

## Art And Politics And The Zürcher Theater Spektakel

Maria Magdalena Schwaegermann talks with Margaret Hamilton

Founded in 1980, the Zürcher Theater Spektakel is an annual festival held over eighteen days in August on the shores of Lake Zurich. Each year the festival presents an international program of established and emerging companies and artists that has included The Wooster Group (USA), La Fura dels Baus (Spain), Christoph Marthaler (Switzerland), Robert Lepage (Canada), Saburo Teshigawara (Japan), Les Ballets C. de la B (Belgium), Societas Raffaello Sanzio (Italy), Richard Foreman (USA), William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet Company (South Africa), Akko Theatre Company (Israel), Ong Ken Seng (Singapore), Guillermo Gomez-Peña (Mexico), Guy Cassiers (Belgium) and the Oskaras Koršunovas Theatre (Lithuania).

Maria Magdalena Schwaegermann has been the Artistic Director of the festival since 2002, and the 2007 festival will be her last festival. Under Schwaegermann's direction the festival has presented a significant number of Australian projects including *Yuè Ling Jié* by the Elision Ensemble, *Soft* by Back to Back Theatre, the Australian Museum of Modern Oddities, Acrobat, *Blood Links* by William Yang, the *Australian Body* series of performances featuring work by Lucy Guerin, Ros Warby, Rosalind Crisp and Helen Herbertson, and the Australian Indonesia collaboration *The Theft of Sita*. That is, arguably, the largest contingent of contemporary Australian performing arts recently presented in a non-English speaking European context not dependent upon a Federal government cultural promotion and funding initiative targeting Switzerland.

Schwaegermann first visited Australia in 1998 and since that time has been a key advocate of Australian artists through forums such as the Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM) as a member of its Board of Directors [1]. In October last year Schwaegermann returned to Australia to select local content for her upcoming festival. At the Melbourne festival I spoke to her about the political content of the 26<sup>th</sup> Zürcher Theater Spektakel.

**Margaret Hamilton:** This year's festival included the Turkish company 5. Sokak Tiyatrosu's music theatre production *Ashura* based on the never ending exodus in Anatolia and the displacement of millions of Turks and Greeks in 1927; La Patogallina's theatre piece on the revolt of the saltpetre mine workers in Chile at the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *1907. El año de la flor negra*; the periodically banned Chinese artist Zhang Xian's Zuhe Niao with the video dance performance *Tongue's Memory of Home*; Heiner Reber, Frank Krug and Lawrence Wallen's *Walking in the Limits* that focuses on the political and personal situation of a couple months before the fall of the Berlin Wall; *Schwarze Jungfrauen* by Feridun Zaimoglu, Günther Senkel and Neco Çelik, a documentary theatre piece based on interviews with five neo-Muslim women living in Germany; and, as part of the contemporary film series *On Life and Survival* screenings of Lav Diaz's *Heremias* (Philippines), Leonard Retel

Helmrich's *Promised Paradise* (Indonesia) and Rithy Panh's *Les artistes du théâtre brûlé* (Cambodia). *On Life and Survival* explored the possibility of overcoming violence through the cultural concepts of remembrance, reconciliation and dignity in countries with a history of colonial rule, terror regimes and military dictatorship that are currently experiencing the rise of fundamentalism. In addition, to coincide with a number of the performances the festival ran public discussions and post-performance talks, including 'Time for art, time for politics: Contemporary opinions from China' and 'Subversive Infiltration: a new vision of film through theatre' that examined the way in which artists in South East Asia are engaging with violence and terror in that region.

Are there any other political projects that stand out for you in the context of the festival?

**Maria Magdalena Schwaegermann:** Yes, the Attendants' Gallery project curated by Belgian artists [2]. They chose five actors from the edges of Europe, from Portugal, Ireland, Lapland in Sweden, Rumania and ex-Yugoslavia and let them tell their family stories. This guides us into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which, of course, is a century of war, flight and exile.

**MH:** For almost twenty years you have been producing and presenting international theatre in a European context, initially as the Deputy Director of the Hebbel Theater in Berlin and since 2002 as the Artistic Director of the Zürcher Theater Spektakel. In that time you have programmed Jochen Gerz, Steve Reich, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Jan Fabre, Robert Wilson etc and a younger generation of theatre artists such as the polish director Krzysztof Warlikowski and the US writer/director Richard Maxwell. You now live between Berlin and Zurich, but Berlin reflects your formative experience in the theatre industry. History, politics and memory are inescapable in Berlin. How has that affected your approach to programming a festival?

**MMS:** Up until now I have avoided talking about politics in the theatre. On the one hand it's hardly new that everything we mount for the public has political power. I actually used to shy away from the concept because since the student revolution in 1968 it has always implied a kind of pre-definition as to 'conservative' or 'liberal'. This time is over. We don't think in these blocks anymore; blocks that inferred that you were convinced that you knew which one was the superior system. Today theatre is political in another way, provided that international artists use the platform of theatre to debate topical questions, problems, anxieties and visions of the future, as well as to deal with conflicts. I don't have a definition that really grasps what is 'political' in the theatre today. I prefer to use the word responsibility. In this sense I try to put together a program, where different positions to the current social situation in the world are examined in a critical and controversial manner. This can take on a very political expression. Ideally, you manage what a critic writing about the Turkish project *Ashura* called the transference of the political into the

poetic realm. It's a question of showing the public different positions, also unfamiliar positions, and cultural differences and in doing so, taking away reservations and anxieties in order to create openness, curiosity, and at best tolerance.

**MH:** Does theatre or performance have an ethical responsibility?

**MMS:** Initially, I also hesitate to simply to say 'yes', because this concept has been misused throughout German history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, yes, today we once again understand that we have an ethical responsibility.

**MH:** In an article on Jan Fabre titled 'aesthetics of poison' the German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann pointed out that: 'Pain, violence, death, and the resultant feelings of fear and compassion, have since antiquity been at the centre of *pleasure in tragic themes* ... Theatre is not a matter of contemplative observation; it carries its audience along with it, on a journey which could actually change that audience. The realm of appearance is not cut off from the living world, it is a part of it' (1993: 92). In the current political climate and in light of the treatment of politics and violence by the media, how effective do you think performance is in a festival context as a vehicle of change? Is it possible for performance and/or the festival context to have an impact in a reality brimming with social and political conflicts and social injustice?

**MMS:** I think it *can* potentially be. I don't know how effective it is. What I try to do is to set up a program that at least provides the opportunity to open people's minds. I'm not there to change people's positions. But what I eventually can do is make them curious – by the way it's nice to see the poster here for the Melbourne festival and there's the caption 'Be curious' – this is an essential offer to the audience. 'Be curious' means be open, accept other positions and try to learn from that – don't be afraid. Maybe in the end it will change something. In order to reach the public some artists resort to radical forms that go as far as the threshold of pain. As long as they do this to draw our attention to, expose or change a deplorable state of affairs that's ok.

**MH:** Your current festival stages geographically and historically specific instances of revolt and massacre in 20<sup>th</sup> century history in the performances by La Patogallina and 5. Sokak Tiyatrosu. These performances are presented in conjunction with contemporary examples of oppression and terrorism. Can you explain your curatorial approach? What were the main philosophical and ethical issues explored in this year's festival?

**MMS:** I would like to answer this difficult question very simply. There are artists and companies who take on current problems. Fear of the foreign and unknown, cultural incomprehension and misunderstanding, violence, war,

expulsion, torture and loss belong to these problems. In terms of putting together a program I am first and foremost directed to work that is already produced. However, as a festival maker one can also support and accompany productions, and what is also extremely important is the festival as a place of production. An example of this is the Turkish performance already mentioned, *Ashura*. 5. Sokak Tiyatrosu from Istanbul began to work on *Ashura* six years ago. The subject: endless expulsion, flight, exodus and ethnic cleansing in Anatolia – a huge proposal. There were still a lot of weaknesses in terms of form and content as the production under the title *Neos Kosmos* had its premier four years ago in Zurich. We supported the group to carry on working on such an important subject with the Dutch partner Jan Zoet from Rotterdamse Schouwburg. In the four years after that a concentrated version developed that is known internationally as *Ashura* and deals with this complex subject convincingly. The critic then appropriately praised the ingenious way in which the piece successfully translated the political into the poetic realm. That became a *leitmotif* for me. Why do we have to always be confronted with these terrible problems in the theatre? This is the question that is often put to me and I answer it with the following: firstly, because these problems exist and secondly, because 'I' have the same potential as the perpetrator of suffering, pain and misery. In 'me' also lies dormant the potential to murder. Thanks to 'my' education and cultural integration I have had the opportunity to learn to hold these possibilities in check. Among other things theatre is the place where I can recognise this and in doing so, learn understanding. That is not to accept the negative, the abyss, but to understand and – given the circumstances – to recognise the origins of aggression earlier on in order to stop, to prevent them. That's what I mean by the responsibility I spoke of at the start [of the interview]. I guess that is what one may call catharsis.

**MH:** To clarify the approach you take to curating the festival, did you aim to present history as a web of conflict – religious, class and gender – in this year's festival, or to transpose historical moments of great political and ethical stress in a particular way?

**MMS:** As I mentioned the festival is mainly made up of productions that develop in an international context. The artists choose the themes and endeavour to find a theatrical language that is important to them. As a curator I see from four hundred to five hundred productions a year. That constitutes a good overview of topical and urgent issues, and I choose out of them. And yes, I feel a responsibility to introduce projects in the context of a contemporary international theatre festival that take on current problems, and not to cater to a craving for shallow and amusing fare.

**MH:** How did the audience respond to the political content of the festival?

**MMS:** The public reacts decidedly positively. The theatres are full, the applause is outstanding and the public keeps coming back. Obviously we are

capturing the nerve of the time. But it is critics from conservative newspapers who in times of growing pressure for market share that tend to use populist arguments against an outspoken and high profile program. That can be observed world wide. Populism is increasing everywhere, as it is in the media, and seems to kowtow to the public. In fact, I often have the impression that the public does not want that, that it is far more sophisticated than it gets credit for.

**MH:** You have one of the most important newspapers in the world reporting on the festival, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

**MMS:** They are extremely positive and they would like to push the festival further into serious issues, while the local press have enormous problems with that.

**MH:** Do you have any sense of why the local press have a problem with political productions?

**MMS:** As I mentioned populism is increasing everywhere, as well as in Switzerland. Moreover, Switzerland always wanted to be neutral and independent. That is no longer possible after the fall of the great power blocks and in a Europe that is coming together – unlike before. That creates disquiet and apprehension. In such a climate populism falls on fruitful soil.

**MH:** For the first time this year's festival held public discussions directly after the performances and I understand this was very successful. Can you elaborate on the role these forums play with regard to the spectator's interaction with the performances?

**MMS:** Over the past few years the public has responded superbly to the challenges of the festival; challenges that are not always easy. They are open and curious. It's therefore not surprising that the public discussions, which offer the possibility to talk to and to put questions to the artists, or for the public to express itself critically, will be accepted very positively.

**MH:** I'm interested in extending the classic discussion of the actor's mask to the spectator. Is it possible for performance to challenge the numerous types of masks that hide the indifference of a spectator or does the medium of performance in fact enable the audience to absolve itself of responsibility?

**MMS:** It's a difficult question and I immediately have the image of the fourth episode of *Tragedia Endogonia* by Societas Raffaello Sanzio in mind [3].

There is this extremely violent situation in the white marble room, where two policemen hit a naked person. In a very artificial way they cover the body of the naked person with stage-blood and they beat him with rubber clubs. The iconography, the image of the beaten and bloody person immediately triggers the feeling of pain. And although artificial or perhaps because completely artificial, the violence and pain appears doubly hard. In addition, Castellucci works with sound that acoustically heightens the blow. The scene is in effect unbearably violent. For me as a spectator, the entire time it is clear that it's about the act. Perhaps that's why I tolerate the image to the bitter end. The timing of this brilliant performance group from Italy is grandiose. I am just about able to endure this scene, that is, just long enough so that the image is burnt into my brain. I cannot imagine that a single spectator that witnesses this scene would not react in the future, if they saw a violent scene like this one in reality. It's to be hoped that the spectator senses more acutely the origin and act of violence in the future and attempts to prevent it. I am also referring to the violence in one's own head, the violence I am capable of. Perhaps it is not so easy to exert this kind of violence in the future as I have lived through the pain.

**MH:** From Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy and more precisely *The Eumenides*, there is a long tradition of discourse on justice embedded in theatre history. How do you view the role of international festivals in relation to this tradition?

**MMS:** The question of justice is naturally fundamental when we are compelled to see current problems treated controversially on stage. There remains one difficulty: we are speaking about international festivals, that is, we are showing productions from a host of countries and as a consequence, have to lean that the concept of justice can be very different. That also shows the power and importance of theatre: it is the platform where we can or rather have to grapple with the definition of a concept like justice.

**MH:** Brecht said, 'One can help to make the institutions of the state more contradictory and thereby more capable of development' (in Jameson, 1998: 30). The Zürcher Theater Festival was originally conceived as an alternative to the State theatre system. Do you think the festival has realised Brecht's sentiment?

**MMS:** The sentence comes from another political period. Today, paradoxically, it is the political level that is the first partner. Most festivals and theatres in the German language speaking region are financed by public funds even though, or maybe because, theatre is the sharpest critic of society, state and politics – just think about the student revolution of 1968 in Western Europe or the 'Soft Revolution' that took place in the GDR at the end of the 1980s and was instigated partly in the canteens of the theatres. Theatre in a way is the conscience of our society. However, I observe with great concern that this hard-won liberty and the right to freedom of expression are being

restricted more and more. Not only have basic public funds for the arts been drastically reduced, but once again projects are being interfered with that don't suit the system. An example of this is the installation in Pro Helvetia's Pavilion in Paris by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn [4]. One can judge Hirschhorn's art however one wants to – that's not the question. What is scandalous is that a few Swiss politicians felt offended. Because Pro Helvetia did not dismantle the exhibition, a not insignificant amount of funding to Pro Helvetia was cancelled. That is censorship and a scandal. And worse: no one really opposed it. What are we coming to (again)?

**MH:** Lehmann argues in *Postdramatisches Theater* that, 'In present society, almost any form has come to seem more suitable for articulating reality than the action of a causal logic with its inherent attribution of events to individuals. Drama and society cannot come together (Lehmann, 2006: 181). Do you agree with Lehmann? What type of theatre do you aim to present at the festival?

**MMS:** Lehmann is referring to here a form of drama specific to the western world. As the person responsible for the program of an international festival I am often confronted with cultures whose classical dramatic forms I am not aware of. So by necessity I have to resort to a form of drama that is familiar to me and to what I have experienced as innovation in the context of postdramatic theatre. That is, namely liberation from classical form and the development of contemporary forms of drama. They might be the very personal – possibly factual – dramatic story of a protagonist and as Lehmann states quite correctly, this has not lead to 'a desertification of whole landscapes of questioning the human condition' ('Verödung weiter Landstriche des Fragens nach der Erfahrung des Menschen'). What's important for me as a member of the public is that the 'performed' history touches me as deeply as classical drama was able to. As for me I am relying on what I see and feel when I am confronted by cultures whose traditions I do not know. However strange it might appear. When a piece touches me or triggers something in me then I'm interested in it. In addition to seeing a performance it's important for me to meet the artists. They help me – if needs be – to 'get into' the project. Sometimes they confirm what I 'took out of it', but sometimes they question it, even increase the scope of questions. So that can also be the reason why one decides on a project, because the artists raise new questions.

**MH:** Do you lean more towards presenting what is now termed postdramatic theatre, as opposed to classical?

**MMS:** I am most touched by forms that somehow guide through classical drama or tragedy form.

**MH:** So Castellucci?

**MMS:** Castellucci, of course. It's because I'm educated in that way and I am familiar with it, including the references to the religious background and the iconography having built up over the last thousand years. That means the more an artform relates to structures or iconography I am familiar with the deeper I can go with the artist. I often wonder how I deal with a performance, for example, from China, because I don't know their iconography. Maybe I choose a performance because it's so Western, maybe not. I don't know. Often there is no time to really analyse on a scientific level. The work I do is subjective and often based on intuition.

**MH:** Marina Abramovic has said, 'As performance artists, we absolutely hate the structure of theatre. Theatre was our first enemy. Because everything there was fake, to us. It was a chic, bourgeois structure, stage lights, everything. And now, after all these years, I find out that this is exactly what I want: to perform in a theatre, to somehow put my life in theatre lights. Instead of these spaces, in just these big halls, where most performances were happening, with very simple lighting and no equipment. But everything I do is in periods ... First of all, the theatre has changed very much' (1993: 108). You presented Abramovic's *Biography* and the *Abramovic Class* at the Hebbel Theater. How do you feel the theatre has changed in light of Abramovic's comment?

**MMS:** I think it was a slow process which started in the 20s when the visual arts influenced the theatre, and later the performing arts developed within the framework of the visual arts in the 60s. Theatre and the visual arts influenced each other and with that the perception has changed.

Marina's personal step into the theatre happened in the 90s and it was obvious that it did not work out immediately. It was interesting to see her *Biography* in the theatre and a big surprise for the theatre people to see this performance that was created in the frame of visual arts. Years later *Biography* was successfully reproduced for the festival, RomaEuropa [5]. Marina collaborated on the last version – for the time being – with the theatre director and choreographer Michael Laub, who comes from the visual arts and film, but knows the principles of the classical stage. In this development one could study the progression of contemporary performance art in an exemplary fashion. Most important in this undertaking: Marina is a performance artist with extraordinary charisma. She manages to project far beyond the limitation of theatrical space.

**MH:** In a scholarly context we are consistently distinguishing between the terms performance, performance art ...



**MMS:** ... and the book by Fischer-Lichte's on the performative in theatre, but I think that's exactly the point. If you are a strong personality on stage you can eventually overcome or get through the proscenium arch. It's different in a black box situation. If you are a stronger performer in a gallery you are not necessarily a good performer on stage. There is something which hinders in the theatre and you need another technique. It depends very much on the architecture and the environment.

**MH:** Heiner Müller stated, 'If one starts with the assumption that capitalist societies, indeed every industrial society, the GDR included, tends to repress and instrumentalise imagination – to throttle it – then for me the political task of art today is precisely the mobilisation of imagination' (1984: 138).

**MMS:** I think it's my job as the Artistic Director of an international contemporary art festival with the selected artists and projects to mobilise the imagination – the power of the public's imagination – and to inspire curiosity and to facilitate the willingness to think and see in another way. That is, 'to fall into movement, to break out of rigidity'. Only then can we have a dialogue with each other.

**MH:** In his comment on Robert Wilson's production of *Hamletmachine* Herbert Blau points to a 'split between art and politics' and while he praises Wilson's imagination he ultimately dismisses it as exquisite imagery (see 1990: 108-111). What do you think of this assessment?

**MMS:** It's a question of how much you can make out of the visual offer Wilson is making. He offers me a lot and since he never explains, the door is very open to make something very personal out of it. I think it's more a question of whether I'm willing to follow him into his visual world and use the space for my own interpretations.

**MH:** In contrast to Europe Australians arguably do not grow up with any sort of tangible relationship to theatre practice? You are constantly in touch with the international festival scene and the arts industry. How do you think festivals in Australia could contribute to changing performance's status and its relationship to political agendas?

**MMS:** When I arrived for the first time in Australia in the 90s I was overwhelmed by the freedom Australian artists had to find and/or devise their own theatre language. In a way there is nothing that one could call an idiosyncratic Australian dramatic language, alongside what one would describe as traditional British drama. There is, however, a diversity that is refreshing and overwhelming. So it came as a shock for me to see how little

over the last few years this power has been recognised by the political level. I believe the concept of culture and art do not belong in the vocabulary of influential Australian politicians. That is fatal, because an essential chance for a peaceful dialogue is being missed. Australia with its rich cultural diversity could be a model, also for Europe. The cohabitation of the different cultures of Indigenous and migrant Australia certainly harbors the potential for conflict, but also for opportunity. The openness for other forms of cultural expression has to be practiced everyday. On a cultural and artistic level this can be demonstrated in an exemplary manner. In order to use the potential that exists, art and culture has to be on the political agenda. All one can hope for is that the responsible politicians of Australia can more fully recognize, cultivate and use this extraordinary resource in the future.

Margaret Hamilton specialises in research on postdramatic theatre and is a lecturer in the School of Music and Drama at the University of Wollongong. Prior to this position she was a consultant in international arts market development for the Australia Council in Berlin, where she developed and managed a two year program of contemporary Australian arts and a subsidiary European touring program.

#### Notes

1. Established in 1981 and based in Brussels IETM has over 400 subscribing members including presenters, producers, artists and managers from key professional international arts organisations, and an associate membership consisting of arts funding bodies and other public institutions. IETM facilitates the development of links and exchange between its members through two annual meetings in Europe and satellite meetings organised according to focus points and dedicated to global networking. In addition, IETM operates an information service, runs training sessions and represents the cultural sector at a number of forums concerned with arts and policy development. For more information see: [www.ietm.org](http://www.ietm.org)
2. Directed by Koen de Sutter and composed by Dick van der Harst *The Attendants' Gallery* was created by the artists' collective Lod. Zürcher Theater Spektakel presented Het Muziek Lod's video opera *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* in 2004.
3. *Tragedia Endogonia* consisted of eleven episodes presented in ten European cities over a period of three years that were arranged into a dramatic cycle based on Greek tragedy. The fourth episode – *Tragedia Endogonia IV Episode BR. #04 Brussels* - took place in the capital of Belgium and was presented at the 2006 Melbourne International Arts Festival.
4. In 2004 Hirschhorn stopped showing his work in Switzerland in protest against the entry of populist hardliners into the government. Pro Helvetia is the Swiss Arts Council established to promote cultural endeavours of national interest.
5. RomaEuropa is an annual international performing arts festival held from late September/early October to December. For more information see [www.romaeuropa.net](http://www.romaeuropa.net).

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