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Our 1989

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In a new stage production, a chorus of speakers from around the world shared accounts of their own lives and hopes the year the Berlin Wall came down.

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Homan Wesa in the Afghanistan section of Rimini Protokoll's *House of Hopes* at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, 2026

Reviewed:

House of Hopes
a performance by Rimini Protokoll at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, October 1–November 9, 2026

On October 7, 1989, East Germany celebrated its fortieth anniversary with a military parade down Karl-Marx-Allee—an old-fashioned display of state power as protests against Communist rule spread across the country. Opponents of the regime were galled by the phalanxes of goose-stepping soldiers and columns of tanks. That same day, representatives of East Berlin's theaters gathered secretly in the side foyer of the Volksbühne, which had opened in 1914 as part of a socialist effort to break the upper-class monopoly on education and the arts.

Built in a rounded, modernist style, the Volksbühne famously promoted a program of "Art to the People," a sentiment that should have been in line with the country's ideals. Instead it was in this theater for the people that opposition against the people's government coalesced, helping to lead to the huge November 4 demonstration on Alexanderplatz, when hundreds of thousands turned out to demand change. Hanging over the protests was the possibility of a "Chinese solution," as people at the time put it: the East German government had supported Beijing's bloody suppression of the Tiananmen demonstrations that June, and many feared it might respond similarly at home.

But events unfolded more peacefully. Under pressure from the Soviet Union to begin bold reforms, East Berlin's leaders were reluctant to unleash their security forces, especially after the international outcry over the Tiananmen massacre. And so just five days after the huge protests the Berlin Wall was opened, and a few months later the country's first free election resulted in a win for parties that promised speedy reunification with West Germany. Less than a year after the meeting in the Volksbühne, East Germany ceased to exist. These events helped create the Western legend of 1989 as a turning point when freedom and democracy suddenly seemed to be spreading around the globe.

Thirty-seven years later the Volksbühne is returning to the events of 1989, this time in the form of a coproduction with the influential Berlin-based theater collective Rimini Protokoll. The result is *House of Hopes*, an ambitious production that tells intersecting stories of how that year played out around the world. The production builds on Rimini Protokoll's long-standing practice of having nonprofessional performers—"experts of the everyday"—tell their own stories to audiences in immersive, unorthodox theatrical settings. Earlier works, such as *100% City* and *Situation Rooms*, used that method to explore demography and the global arms trade; *House of Hopes* turns it toward historical memory, allowing personal experiences of the same year to coexist and collide.

Set in ten countries—Afghanistan, Chile, China, Hungary, Japan, Namibia, Poland, Romania, South Korea, and the United States—the stories complicate the conventional Western narrative of 1989. The most obvious counterpoint to Berlin is Beijing, but the year was critical in many other countries as well, often in unexpected or indirect ways. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan preceded civil war and eventually Taliban rule; South Korea's democratization left the chaebol with enormous economic influence; Namibia was casting off South African rule, but one party has ruled the country ever since; some of the leaders of the opposition to Communist rule that year in Hungary and Poland later embraced right-wing nationalism (a historical twist that resonated strongly during the

performance with the rise of the far-right AfD party in Germany). The stories aren't meant merely as excuses to relive that heady moment or as exercises in historical revisionism but rather as new vantage points from which to see our post–cold war world.

At the start of each staging of *House of Hopes*, organizers divide the audience randomly into ten groups. Each of those groups experiences seven of the stories, which the cast performs in different parts of the theater: the foyer, stage, wings, balconies. (The Volksbühne calls it a *Hausbegehung*, or a walk-through of the building.) Each story lasts about fifteen minutes before the groups set off to find their next location. Often they can see one another, but they wear headphones that isolate each narrator's story.

Rimini Protokoll's trick is to make these histories something more than testimony. Again and again spectators find themselves enlisted in someone else's past, directed to take part in that performance—often without understanding how their actions will appear from elsewhere in the building. On the night I attended I heard a Chilean woman explain that she participated in protests against Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, which in 1989 resulted in a series of laws that codified the country's return to democracy. She invited us to imitate her gestures, for example by shaking our fists in the air. At the same time, down by the stage, the Afghan narrator told his group to turn around and watch us—an unruly crowd, he said, threatening impending violence.

The autobiographical stories have a certain bittersweet humor. The Hungarian storyteller told of growing up in the period after the 1956 uprising, a failure that scarred the country for decades. After 1989 her parents decided to go into business and had to decide what would sell well in the turbulent 1990s. With crime rising, they hit upon the idea of car alarms—and so the family home became a store, with a workshop in the basement, office staff on the second floor, and the tasks of daily life sandwiched in between. The audience recreated the soundtrack of her childhood, shaking keyrings, clicking analog phones, and rustling papers to a beat she conducted. Looking back, she was amazed at her parents' ability to survive but glad she didn't have to muster the same resourcefulness: "Unlike my parents, I didn't have to adapt; I could leave."

The narrator of the Iranian story stood in the foyer in front of a giant collage of photos: arid mountains, fighter jets, ancient stone sculptures, dictators, mullahs, childhood fun, and Bollywood films. Growing up under Ayatollah Khomeini's rule, she remembered, she returned repeatedly to one action-adventure film in particular, the Hindi megahit *Sholay*, watching it so often that she memorized the dance sequences. She was mostly fatherless, because her dad had been arrested for shaving his beard and was only released in order to

serve on the front after Iraq invaded Iran. In 1989 Khomeini died, filling much of the country with “omid,” hope for change.

That hope was dashed, and the speaker, like most of the performers, went abroad. She told us that she calls home often, with her mother offering her one piece of advice: keep dancing. Then the woman left the foyer for a few moments until a man walked up to the collage and pulled it back—it was only a curtain, and behind it was a bank of windows opening onto the dark streets of Berlin. A narrow spotlight lit the woman out on the street as she danced the *Sholay* choreography from her childhood.

By then another pattern had emerged. Many of these accounts are also stories of diaspora: memories of a time and place that cannot be recovered, recounted by people who now find themselves in Berlin. The Iranian performer’s childhood dance made that displacement almost literal.

Nowhere did the distance between past and present feel more consequential than in the story of Beijing’s 1989. The speaker had spent much of her life inside the system whose history she was about to describe. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, she and millions of other young people from the cities were sent to the countryside to labor with the peasants. After Mao’s death she returned to the city, studied, and eventually landed a job in the central government.

Bahar Kaygusuz

Vera Jonas in the Hungary section of Rimini Protokoll’s *House of Hopes* at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, 2026

When the student-led protests began in the spring of 1989, she regularly walked over to watch the demonstrations and soak in the atmosphere. One of her relatives was a hunger-striker on Tiananmen Square, where she visited him. Behind her a huge screen displayed the interior of the Great Hall of the People, the monumental structure on the square that serves as one of the symbolic centers of Chinese state power. As she talked, other images slowly appeared overlaid onto it: photos of demonstrators and banners calling for democracy.

“We begin to dream. Some want the leaders to step down. Our dream did not come true.”

The screen suddenly turned white.

"You can find pictures of what happened on Tiananmen on the Internet, but I can't show it."

When she returned to her government work she was criticized for attending the protests, even if she was mainly an observer. She wrote self-criticisms for months and finally checked herself into a clinic to escape the pressure. "Many leave China," she went on.

> But I don't run away. I stay. I still believe that our economic reforms can help the people. Ten years later I lose my hope, and I quit my job. The economy booms but not democracy.
>
> You may wonder what happened to my relative, the one who was a hunger-striker on Tiananmen Square. He became a top manager at a computer company. He's very rich now and doesn't talk about what happened on the square. And I can only talk about it here under a fake name.

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