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Theatre and science collide in Berlin museum

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What happens when an experimental theatre troupe runs loose in Berlin's Natural History Museum? Daniel Miller suits up for a taxonomic safari in the urban jungle.

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The Germans have always had a passion for systems. In the 19th century, the Prussian academic Leopold von Ranke effectively invented the discipline of modern history with his ordered, methodical approach to the past. Even the German language – with its acrobatic yet orderly grammatical constructions – turns on the logic that each distinct, separate element should first be kept under control.

For a non-German, being dropped into this Teutonic system fetish is a bit like trying to land a Lufthansa jet in gale-force winds.

And so too is *Die Kunst des Sammelns*, or The Art of Collecting. The fruit of two years of work, the unique event brings together Julien Klein's experimental theatre group A Rose Is and the senior research staff of Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde. The show attempts to dramatize scientific collection while showing off many of the museum's less known eccentricities.

The whole event takes the form of a sort of pedagogical obstacle course, with visitors led through the museum by guides to a series of theatrical staging-points. These include a reconstructed 1834 lecture on fish by the polymath playwright George Büchner, a deadpan discussion of the bestiary of toys including jokes about a creature laying Kinder chocolate eggs, a talk on "arachno-fiction" by the spider expert Dr. Jason Dunlop, and a cello-accompanied fairy tale on how human mortality started with a slothful chameleon.

Sound bizarre? Sure, but absolutely engrossing too.

Thirty such scenes take place simultaneously over the course of a three-hour performance, the vast majority delivered by the museum's surprisingly game research staff. Their enthusiasm and humour throughout is remarkable. They're certainly nothing like my traditional image of the German professor mumbling his lecture notes from a manuscript positioned mere inches in front of his face. During the show it's easy to forget you're in own of the largest and most respected natural history institutions in the world and that its employees entertaining you are world-renowned experts in their fields.

The practice of producing theatrical shows in real-world locations as opposed to specialized venues has been an emerging trend in German theatre for some time now. Groups like Rimini Protokoll have led the way by putting on pieces in call-centres and truck stops.

But the concept works especially well at the Museum für Naturkunde, since the location is itself such an odd place. It simply teems with a whole host of strange curios – from Alexander von Humboldt's personal talking parrot to hundreds of crocodiles hanging from hooks – and it's the perfect setting for a show that uses the exhibits for a secret-life-of-the-institute vibe.

Nevertheless, the event proves that of all the odd animals that live on this earth, by far the most bizarre and peculiar are the humans themselves. At the end of the performance, following a short video clip in which you've witnessed them battling their way through a series of horror films, the assembled researchers strike portrait gallery poses alongside their very own totem animals.

The adventure ends with drinks in the cellar, where the pastiche riot grrl rock outfit "Taxotopia" starts kicking out the jams. "What did you call me?" the singer inquires, "Honey? Baby? What is my name?" As Nietzsche wrote: "Man is the animal, which is not yet defined."

On February 29, March 1, March 5-8 at 7 pm

Final show March 9 at 4pm

www.hum-die-kunst-des-sammelns.de

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