

JEANNE MARIE FABIENNE LOPATA

Jeanne and Mrs. Muskatnuss

or

The IFTR 2025 Volunteering Experience

A comedy in V Acts



Cologne

Medienbericht IFTR Congress 2025

(International Federation for Theatre Research)

University of Cologne

2025

Dramatis Personae

J e a n n e L o p a t a, *a Volunteer*

M a t h i l d e F r a n k, *an Organiser and Referent of the Volunteers*

J a n n e, *another Referent of the Volunteers*

M a l i n, *a Volunteer, Referent of the group 'Awareness'*

T h e o t h e r V o l u n t e e r s

T h e o t h e r T W S – M e m b e r s, *Members of the
'Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung' at the Schloss Wahn*

T h e D e l e g a t e s

M s. M u s k a t n u s s, *the beloved Delegate*

T h e W o r k s h o p L e a d e r, *a Delegate*

*The play takes place in Cologne, at the University. Pentecost 2025. It is
a holiday. Outside, the sky is blue and the weather is warm.*

Act I

Scene 1

First day of the Congress. The main square near Cologne University. Early morning. Jeanne enters with a suitcase, a crumpled campus map, and a half-empty coffee cup. She looks both exhausted and overwhelmed. Delegates bustle past with very professional lanyards, stacks of books and large bags.

JEANNE: Seven o'clock. *(looking at the map)* Campus... Campus... Where are you hiding, dear campus?

DELEGATE 1 : *(rushes past, muttering in French)* Encore un éclat de génie... Non mais c'est qui encore ces Allemands qui se lèvent à six heures du mat'... Ils ont intérêt à faire du bon café au moins, déjà qu'on peut pas manger du pain décent... *(To Jeanne, after seeing her lanyard)* Hé, vous là! Vous savez où c'est l'Université? Di Ounivèrztéte? Zee Youniversity?

JEANNE: Désolée, je cherche au...

DELEGATE 2: *(rushing by)* Hé ! Signora ! Sa dove si trova l'università?

JEANNE: Scusa me, ma non lo...

DELEGATE 3: *(coming by)* ¿Sabes dónde está la universidad?

JEANNE: Lo siento, no lo s...

DELEGATE 4: Hei, neiti! Tiedättekö, missä yliopisto on?

JEANNE : Valitan, en tied...

DELEGATE 5: Marama! O kila beka na vanua e tiko kina na univesiti?

JEANNE: Veivosoti, au sega ni kil...

DELEGATE 6: Merhaba bayan! Üniversitenin neredede olduğunu biliyor musunuz?

JEANNE: Üzgünüm, bilmiyorum...

DELEGATE 7: 大学がどこにあるかご存知ですか？

JEANNE : ごめんなさい、知らない...

DELEGATE 8: هل تعرفين أين تقع الجامعة؟! مرحباً آنسة!

JEANNE: آسفة، لا أعرف...

DELEGATES 1 TO 8: Marama ... Hé, vous là!... 大学... bayan ...Signora ! ...

مرحباً آنسة...Sa dove... Tiedättekö... l'Université... neredede olduğunu biliyo...

e tiko kina...ご存知です... si trova... هل تعرفين!

JEANNE: Au secouuuurs!!! Heeeelp!!!

A VOLUNTEER: (*approaches as she sees the crowd growing*) Ladies and gentlemen, please follow me this way!

Scene 2

JEANNE: (*staying by herself*) What for an idea I had?!

You know, it all began rather innocently. I was doing my internship at the Schloss Wahn, in the TWS team, for my Bachelor in German and French literature. February, March, April... cold, damp Cologne and a castle full of archives, dust and funny people speaking about funny things... I was only supposed to be assisting the TWS-members, and one thing led to another.

At first, I was writing little articles for the weekly TWS newsletter, nothing extraordinary, just slices of Cologne life: bread, beer, food... The city on a plate, really. Did you read my article about the Būdchen? I hope you did. Never mind. Then I thought, why not go further? Why not be *in* the adventure, instead of simply describing it from outside? So, I joined as a volunteer. I was glad to extend the internship in a way. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. Not just a job, but a chance, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to step into something large-scale, international, intercultural. A carnival of ideas, people and encounters. It was very exciting.

The first meetings were almost timid. A handful of us sitting together, trying to imagine what this Congress would become. Collecting ideas, debating the meaning of carnival, metamorphosis, subversion, even *ekstasis*. How do you create a space where everyone feels comfortable, and where problems become not obstacles, but occasions for creativity?

I joined the Awareness group rather late, but I was glad of it. A smaller circle, a chance to contribute, to bring my own perspective. And I must say: the freedom and trust we were given was remarkable. We weren't hovered over, we were free to act. And in that freedom, we found energy.

Of course, I was stressed. Who wouldn't be? Stressed, excited, curious, all at once. And I must admit, I was apprehensive. I thought: the organisation is not perfect. We'll be overrun, overcrowded, completely overwhelmed. Can we really manage? Will we manage? Or will we drown in cables, programmes, and lost professors asking for toilets in

seven different languages? But still, beneath the worry, there was a spark. Because even if everything fell into chaos, I knew I would learn something. And that made it worth it.

Now, I'm here, not even on the campus but already weighed down by the burden of endless questions... Do I know where the University is? I'm not even sure. Let's hope this sacrifice will be worth it. But as I speak, my dearest comrades are waiting for me!

Scene 3

Jeanne enters the Volunteer-Room, running in, breathless.

VOLUNTEER 1: You're late!

JEANNE: I got lost.

VOLUNTEER 2: Welcome to Cologne. Quick, before we begin: have you by any chance seen the VGA cable?

JEANNE: Sorry, the what?

All the Volunteers stares at her in unison, dramatically.

VOLUNTEER 2: The VGA cable!

They all look around wildly, desperate, searching for the cable. They run through the whole room, moving every item in order to find it. Until Mathilde Frank enters. Everyone stops, pretending they are not frantic. She looks at them intrigued.

MATHILDE FRANK: Is everything all right here?

Next to her, a Delegate, Ms. Muskatnuss, whom Mathilde Frank is helping to find her room. Ms. Muskatnuss is balancing a high pile of papers and books, almost taller than herself. Jeanne, who

had not moved, stares, wide-eyed, fascinated by the Delegate. The Delegate does not see what is happening, immersed into her notes for her next keynote.

JEANNE: *(to herself)* An angel of research... The queen of theatre research! The Holy Scholar in person!

MS. MUSKATNUSS: *(passing by, struggling, muffling from under the pile)* This is fine. Everything is fine.

Some pieces of paper fall out of the pile. Jeanne tries to gather them, as does Ms. Muskatnuss. Their hands touch. Jeanne blushes and loses her composure.

MS. MUSKATNUSS: *(without noticing)* Thank you, Miss... *She does not get any answer. Jeanne keeps stammering.* Thank you, you, whoever you are. Now, I've got to go to my presentation about "Towards an epistemocritical and intercultural-deconstructivist reinterpretation of infra-theatrical stage practices in the forgotten dramaturgies of 19th-century rural Luxembourg: a comparative, performative and quasi-phenomenological study of the peripheral gestures of silent extras in a para-liturgical context."

She exits quickly. Once she is gone, everyone returns to what they have to do, taking their place where needed. Jeanne goes to the Seminargebäude.

DELEGATE 9: *(passing by)* Excuse me... where are the toilets?

Interlude I

CHORUS OF SCHOLARS

From many lands we gather, hand in hand,
To share our thoughts, to question and expand.
Yet in confusion first we find our place,
A carnival of minds, a human space.

Act II

The first day of the Congress is over. Surprisingly, everyone survived. Jeanne did not face any major unforeseen problems. She now knows perfectly well the location of each coffee station and restroom at the University. She did not go to any conference sessions yet, but she hopes to do so in the next few days.

Scene 1

Second day of the Congress. Jeanne's student room. An alarm clock rings violently at 6 a.m. Jeanne groans, buries her head under the pillow, then falls out of bed with a thud. She lies on the floor for a moment, making incomprehensible noises. Then, she tries to get dressed, still on the floor. She struggles with socks, gets them on mismatched and puts her T-shirt on backwards. Finally, she manages to crawl to the food cupboard. She pours instant coffee into her coffee cup and drinks it directly, then realises she has forgotten the water. She eats it nonetheless.

Scene 2

On the campus. Jeanne has a coffee cup in her hand.

DELEGATE 10: Excuse me! Is this the keynote room?

JEANNE: (*points randomly*) Down that way.

DELEGATE 11 (*appears instantly*): Excuse me! Is this the toilet?

JEANNE (*points in the same direction, sipping coffee*): Also down that way.

DELEGATE 11: (*alarmed*) Oh dear...

More Delegates crowd around.

DELEGATE 12: Where is the "Performance as Protest" workshop?

DELEGATE 13: How can I connect my laptop to the projector?

DELEGATE 14: Could you type the Wi-Fi password for me with my Cyrillic keyboard?

DELEGATE 15: Where is the coffee station?

DELEGATE 16: Help! My PowerPoint has disappeared!

JEANNE: Well... Let's handle the situation step by...

VOLUNTEER 3: (*running by*) Where's the VGA cable?

JEANNE: Still missing, I believe. The Kulturministerium has launched an investigation.

VOLUNTEER 3: Then I'll pantomime the presentation!

JEANNE: How wonderful. (*To the Delegates*) This way, on the left. Use this HDMI cable. No I cannot, I need a Roman Keyboard. Please, try opening PowerPoint once again.

The Delegates go back to their occupations. At this moment, Jeanne notices piles of books and papers on a table. Jeanne gets closer, thinking they need to be tied up. But as she gets closer she hears scratching noises, like someone writing frantically on a piece of paper. She discovers Ms. Muskatnuss hidden by the books.

JEANNE: Ms. Dr. Muskatnuss, what an honour to make your acquaintance! I am so glad I can meet you!

MS. MUSKATNUSS: Nice to meet you.

JEANNE: I have much consideration for your work! I studied some of your articles in class. They inspired me to write my bachelor's thesis on a play by Milan Kundera! Would you possibly have a minute to spare so that we could discuss my research topic?

MS. MUSKATNUSS: Did you read Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*?

JEANNE: I must confess I haven't.

MS. MUSKATNUSS: Then, come to me again when you have. I don't have time right now. I have to finish my presentation quickly for tomorrow on "Hermeneutic-transversal deconstruction of spectral appearance modalities in unpublished stage directions from Breton plays (1872-1874): a diachronic, inter-ontological, post-spectatorial, neo-microhistorical and vaguely meteorological study of the invisible archives of parish theatre". And could you please be so kind as to take these documents back to the library?

Jeanne exits with the books.

Interlude II

CHORUS OF SCHOLARS

The walls are bare, the minds not yet awake,

Yet soon the spirit stirs, the bonds we make.

A fragile dawn, where languages converge,

And out of difference, new worlds emerge.

Act III

The second day is over. Jeanne kept looking for the Ms. Muskatnuss but did not see her. She plans to invite her today for a dance at the closing Party so that they can speak about her paper. She thinks the romance of 'Guten Morgen Barbarossaplat' would encourage Ms. Muskatnuss to take her as a co-worker later.

Third day. Early morning, first presentations of the day. A seminar room with an open door on the floor. Chairs in a circle. A whiteboard with "Performance as Research" scrawled across it. A guitar next to it. Jeanne stands on the floor waiting for the late Delegates to arrive, in case they need directions. She is dragged in by the Workshop Leader.

WORKSHOP LEADER: (*clapping hands*) Wonderful! Today we shall not speak about theory. We shall *embody* it. You there!

JEANNE: Me?

WORKSHOP LEADER: Yes, you. Perfect. Come here. What's your name?

JEANNE: Volunteer.

WORKSHOP LEADER: Excellent. Here... Hold this, Volunteer.

He hands her a large, ridiculous pinecone stuck to a string.

JEANNE: Thank you...?

WORKSHOP LEADER: Not just a pinecone. A nose, a *mask*! Place it on your face! And be your character. No! You are no character! Be

you! The pinecone is part of your body! You are the pinecone! Who are you?

JEANNE: The pinecone?

WORKSHOP LEADER: No! You are no pinecone! You are Volunteer the Clown! The pinecone is no pinecone, the pinecone is part of you! ... Now! Improvise a song. In rhyme. In English. Go on!

JEANNE: *(puts her coffee cup aside. Awkwardly, out of tune)*

I came to serve with lanyard, help, and smile,

But never thought I'd clown in such a style.

With pinecone face I stumble, rhyme, and groan,

A tragic hero armed with pine alone.

The room erupts in laughter. The Delegates clap. One takes frantic notes: "Radical clowning in Germany, 2025."

WORKSHOP LEADER: Brilliant! The pinecone is a metaphor for postcolonial resistance!

DELEGATE 15: Or perhaps the pinecone represents surveillance in the digital age!

DELEGATE 16: No, no, it's clearly a feminist critique of botany!

The debate escalates. Jeanne stands frozen, pinecone still on her face. Suddenly, Ms. Muskatnuss enters at the back, curious. Jeanne notices and panics, trying to remove the pinecone, but it is stuck in her hair.

JEANNE: *(struggling)* Oh no, oh no...

MS. MUSKATNUSS: *(applauds warmly)* That was remarkable. Truly subversive! *Looks at her watch, raises an eyebrow and exits quickly.*

JEANNE: This is over now. I will never be more than Volunteer the

Pinecone clown. Ms. Muskatnuss will never want to talk to me. All my chances are gone.

Interlude III

CHORUS OF SCHOLARS

In art we find the mirror of the age,
In clowning too, resistance takes the stage.
The laughter heals, the body speaks its part,
A language fierce, political, of heart.

Act IV

Fourth day of the Congress. The conference info desk.

DELEGATE 17: Can you translate my keynote into Swahili by lunch?

JEANNE: I'm not sure...

VOLUNTEER 4: *(on the other side of the scene)* We need the VGA cable or the keynote dies!

VOLUNTEER 5: If the keynote dies, the whole conference dies!

VOLUNTEER 6: Oh Gott!

MATHILDE FRANK: *(listened to them)* No! Please, calm down. If there is no VGA cable, the Delegates will do without. But before it comes to that, we have to quest. The VGA cable *must be* out there.

ALL TEAM MEMBERS: *(chant, like a prophecy)* THE VGA CABLE!

They quest.

VOLUNTEER 6: *(holding a microphone)* Behold! The sacred cord!

MATHILDE FRANK: That's for karaoke. Next.

VOLUNTEER 4: *(holding a lanyard, triumphant)* At last!

VOLUNTEER 6: That's mine, you idiot!

VOLUNTEER 5: *(holding a shoelace)* I found it!

MATHILDE FRANK: You sure?

VOLUNTEER 4: *(holding a bratwurst)* Is this it?

MATHILDE FRANK: Did I really hire you?

Amidst the chaos, Jeanne returns to the info desk and finds a folded

note lying there. She freezes, heart pounding. Music swells slightly. She recognises the handwriting of Ms. Muskatnuss.

JEANNE: (*whispers*) A note... Could it be...? My dearest angel, at least...
She opens it with trembling hands and reads aloud.

JEANNE: (*softly, romantic tone*) "Bibliography: Bhabha, Butler, Derrida..."

Pause. She stares in horror. Music cuts abruptly.

Suddenly, Ms. Muskatnuss enters, passing by with a group of scholars. Jeanne hides the note behind her back, flustered.

MS. MUSKATNUSS: (*smiles warmly*) Oh, you again. Excellent work with the pinecone yesterday. Very inspiring.

JEANNE: (*miserable*) All my pleasure.

MS. MUSKATNUSS: Do you study theatre? Or are you a comedian?

JEANNE: Actually, I do. And I play sometimes in my hometown. I am working on my bachelor's dissertation and afterwards maybe I'll become a scholar like you.

MS. MUSKATNUSS: (*already being pulled away by the other scholars*) That sounds really nice. I'm sorry I have to go to do my presentation on "From meaningful insignificance to the overdetermination of nothingness for a transdisciplinary and constructivist-structuralist hermeneutics of marginal practices involving empty chairs on stage: A micro-historical study of the mise en abyme of unoccupied furniture in amateur theatre companies in rural south-western Bavaria (1878–1923), between performative silence, affective memory and forgotten materiality". See you at the closing party! *Exits.*

Jeanne is happy.

VOLUNTEER 5: We found... nothing.

VOLUNTEER 6: The VGA cable may never have existed.

JEANNE: Then I am free! No cable, no congress. No congress, no madness! And I can talk to Ms. Muskatnuss!

VOLUNTEER 4: (*gasps*) Don't you understand? Without the VGA cable, there can be no PowerPoints. Without PowerPoints... there can be no research.

Volunteers 4-5-6, horrified, collapse in melodramatic despair. Jeanne takes out Lehmann's book and reads it from the beginning, intensively.

Interlude IV

CHORUS OF SCHOLARS

Yet in the storm of questions, out of place,

We find a rhythm, hear a human grace.

The borders fall, the voices intertwine,

A fellowship of thought, a grand design.

Act V

Final day of the Congress. In a sunny garden. Cologne's carnival music drifts in faintly. The Delegates dance in their conference lanyards, dressed as Harlequin, Pierrot and other traditional fanciful figures. The TWS and Volunteer Team enters, equally exhausted but festive.

VOLUNTEER 7: It's over. Almost.

VOLUNTEER 8: Thank God, soon we can have a 14 hour night's sleep.

JEANNE: I'm kind of sad it's already the end... (*She notices Ms. Muskatnuss passing by. Confidently:*) Hey, Ms. Muskatnuss! How are you?

MS. MUSKATNUSS: Wonderfully well! All my presentations went perfectly and I met very interesting people.

JEANNE: I'm glad to hear it. Same for me! By the way, I read the reference you gave me. Wonderful! It will be a great support for my paper!

MS. MUSKATNUSS: That's a good thing! I learnt a few days ago that one of my co-worker was about to end our collaboration because he had been given a chair in Ireland. I'm looking for someone to take his place. Do you want to join in? I'd be glad to have you as a dynamic young researcher, curious and very skilled at clowning!

JEANNE: I would love that!

Suddenly, Volunteer 9 enters from the side, triumphantly holding

something above his head. Everyone stops and looks at him.

VOLUNTEER 9: (*yelling*) I FOUND IT!!!

He reveals a long black thick wire, glowing as if holy. The Volunteers fall to their knees in awe. Delegates gasp. Someone faints. Jeanne blinks in disbelief.

JEANNE: That's it? That's... the... the VGA cable?

VOLUNTEER 9: (*solemn*) This is it. The Congress is saved.

Delegates break into wild applause and begin to chant rhythmically:

DELEGATES, TWS-TEAM and VOLUNTEERS: (*chanting*) VGA! VGA! VGA!
Viva Colonia! Viva Colonia! Viva Colonia!

Everyone cheers. Confetti. Fireworks. Music gets loud. Jeanne finally drinks her coffee.

Interlude V

CHORUS OF SCHOLARS

And so we part, yet richer than before,
United still, though scattered evermore.
A carnival of minds in Cologne's embrace,
Where strangers met and each one found a place.
A carnival of thought, of joy, of song,
Where all who came did find they too belong.

Bishnupriya's words did so foretell,
That IFTR would become a Carnival,
A Congress born of life in common ways,
Where all could share, and all could celebrate.

Not merely talk of cooperation there,
But built upon it, in each fleeting act:
Between the people, hand in hand, we moved,
Between the TWS and those who came to learn,
Between the nations—fifty in number,
Between the young and old in careful steps,
Between the artists' hearts and scholars' minds,
Between the scholars now and those to come.

No single tongue was shared by all, yet still
A common speech arose: culture, desire,
The wish to work, to move, to build, to grow,
Together, though divided by the world.

This gathering spoke with gentle protest's voice,
Against the wars, the tyrants, and the pain,
Non-violent, yet burning with resolve,
And deeply, in the soul, it left its mark.

Epilog

At home, back in France, months after the crazy experience, Jeanne is trying to write her report:

JEANNE: Months have passed, and here I am, scribbling in this report, trying to pin down the memories, the sparks, the highlights of IFTR. Where do I even begin? What does Mathilde wish to read? Let's pretend I actually worked on this report and not just had fun...

I.

The presentations, first. They were so queer! In the best sense. So different from the conservative teaching I used to receive in France — in prep class, mind you, where everything was neat and polished. Here? Nothing predictable. Everything alive, divergent, questioning. The New Scholars Forums, especially, those were something else. For me, a student, they were liberating. They helped me desanctify the research process. I could speak freely, stumble, ask, doubt. I could see that scholars are normal people, same as me, nothing to be intimidated by. And then, being asked, as German students, about our research methods in theatre or culture courses... It felt intimate, grounding, like someone was talking to us as if we were the same. A moment where we are not teachers, scholars and students, but all researchers, acting for one unique goal. And meeting some of them more privately, like the scholar from Côte d'Ivoire — oh, what a moment! Discovering her work on the *yourou*, wrestling with

translation, helping her move her ideas from French to English... It felt like a bridge - a tiny, very trembling bridge - over this vast river of knowledge. Then there was the Australian scholar, so generous, giving me her references because her work resonated with my own dissertation... such a simple gesture, yet it opened up an exchange of thought, a dialogue I will carry with me. And performance as research! That was completely unexpected. Discovering some political and social aspects of clowning in Europe, confronting pedagogic exercises I had never dared imagine, and — yes — playing a clown with pinecones on my face, freestyling rap in English, in front of twenty researchers I had never met... The absurdity of it! The thrill! What I enjoyed most, more than the presentations themselves, was that it was never just presentations. Always dialogues. Always exchanges. Eyes meeting, ideas bouncing, laughter spilling over, questions opening doors instead of closing them. Yes. That, I think, is what I will remember. Not just the words, but the living, breathing, messy, joyous conversation that is theatre research, at its brilliant, unexpected best.

II.

But my Congress wasn't only about meeting scholars and listening to conferences. It was also 'work' for me, I mean, participating in the project at my level, within the greatest team I could have had. The mornings, for example. I can still feel them, each one beginning with our ritual: Coffee first, always. Then a quick debrief of the day before, a hasty recount of triumphs, minor disasters, and the small victories that no one else would notice. And then brainstorming.

Always brainstorming. Brainstorming is very important. How to make things better, smoother, and so on. But the volunteer team, it was a real community. A tiny, perfect, sometimes chaotic community of solidarity. Laughter spilling across the room. Shared joyful tiredness. And the unforgettable solidarity. Everyone inspired, engaged and always smiling. And then, of course, the help of Mathilde Frank and Janne and each Volunteer and each TWS-member. Thank you all! Simple words, yet they carry the weight of every last-minute panic, every tiny act of patience and care that kept the whole circus upright. Yes. That is maybe what I remember most. Not the schedule, not the logistics, not the list of tasks. But the people. The ritual. The laughter. The warmth, the solidarity. The feeling of being part of something bigger than oneself, even if only for a fleeting, brilliant week. Building something with people we just met. And enjoying them, wanting to go to the party with them, to see them afterwards, after everything is over.

III.

I think maybe Mathilde or whoever is going to read this also wants to know what I learnt during the Congress as a Volunteer. Let's see... What has IFTR given me? That's for sure, the wonderful chance to meet new people — researchers, yes, but also other students. Students with whom I share certain interests even if we come from very different horizons. It was like being part of a conversation that stretched beyond language, beyond expectation, beyond borders. I also began to understand, in a way I hadn't before, what it actually

means to be a scholar. Not the abstract notion, the title, the prestige, but the practice, the work, the daily negotiation of ideas and methods, of doubts and discoveries. And even if my understanding is still somewhat superficial, it is enough to make me feel part of something larger, something moving. Confidence, then. I have more of it now. Strange, isn't it? That speaking with others, even when we don't share the same mother tongue, can feel natural, possible, less terrifying. I carry that with me, in every conversation, every discussion, every question I dare to ask. The experience was invaluable. Truly professional, yet human, playful, demanding, inspiring. It has deepened my interest in theatre research, a field I once assumed to be very small, almost non-existent. And yet, here it is, big, vibrant, global, challenging, thrilling. So much so that it inspired me to write my Bachelor's dissertation — yes, my Bachelorarbeit in German Studies — on theatre. Who knew that one week could set off an idea that grows into a whole project? And I hope, I very much hope, to take part in IFTR again. To volunteer, to learn, to meet, who knows? Perhaps one day, I will even work in the cultural field, perhaps in theatre, within an international organisation, carrying these lessons, these connections, these sparks of joy and curiosity into a professional life I can barely imagine now but one that feels suddenly possible. Yes. IFTR gave me knowledge, but more than that, it gave me courage, curiosity, and a sense that the world of theatre, and of research, is not small at all. It is alive, beyond any frontiers. And I am, somehow, alive in it too.

She takes her pen and begins to write.

(End)

JEANNE LOPATA
University of Cologne
IFTR Congress 2025