

Interview with Milo Rau

Jonas Mayeur: After the production of *Orestes in Mosul* in the former capital of the Islamic State and the Jesus film *The New Gospel* in the southern Italian refugee camps, now follows the third part of your *Trilogy of Ancient Myths*. Why Sophocles' *Antigone* and why in the Amazon of all places?

Milo Rau: "I studied ancient Greek for almost seven years, and as my final work I translated Euripides' *The Bacchae* anew. So the Greek tragedies have always fascinated me, and *Antigone* is undoubtedly the most famous of all tragedies. Goethe calls it the absolute pinnacle of Western poetry: crystalline and prophetic, insanely complex and yet almost grotesquely simple. From Brecht to Anouilh, from Judith Butler to Anne Carson, the play has been subjected to ever new interpretations. The plot, as I said, is very straightforward, actually a series of a few encounters and choral songs: When *Antigone* buries her brother *Polyneikes*, she thereby violates the burial commandment of King *Creon*, for *Polyneikes* is considered an enemy of the state. The philosopher *Hegel* saw the confrontation between *Antigone* and *Creon* as the confrontation between traditional, divine law and rational, modern state. For the philosopher *Judith Butler*, on the other hand, *Antigone* undermines the existing symbolic order even more radically: namely, from its utopian outside, from a fundamentally different design of human coexistence, of the living and the dead, of man and nature. And this is where the Amazon comes in: I think that the 'symbolic order' of the Occident really needs to be questioned and changed from its outside, the peripheries of the capitalist system."

The ancient Greek tragedies shape Western culture, have been interpreted and staged hundreds of times, and are an integral part of the repertoire of European theaters. However, this does not apply to Latin American countries, where the Greek tragedies are culturally less significant. Why this choice? Why this "appropriation", so to speak, of *Antigone* by Brazil, by the Amazon? Wouldn't there be, thought the other way around, many stories from the Amazon that deserve to be brought to Europe?

"What they Greeks did thousands of years ago, is using the myths and stories of the places they conquered, to form new myths. *Antigone*, *Medea*, even the allegorical figure of Europe itself: these are all figures and myths that the Greek city states appropriated and made into the first European imperial high culture. The stories of the colonized became the myths of the colonizers. In that sense, simply restaging *Antigone* or *Medea* in Berlin or Ghent is actually continuing this cultural appropriation of thousands of years ago. To me, it makes much more sense that these stories are now being catapulted out of the - meanwhile globalized - European system again, that they are being re-appropriated by the peripheries, re-socialized. There's [a beautiful documentary](#) that was made about Kay Sara after our first rehearsal block in the spring of 2020 in which she says: 'I didn't know about the play *Antigone*, but I think the person fits me perfectly'."

How did this project begin?

"Like most of my projects, unplanned, from an encounter. When we met in 2019 - we were touring with a couple of my pieces in Brazil - they said they would like to do something with us. I showed them clips from the film I had just shot, *The New Gospel*, whereupon they showed me a book they use in their schools, *Occupying the Bible*. They immediately understood what *The New Gospel* was about: the reappropriation of a myth, the revolutionary Jesus myth, by the outcasts, the marginalized of today. We are now doing exactly the same with *Antigone*: we are not only criticizing and adapting Sophocles, we are occupying the play, as it were, just as the landless movement occupies land. With the actors, stories and wisdom of the Amazon."

What role does MST - Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra - the largest social and political movement of landless workers - play in the production? How do they interpret Antigone and what artistic as well as political potential do they see in this project as a political movement?

"I think it's no coincidence that the proposal for Antigone came from them - because of the land question and the fight against a dictatorial state, both of which are central to the play. When we started the project, Bolsonaro was still in power. Douglas Estebam, one of our two Brazilian dramaturges, worked with Augusto Boal, the inventor of the Theater of the Oppressed. So we are very close in terms of our overall conception of theater, working with amateurs, mixing staging and activism, and so on. The appropriation of myths is also very central to MST: the Bible, the lineage of the quilombos (runaway slaves), the labor movement, and recent Brazilian history, especially of course the massacres of state power, all play into our interpretation of Antigone. In addition, the gender and diversity issue that is very present in Antigone is absolutely central to MST. And finally, the use and training of choirs is part of MST's schools and political training. The idea of forming a choir from survivors of the 1996 massacre, but also bringing in activists from the quilombos and indigenous peoples, negotiating gender issues on an equal footing with land issues, all of this is completely logical for the MST. And of course, Antigone is completely rewritten in this appropriation: Amazonian rituals take the place of the rituals of Ancient Greece, the choirs sing something different, the music is recomposed. And the first time I read it, I was told: Why does everyone kill themselves at the end? The fight goes on, doesn't it? So we rewrote the ending."

As Kay Sara's speech says, which she was supposed to deliver in 2020 as the opening of the Wiener Festwochen - and then delivered online, as the first part of the [School of Resistance](#) - we as humanity are on the brink of the ecological apocalypse. The Amazon rainforest, called the 'Green Lung of the Planet', is threatened, the planet, and with it humanity, has reached a tipping point for which humans themselves are responsible. It seems that even the attempts to avert this catastrophe only accelerate it. For example, the regulatory attempts of European corporations often contribute to the fact that the destruction is not slowed down, but covered up with quality seals and other greenwashing - or that these seals are just deliberately distributed only to the big monopolists. How can the staging of a Greek tragedy which deals with precisely the tensions between nature and man, and traditional and modern law, contribute to overcoming the tragedy? How can theatre, as your [Ghent Manifesto](#) says, not only describe, but actually change the world?

"This question has been at the center of my work in recent years. As a result of *Orestes in Mosul*, we founded a film school with UNESCO in the former capital of the Islamic State. A quarter of the students are girls, and the films of the first class are now touring European film festivals - which is a small miracle. Or take the second part of my Trilogy of Ancient Myths, *The New Gospel*: we have established a distribution network for fairly produced tomatoes with meanwhile more than 200 supermarkets all over Europe. As a result, since 2019, we have been able to regularize over a thousand migrants with work contracts, turning slaves of the mafia into the future citizens of Europe who can live in dignity. It would have been absurd for me to make a Jesus film, and not take the message of the *New Gospel* quite literally: the last shall be first."

"Now, as far as the Amazon is concerned, the problem is at once very simple and multifaceted, as you rightly said. Because, of course, the big corporations have responded to the new consumer awareness. By putting seals on their products, producing fair palm oil without slash-and-burn, and not traditional diesel but biodiesel and so on. However, scientific studies show that behind these labels there is often the same devastation, human rights violations and displacement as before. The deforestation of the jungle has accelerated since capitalism has produced 'green', since soy and biodiesel have been fed into the global commodity cycle as 'good' raw materials. Take just one simple

fact: the CO2 footprint of biodiesel is three times greater than the footprint of fossil diesel. And not a single seal accepted by the EU stands up to scrutiny. In the very state where we produce the *Antigone*, there are palm oil plantations of European producers like Ferrero or Unilever."

"Let's just take Ferrero: according to studies by Global Witness and Save the Rainforest, our 'fairly produced' chocolate bunnies, which were produced with 'green' palm oil, actually contain the blood of displaced small farmers and the burning smell of the devastated Amazon. But if you go to the websites of the companies concerned, the first thing you see are long articles about sustainability, fair production, reforestation. The face of destruction is a smiling one, which brings us back to *Antigone*. Creon is a very interesting, dazzling character. Not a mad dictator, but a thoroughly modern ruler who knows exactly how to transfigure exploitation and destruction in a zeitgeisty way. This is where we, together with the landless movement, intervene. We will tear the mask off the face of the corporations in a classic activist manner - and try to show real alternatives. Because "this madness must stop," as Kay Sara says in her speech."

This project started in 2019. Over the years, you worked with so many people on this performance, both in Europe and off course in Brazil, establishing long-term relationships. How did this project and the many collaborations, especially the one with Kay Sara, evolve?

"We started rehearsing in 2019 together with the MST. Since then, the project went through many different phases: in spring 2020, NTGent had to interrupt the rehearsals in the Amazonian State of Pará because of Covid. The protagonist of the play, the indigenous actress and activist Kay Sara, opened the Vienna Festival with a widely spread opening speech in May 2020. After a phase in November 2020, from October 2022 on, the rehearsals started again. A big campaign against greenwashing, together with the MST, was connected to the theatre play, as was the shooting of a videoclip."

"The re-enactement - on an occupied Federal Highway through the Amazon Forest - of the biggest massacre against activists of the MST on 17th of April 2023, provoked a big scandal in Brazilian and international media. On May 13th, the European premiere of the play will be performed at NTGent, as start of an international tour. The Brazilian actresses and actors and the activists of MST will mainly be present on video. Also Kay Sara, performer of *Antigone*, decided to be present only on screen. The both of us understood only during the film shootings in Brazil and during the last weeks of rehearsals in Europe, that Kay Sara's place is in her home country, as part of the political Brazilian struggle, and that she will only be present in the European version of '*Antigone in the Amazon*' on video. It's one more turn in this project that we develop together since so many years now: a logic outcome of our common artistic and political collaboration on two continents - a project bigger than anybody involved."

READ THE COMPLETE SPEECH OF KAY SARA FOR THE WIENER FESTWOCHEEN [HERE](#) (English). This speech was also published in [NRC](#) (NL), [De Morgen](#) (BE), [TAZ](#) (GER) and [La Repubblica](#) (IT).