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Stage



**Arifa Akbar**

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## Prime movers: the German circus exploring Amazon through acrobatics



High-concept acrobatics ... La Danse d'Amazon. Photograph: Luna Zscharnt

Rimini Protokoll's new show is part of a series of performances inspired by James Joyce's *Ulysses* and draws a connection between its Aeolus episode and hypercapitalism

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**O**n the eastern outskirts of Berlin, a big top has been erected by theatre company **Rimini Protokoll** for a circus with a twist. These acrobatics come wrapped in metaphor and high concept: the show is about shopping giant Amazon and the processes of the virtual marketplace. Upon entering, we are given clickers to use instead of clapping to imitate the click of online transactions. We view secret footage

filmed inside fulfilment centres, listen to testimonies from workers and watch piles of packages heaved across the stage.

We hear from Gisela and Dietmar Winkler, who ran a real-life circus near here, and there is a clip of [Amazon](#) founder Jeff Bezos, speaking about a German circus he saw that was the inspiration behind Amazon. Comparisons between the circus and the online retailer are subtly drawn out, such as bringing a product directly to the consumer/audience and the herculean physical effort involved in the work.

The show, *La Danse d'Amazon*, directed by Daniel Wetzel and first performed in November, is part of a two-year project celebrating the centenary of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The literary classic features Leopold Bloom's journey across Dublin in the course of one day in 1904. For the *Ulysses* European Odyssey (UEO), each of the 18 chapters in the book - known as episodes - are being enacted in a different European city. The aim is to give a current meaning to the themes and issues raised in each episode, including citizenship, migration, mental health and the climate crisis. It culminates in June with the Yes festival in Derry and Donegal, a women-led event inspired by the final episode featuring Molly Bloom.



International exchange of data ... *La Danse d'Amazon*. Photograph: Luna Zscharnt

The twinning of chapters to cities has been carefully thought out: the episode in which Stephen Dedalus speaks about Hamlet has been dramatised in Denmark. *La Danse d'Amazon* is inspired by the episode Aeolus, set in a Dublin newspaper office. Joyce drew on the story from Homer's *Odyssey* of Odysseus receiving a bag containing the winds to aid his voyage home. The bag is opened under the impression that it contains riches and it unleashes a storm. Joyce explores ideas around language, rhetoric, the power of news headlines and the press in his book. Rimini Protokoll loosely interpret the chapter to look at the delivery of news and the international exchange of data, through its study of online consumerism.

Wetzel, one of Rimini Protokoll's trio of author-directors, was interested in exploring hypercapitalism and the question of what happens between the ordering of a package and its arrival. We used to own 300 things, he says, and now we own 10,000, on average. An exploration of online consumerism interested him rather than allocating any blame. "It is not built into Amazon to be exploitative - that's us doing it." But he adds: "It could be regulated so it is put to good use, such as showing us the most ecological options [of a prospective purchase], for example." Linn Günther, artistic collaborator on the show, carried out extensive research into Amazon, which was a challenge to collate, at times, with some employees speaking to her anonymously.

The €3m UEO project was conceived by Seán Doran and Liam Browne of the company Arts Over Borders. The last three words of the book, they point out, are "Trieste-Zurich-Paris" - the cities in which Joyce wrote the book. "His

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Truly European ... James Joyce in the late 1930s. Photograph: Hulton Deutsch/Corbis/Getty Images

imagination is filled with Dublin but his day-to-day life - the friendships he made, the artists he met, the inspirations he had - were all in mainland [Europe](#), in these three cities," says Browne. "That enormously influenced the novel. If he had been writing it in Dublin, I think it would have been a very different book."

Claudia Woolgar, a lead partner on UEO, said Doran and Browne approached her with the idea that *Ulysses* was a European novel. "I said: 'No, it's not' but I'm now convinced of it." She had also thought it an "impossible" book to read, but this project makes it accessible and contemporary, she says.

The project has also sparked activism in the cities it has reached. In Marseille, a site-specific public performance called *We All Fall/Récit* sought to humanise the migration debate. Local people - including asylum seekers and first- and second-generation migrants - wrote and performed with the collective *gethan&myles*. In Lisbon, a performance about Europe's ageing population is being developed with the community and a nonprofessional cast of young and old people, drawing on their lives.

In the case of Rimini Protokoll's show, its collaborator [The Peng! Collective](#) staged an intervention last November with a Black Friday protest outside the Amazon Tower building in Berlin, among other actions. It is, for Browne, a clear sign that these cities are presenting their interpretations with "a sense of wanting to affect change in whatever way".

Arifa Akbar's trip to Berlin was provided by the [Ulysses European Odyssey](#), which will culminate on 13-16 June with the Yes festival in Derry and Donegal. *La Danse d'Amazon* is at [Kampnagel, Hamburg](#), in autumn.

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