fabric. The actors squint through the curtain. They don't have red noses, but still, a child cries out: „Clown!“ The two actors smile bashfully. They bob their knees to the rhythm of some tender music.

A quiet beginning – but everyone felt the spark! Now, one of them beats the drum, she lets a sugar cube fall out of the rim of her hat into a cup. It makes „ping“ three times. At the fourth time a child says quite loudly: „Down!“ The sugar cube jumps. To the roll of drums the woman conjures white handkerchiefs out of bottomless trouser pockets. Suddenly a white rabbit jumps out. A beautiful animation with a piece of cloth! The two clowns are on their knees in front of the white rabbit. What shall they do? Does it want to eat, drink, sleep? With a white rabbit you can dream so well. With few things, humor and music the two comedians create a magic world.

*Barbara Fuchs in double, Magazine for Puppet- and Object-theatre 1/2013; 27*

## A white rabbit for Reims Scène d'Europe

The play begins in the foyer. A good mood spreads through the auditorium immediately: Melanie Florschütz und Michael Döhnert welcome their audience and invite them to enter the venue. The stage design is amazing: One surprise is followed by the next, with hardly any material used. Great effect is being reached by the use of the music and... a white rabbit that jumps out of Melanie's pockets, in and out, here and there, like jumping out of a magician's hat. A rabbit made out of a simple white handkerchief, as volatile as a dream, it appears, disappears, flies. „You don't have to manipulate it much“, says Melanie „it moves almost by its own because of its material. This tender being easily establishes direct contact to the children.“

That is indeed true, you are immediately being drawn into the poetry, and the shiny eyes of the children show that there is magic at work. At the end of the 30-minute play, when the two actors get their applause, a little girl asks: „And where is the rabbit?“ One last time, it jumps out of the pocket and bows on top of the actress' hat.

Voilà! The shows have enchanted the children. Each time the audience was cheered by the charme of... a handkerchief in the shape of a white rabbit and two talented players.

*L'union L'Ardenennais, Publié 4/12/12 Champagne Ardenne Picardis*

## 8th Festival Ré-Génération

### Petits et grands petits at TNG, Lyon

The German group florschütz und döhnert presented „Ssst!“ a tender and clownesque play without words for very young children and their parents. In quite a charming way, the two comedians Michael Döhnert and Melanie Florschütz create an adventure of episodes around a little rabbit using only minimal objects, an electric guitar, a rope and a curtain. That doesn't sound like much, but with their grace and simplicity, the two players remind us of Zampanò and Gelsomina, the protagonists of Fellini's masterpiece La Strada.

*Andrea Genovese, BELVEDERE N.27, January 2014*

## Psst! Secrets of a White Rabbit review – enthralling handkerchief-bunny mime

### Barbican, London

Melanie Florschütz is a magnetically expressive performer in this excellent German mime show about a raggedy rabbit

Let's get one thing clear straight away: there are no real rabbits in Michael Döhnert and Melanie Florschütz's

children's show, *Psst! Secrets of a White Rabbit*. My four-year-old god-daughter Blue was, frankly, gutted when I broke this news. But once we bunny-hopped over this initial hurdle – and it took a lot of blustering chat about the magical power of the imagination – this German mime show (bear with me here) turned out to be a properly enchanting production.

The age recommendation for the show is two years plus so it is, by necessity, very simple. The rabbit in question is little more than a scrunched-up handkerchief, with a couple of stick-on beady eyes. The set is made up of a couple of suspended sheets, some scrappy props and a few battered-looking instruments, and the costumes look like they've been pulled from a dusty old attic. As I said, very simple – but enthralling from start to finish. Döhnert and Florschütz don't say a word throughout the show, although they do make a lot of silly noises. I think Blue would have been happy just to watch Florschütz's face for the entire half-hour; she is one of the gentlest and most expressive performers I've seen, and the kids adored her. Every time Florschütz giggles, the audience squawks in delight and, when her eyes open wide with mischief or wonder, the kids' mouths drop open. Honestly, if Florschütz had stood up in the middle of the show and motioned to the kids to follow her right out of the Barbican, we would have had a tough time holding them back.

The piece begins with some gentle clowning around until (finally!) the rabbit makes an appearance – and what a disappointment this raggedy little rabbit initially appears to be. Blue's face is a treat, as the fluffy creature of her dreams is replaced with a scrappy old handkerchief. I fear a massive meltdown is imminent – but the rabbit, aided by our two gentle clowns, begins to come to life. A cardboard box is opened, and a light switched on inside – and suddenly, this handkerchief rabbit has a home. A ladder appears, and Florschütz, mischief oozing from every pore, places the ladder so that it reaches right up to Döhnert's bum. Quietly and skilfully, the rabbit creeps up the ladder and disappears inside Döhnert's jacket. Later, a rope is pulled across the stage, and the rabbit – now happily nestled inside a bowler hat – sails across the ropes, which surge like the sea. Gradually, the rabbit grows in stature, and the modest space is filled with a life of little adventures. A drum is suspended above the stage, and the light shines through it in such a gentle way that it now looks like the moon. Everyone practically sighs in unison, soothed and happy, and a little bit in love with a handkerchief dressed as a rabbit.

*Miriam Gillinson, The Guardian. London, 31 October 2014*





## Melanie Florschütz in an e-mail interview with the journalist Barbara Fuchs, 2013

1. What was your first inspiration to make theatre for very young children?

In 2004, we made **Hase Hase Mond Hase Nacht** (Hare Moon Hare Night). Before that, for many years, we had been observing the younger brothers and sisters of the kids who came to see our plays for children aged 5 and older who had accompanied their siblings. I noticed that even the youngest children took an interest in theatre. But I also saw that after a certain amount of time (about half an hour maximum) and confronted with more severe conflicts, they would stop and drop out. So there was the mere wish to make theatre for very young children without any concrete ideas or examples. At that time in Germany, there weren't any plays for young children. It would start with plays for children aged 3 and older, and that would be reduced stories told in a linear way. It was impressive to see pieces of colleagues from France at Silvia Brenden's festival at the SCHAUBUDE Berlin in 1999 and at Agnès Défosse's Festival Premières Rencontres in 2004 near Paris. So many different artistic approaches and ways to make theatre!

And it became clear to me that each play is telling of the idea the artist has of children's understanding, what they understand and what not; that we as adults first of all deal with our ideas of little children. It is a political controversy to think about the value and the competence of a young child. At what point in life should a human being start to be taken seriously? Can you talk to people even if they are still not able to talk themselves? Our society is very much based on the written word. As if there was no other language than the one communicated through words.

2. What does doing that give to you personally?

Why do you continue doing it? What do the very young children give you that you do not get elsewhere?

Very young children are living the moment. The absolute "now". There is no earlier or later. We, as grown-ups, try very hard to get back to that quality. I am totally convinced that children are born with a universal understanding of the world. They want to live and survive and they want to do that now. I can admire that completely unromantically.

There is an artistic challenge to it: We are dealing with an audience that is reacting very directly and immediately, that has an unprejudiced perspective and that is refreshingly undisciplined. You don't experience that with any other audience. The presence of the audience is

pretty palpable!

You have to get out of your artistic glass-house and ask yourself some basic questions. The actions on stage have to tell of a necessity. L'art pour l'art does not interest most of the children after three minutes. How should we communicate the theatrical meaning of the event, of "We are watching theatre"? That question suggested to find a translation for all the naturalistic processes in the play. Looking for translations we are already in the middle of our profession as theatre-makers. We are looking for signs and codes for a piece about the world. The children are able to read and decipher these signs when they are used clearly enough. It is a unique communication happening in theatre, perceived with all the sensory organs. Every time, it is a challenge for us to tell a story beyond textual information. If the outcome is poetry, then it is a kind of condensation of all the thoughts we collected to a certain subject after saying good-bye to the invented ideas.

Despite all the association, theatre for very young children always needs concrete, tangible action. It is a very action-oriented theatre. "What is an interesting plot?" "When does an action on stage become interesting?" – That's what a great deal of our efforts are about. It is a kind of theatre that you cannot really make up completely beforehand because it unfolds through the action of doing it and it will only be complete when it gains shape through the experience of playing it and through the immediate reactions of the audience.

Where the dramatic composition is concerned, again and again we need to adjust it to the audience's response. Sometimes children are amused or scared at points of the play we would not have thought of as having that kind of potential. Sometimes it is just a question of changing the timing that makes it easier for the audience to understand our intentions and to make it become an event. Sometimes you need the courage to abolish everything you have in order to let your ideas get into a new order. We had been working at **Rawums (!)** over a time of two and a half years with three different versions. **Herr & Frau Sommerflügel** (Mr. and Mrs. Summerwing) we completely revised after 10 shows because we were not happy as players. In the new version our little animal stories became a circus. It is a beautiful work to keep fine-tuning and improving our plays until they seem right for us as artists and for the audience. Never before had I thought so much about the relationship artist – play – audience.

3. Is this a correct observation: Continuity with the aesthetic means? Music, a clear and simple stage, clownish elements, magic... the use of light, paper objects...

Puppets and objects always play an important part because I come from puppet theatre. We are not working with a certain kind of puppet, though. What we are most interested in is the relationship between the actor and the puppet, the object. The way a player deals with a puppet, how he or she brings it to life do already tell a lot.

Michael Döhnert is a musician and that definitely leaves a trace on the musicality of our pieces, be it through using live-music and sound concepts or the musical and choreographic rhythm of the dramatization. That did not come up initially by dealing with a specific audience. But working in theatre for very young children did indeed sharpen our perspective on all the elements of the play. This process generated artistic decisions: the transparency of the employment of our theatrical means is very important to us and it determines our acting. In our productions we always reflect the relationship between the making of and the effects of an illusion on stage. That is probably where our love for hand-made magic comes from. In other words, you can see the thread that is being pulled and for example opens a suitcase filled with light. Although we do show how things are being done that does not diminish the pleasure of the illusion - quite to the contrary, our visible effort is being rewarded by its effects. And sometimes I think you can indulge more in a tongue-in-cheek kind of illusion than in a well-hidden one...

We communicate with our audience in an associative language of images. The symbolic core, the abstraction of a stage decoration, a puppet or an object often enhances the audience's power of imagination. In our aesthetics we are striving for a simplicity that carries the highest possible complexity.

While developing **Ssst !** we directed our methods of work even more towards the exploration of visual events (thereby I also mean the capacity of the audience to not only recognize an image but also to complete it in their own imagination). The question „What do we want to tell?“ turned to „What is already telling what?“ - and how many clues are needed to exalt the imagination? A house that can be folded like a letter... A stage curtain that is moving around the actors... A white rabbit "born" out of a trouser pocket...

The rabbit is a chance hit in its creation out of a handkerchief. You can still sense the tender silk handkerchief in its essence. It is very fragile but a real character. The rabbit enters the world of the two clowns. Totally unexpected. The rabbit is there, it watches the actors who don't know what to do with it. Finally, the clowns create a little universe for the rabbit. And the more they do that, the more the rabbit comes to life and becomes part of the clowns' world.





**Ssst ! at international festivals:**

2015

Festival BABELUT Neerpelt, Belgium  
 Festival Kaolin & Barbotine Limoges, France  
 Festival Pépites, l'Art et les Tout-Petits Théâtre de la Guimbarde in Charleroi, Belgium  
 Festival Petits bonheurs Montréal, Canada  
 Festival Giocateatro Casa Teatro Ragazzi Turin, Italy

2014

Leselust Burghof Lörrach, Germany  
 Barbican London, United Kingdom  
 Festival Szene Bunte Wähne Horn, Austriche  
 Carré les Colonnes Saint-Medard-en-Jalles, France  
 Festival L'Art et les tout-petits, Théâtre Montagne Magique Brüssel, Belgium  
 Semaines petits enfance Très Tôt Théâtre Quimper, France  
 Festival des Rêveurs Eveillés Sevrans, France  
 Festival Régénération TNG Lyon, France

2013

Festival Sur un petit Nuage, Pessac France  
 Festival Festi Mômes Questembert, France  
 Festival 2 Turven Hoog Almere, Netherlands  
 Festival Starke Stücke Frankfurt am Main, Germany  
 Festival Meli`Môme Reims, France  
 Festival Petits et Grands Nantes, France  
 Westwind, 29. Kinder- und Jugendtheatertreffen NRW, Bonn, Germany

2012

Festival Scène d'Europe Reims, France  
 Traffo CarréRotondes Luxembourg, Luxembourg  
 Internat. Festival 2+ Schaubude Berlin, Germany





# Ssst!

Theatre for children aged 2 +

Idea, scenography, objects, play:  
 Michael Döhnert and Melanie Florschütz  
 Artistic collaboration:  
 Joachim Fleischer, Werner Hennrich, Hendrik Mannes  
 Music: Michael Döhnert  
 Costume designer: Adelheid Wieser  
 Scene painter: Wolf Dieckmann

Production: florschütz & döhnert  
 Co-Production: SCHAUBUDE BERLIN, BROTFABRIK Bonn,  
 Méli'môme / Festival Reims Scènes d'Europe  
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