

WHAT IS THEATRE?

Stefan Kaegi is a co-founder of Rimini Protokoll. He produces documentary theatre plays, radio shows and works in the urban environment in a diverse variety of collaborative partnerships. In 2010 Stefan was awarded the European Prize for Cultural Diversity. In 2011, Rimini Protokoll won the Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale for performing arts. In 2015 Stefan and Rimini Protokoll received the Swiss Grand Prix of Theatre.

Stefan Kaegi is one third of Berlin-based group Rimini Protokoll. Through their immersive, participatory, interactive performances, they slowly redefine the boundaries of Western theatrical practice. 'We intuitively had interest in what is now called immersive theatre,' says Stefan. 'The actor, as someone who has learned something and wants to show it, was never our main interest. We have always been interested in how other people could be on the stage'. Their stages have been filled by hundreds of people all over the world (quite literally so). But their stages have also moved as their performances include walking, dancing, riding in a truck... It is part of the quest for a more democratic theatre. A theatre that would become a two-way channel rather than a stage-audience shout-out.

The whole movement is nothing less than a revival of theatre for Stefan:

'I am glad that the theatre has found a way back into a wider definition of what it can be, and it has all started from the moment when the theatre began to question its format in the broader sense, not just what can happen within those 90 minutes on the stage – but what is the function of this all. This is something that maybe needs to go on for 24 hours...

The usual, celebratory narrative of participatory theatre often goes in two directions. One: participation is good because audiences get their voices heard in the creative process and that will attract them to theatre. Two: it is good because it builds strong communities. However, none of these would be what Stefan and Rimini Protokoll are after.

Actually, one of the underpinning drivers for audience development, namely the declining numbers of audiences, seems to be distant thunder for Stefan. As he says, there are more and more people willing to experience theatre in a new way. The diminishing number of tickets sold is a different story:

'That is typically a problem of the Stadttheater (local public theatres). They have this house and certain people are coming back always again to the same house and then they make research into them and find out, oh, they actually like what we do. That is why they are coming back. But then you are in a closed circuit; you are just reproducing the expectations that you project into audiences. I don't think it's something that you should do.'

Instead, 'you should bring up the content because it is exciting,' claims Stefan in a classical curatorial style. Does that imply a kind of disinterest for audiences? Not really.

'What we do often is that gradually rehearsals are being replaced by try-outs, because in the project like Remote X the audience is such an important part of what actually is the thing going on, that we can hardly rehearse without an audience.'

In the practice of Rimini Protokoll, there is a clear distinction between caring for audiences and conforming to their expectations, no matter who they are. Audiences are a part of the creative process, but not as a target group whose liking should be the defining guideline of the artistic work:

'The question is only how understandable it is. Theatre is a big communication process and we are not interested in the misunderstanding which would happen even before audiences interact with the material [the performance]. Afterwards, you can do with the material whatever you want.'

Taking care of the ways audiences understand the event they should become a part of does not mean any kind of 'dumbing down'. It is rather caring for the one you talk to. As for the communities, they are at best temporary formations, a consequence, rather than a goal. Responding to my provocation that he doesn't care much about the potential of theatre to make cohesive, stable communities, Stefan responds:

'I am not about stability... the idea of destabilisation related to the artist is closer to me. I think people have enough of their mechanisms to go into their stability networks. These communities might be created temporarily, but I don't see why they should turn into perpetuated rituals. I think we need to talk about conflicts. It might create temporary harmonies as well, but also create places of interaction. I don't believe in it becoming institutionalized and expectable.'

Just as others have pointed out, there is a clear distinction of what it means to work with audiences as an artist or as community managers or a marketing director of a large venue. But this goes much further. The question is what is the role of theatre and performance arts in society:

'I have seen in the UK grants that actually force artists to be teachers; this has problematic sides. You only get money if you go to schools and you seem to be in a position to replace teachers. In Germany, during the refugee crisis, there were politicians installing special funds for artists to make projects with refugees. You suddenly get this vision of artists being a kind of an army that is sent to deal with the burning forest... On one side it might be overestimating the power or the social skills of artists. Of course good projects might come out, but it would be weird if the function of arts would be reserved for this particular purpose.'

Here with Stefan, we see once again a theatre-maker who does not subscribe to the idea of theatre being a building block of big proud scenes, nations, markets or any other giant self-perpetuating structure. It is much more about being democratic in a way to be able to question these structures and build spaces for communicating and envisioning different and opposing worlds as well.



picture from Rimini Protokoll's 'RemoteHuston' (photo: ©UH Cynthia Woods, Mitchell Center for the Arts)

AWAY FROM SECURITY

Farida Hammad is currently the Strategic Planning Director at **Mahatat for Contemporary Art** (Cairo, Egypt). She is also an artist and focuses on the interplay between spaces of expression and creative social movements. Currently, she is combining elements of graphic narrative and public space through comic creation and workshops.

Hanane Hajj Ali is a Lebanese actress, activist and researcher. She is a co-founder and general assembly member of **Al Mawred Aththaqafy**, international training and research centre from Egypt. She is also a founder of **The Cooperative Cultural Association for Youth in Theatre and Cinema**. Hanane is a prolific author and researcher on theatre, arts and activism in Arab region.

So far, the discussion has been mostly European. However, if we want to become aware of habitual things and experience something different, it is useful to step out geographically as well. **Farida Hammad** is a member of the **Mahatat for Contemporary Art**, a Cairo-based arts collective devoted to producing performing arts events in public spaces across Egypt. She has joined Mahatat recently, after finishing Media in Development studies in London. Why public art? 'I think that it is important to always feel like the streets belong to the people' - Farida responds and continues: 'Every time we do a performance I feel that we are doing something in the streets because we can and we should'. Street culture is not at all uncommon in Egypt. In fact being on the street is a large part of daily life, but as Farida claims, 'there is not as much creative use of public spaces'. As a consequence, performing in public spaces draws quite some attention.

For Mahatat, the goal of drawing attention is however not the attention itself. It is part of the wider struggle for public space. 'Revolution changed the way we see public spaces - now, there is more ownership of the street' says Farida. However, not everyone is happy with these new developments. Big cultural venues, Cultural Palaces as locals call them, play a marginal role in these struggles. Under the firm control of the Ministry of Culture, they are centralised and often exclusive. On the other hand, memories of streets becoming a political arena for dissent are still fresh, so there are many ways in which the streets are overseen by various law enforcement services.