

Good Passports Bad Passports

Let's get to know each other

Lernen wir uns kennen

*“Yes” is on the left-hand side,
“No” is on the right-hand side*

*“Ja” ist auf der linken Seite,
“Nein” ist auf der rechten Seite.*

*I speak German
I am a resident of this country*

*Ich spreche Deutsch
Ich bin Inländer*

I have a credit card

Ich habe eine Kreditkarte

I pay taxes

Ich zahle Steuern

I possess two different passports

Ich besitze zwei verschiedene Pässe

I have previously been convicted

Ich bin vorbestraft

I am a happy person

Ich bin glücklich

I love my home country

Ich liebe meine Heimat

I never lie

Ich lüge nie

I believe one day national borders won't exist

Ich glaube, irgendwann gibt es keine Landesgrenzen mehr

AND SO ON. Thus intones a disembodied male voice at the beginning of Helena Waldmann's 2017 dance production *Good Passports Bad Passports - a borderline experience* (*Gute Pässe Schlechte Pässe – eine Grenzerfahrung*). As the statements continue, a group of about thirty black-clad figures, male and female, assembles on the dimly lit stage and then begins to separate into opposing camps according to that decisive command—“‘Yes’ is on the left-hand side, ‘No’ is on the right-hand side.” Occasionally, one of the figures seems to change her mind and scurries across the stage, as if she is confused by the statements or worried she might be caught in a lie. This sorting process is interrupted only when a male figure emerges from each group and steps forward—one downstage left, the other downstage right—to perform a series of movements, which they announce one by one in their native tongues. The figure on the left speaks in German and performs impressive acrobatics in the manner of *nouveau*

cirque; the figure on the right speaks in English and performs graceful movements in the style of contemporary dance, which seem choreographed to derisively mimic his counterpart. Soon each figure is joined by other performers from his side of the stage to form two rival groups: three acrobats and four dancers. As the performance continues, the movements of the groups suggest encounters between different, often antagonistic, national cultures, including a sequence in which the dancers aggressively defend a line taped down the center of the stage from any trespass by the acrobats—even as the acrobats welcome the dancers to their side of the boundary. The small groups continually disperse and reform across the stage in a series of dramatic scenes, repeatedly evoking frontier crossings, border patrols, passport checks, and other aspects of the global migrant crisis. Eventually, after a particularly fraught encounter between a dancer and an acrobat, the rest of the cast (local volunteers from a variety of ethnic communities) reemerge from the wings and interlink arms to form a wall of bodies dividing the adversarial groups from one another. But when both groups start to push on the human barrier, it begins to rotate slowly around the center of the stage, gradually accelerating, as the performers lift their voices in a dissonant cry, until the centrifugal force disperses them across the entire performance space, and they all fall silent.

Waldmann describes her inspiration for the piece as the simple recognition that “good” passports provide their holders a freedom of movement that is denied to those who possess “bad” passports. Traveling with dancers and show crews from various parts of the world, she has frequently witnessed those with “bad” passports being delayed and subjected to intense questioning, while Waldmann, with her “good” German passport, was able to navigate the customs and immigration process with ease and expediency. Of course, she is not alone in such observations. In *Step across This Line*, for instance, Salman Rushdie describes a day spent at the immigration area of Heathrow airport, watching how passengers were treated by passport control officers: the one factor that seemed to make all the difference was the possession of a US passport, which enabled travelers to move quickly on their way, regardless of their ethnic features or presumed associations. He concludes that for “those to whom the world is closed, such openness is greatly to be desired. Those who assume that openness to be theirs by right perhaps value it less.” *Good Passports Bad Passports* provides a highly charged recognition of this basic duality.

In doing so, the dance production evokes the mounting importance of passport indexes, such as the one compiled by Henley & Partners (the self-described “Firm of Global Citizens”), which ranks travel documents “according to the number of destinations their holders can access without a prior visa.” In 2017, the Henley Passport Index ranked Germany at the top of its list (followed closely by Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Spain, and the United States), with the capability to travel to 176 nations visa-free, while Afghanistan could be found at the bottom (just behind Somalia, Syria, Pakistan, and Iraq), with just twenty-four nations opening their borders to its passport holders without a visa. An Afghan or Somali passport may assert both the personal and national identities of its holder, but it collapses them in a way that essentially imprisons the individual within her nation of origin. In effect, the list codifies the very sentiments that Rushdie expresses at the beginning of his book: that while his British passport

has “done its stuff efficiently and unobtrusively,” the Indian passport he held as a boy in the 1950s was “a paltry thing.” “Instead of offering the bearer a general open-sesame to anywhere in the world, it stated in grouchy bureaucratic language that it was only valid for travel to a specified—and distressingly short—list of countries.” The “bad” passport decrees that its holder will be waylaid, interrogated, possibly detained or turned back at airport checkpoints and border controls around the globe. If a “good” passport, under the current regime, is the key to unlocking the doors of international travel, providing freedom of movement and unfettered opportunity, then a “bad” passport locks away its holder, as the inmate of an “undesirable” national community, unwelcome in most of the wider world.

Good Passports Bad Passports ends by offering the image of a future beyond its titular dichotomy. When the statements of the spectral voice resume at the conclusion of the production, a new option is posed: “*I believe one day national borders won’t exist / Ich glaube, irgendwann gibt es keine Landesgrenzen mehr.*” With this prompt, the entire cast steps to the front of the stage and, for the first time, performs a gesture of unanimity as they interlock arms and gaze out into the audience. It is an arresting tableau. At the same time, however, the production has provided a visceral reminder to its spectators in Stuttgart, Bolzano, Beirut, Tel Aviv, and elsewhere that, for now, “good” passports provide bodies with security, mobility, opportunity, which is denied to the bodies of persons just as deserving as those with superior travel documents. It serves notice of the differential value of passports, often ignored by those who enjoy documents with significant economic and political value, even as it is sensed acutely by those who face overwhelming obstacles to travel and migration based on nothing more than their citizenship or country of origin. Even so, as the line of multi-ethnic, multi-generational bodies forms at the front of the stage, coming together in the semblance of a single global community, we also glimpse the possibility of a borderless world, where our current international system of separation, obstruction, and detention no longer holds. We see a sign, if only momentarily, of what Rushdie calls the “post-frontier,” which might just help us to imagine a new age of unrestricted movement.

Yet the vision of a world without borders may be far too utopian to expect in our geopolitical reality anytime soon. For the time being, the passport remains (and becomes continuously more) an object with immense political, personal, and financial significance, one that has created a global hierarchy of haves and have-nots, all subject to the little book that is presented at border crossings and airport checkpoints. More than ever, the rights we enjoy depend not just on the fact of our citizenship or our possession of a passport, but on the color of the passport, the seal on the cover, and the status of the issuing country in the international community. Our passport defines who we are in the geopolitical order, where we can travel, reside, work, and on and on. At present, there is little international effort dedicated to increasing hospitality across the sovereign nation-state system or seeking practical means to collapse the inequities in the international passport regime. The United Nations might proclaim that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including one’s own, and to return to one’s country,” but the fact of the matter is that not all passports are created equal or treated with equal respect.

It should not come as a surprise that, in such circumstances, a market for second passports has emerged and grown almost exponentially in the twenty-first century, as passport holders seek to enhance their status in the international system. Henley & Partners, along with other firms such as Sovereign Man and Nomad Capitalist, have emerged to advise their clients, usually high-net-worth businesspeople and investors looking for new prospects and tax breaks, on the various means to attain a new citizenship and a second passport. These methods include, of course, citizenship by ancestry and by naturalization, but also by investment, sometimes without ever having to step foot in the issuing country. For the price of a property purchase (starting at about \$150,000) and/or a government fee (starting at about \$15,000), depending on just how “good” the document is, individuals can acquire passports from small nations such as St. Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Cyprus, Vanuatu, and Comoros. There are significant financial barriers, then, to the attainment of “global citizenship,” just as there is obvious clout associated with the phrase “*I possess two different passports / Ich besitze zwei verschiedene Pässe*”. The precious books promise investors more political stability, or perhaps enhanced opportunity, though, as might be expected, these programs have often met with charges of corruption.

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