



WHY THEATRE?

NTGENT, GOLDEN BOOK V

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The Golden Books are a joint project by NTGent and the Berlin publisher Verbrecher Verlag. It is a series on theatre, aesthetics and politics as well as background pieces on projects by NTGent. A series on both the theory and the practice of an engaged theatre of the future.

For the 5th volume, after months of cultural lockdown, when live arts were in a state of emergency and the whole institution rethought their priorities, NTGent asked more than 100 of the most influential artists and intellectuals in the world the question: *Why theatre?* Why is this art form so unique, so beautiful, so indispensable? From classical theatre to performance art and dance, from activism to political theatre and the performativity of everyday life, authors of all continents and generations delivered short essays, memories, manifestos, letters. Moments of aesthetic epiphany meet strong emotion, critical insights into the problems of representation and populism compete with utopian texts about the theatre of the future: more than 100 voices about the state of performing arts in 2020.

WHY THEATRE?

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NTGent

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EDITORIAL

Why theatre? We can't ask ourselves a more basic question than that and at the same time no question is harder to give an answer to. Why do we make theatre? What purpose does it have or does it even need to have a purpose? Usually, the answers are given by the making of theatre itself – but suddenly we find ourselves in a situation that has shaken up our ways of searching for the answers. In March 2020, NTGent was closed for an unknown period of time, like most theatres all over the world, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

So we wrote the following letter to more than 100 artists and intellectuals all over the world:

“Dear friends,

In times when theatre and performance as live art are in a state of emergency and societies rethink necessities, we ask you: Why theatre? For two years now, we have been publishing the series 'The Golden Books' at NTGent, together with the Berlin based publisher Verbrecher Verlag: books on the theory and practice of contemporary performance art, on individual plays and general social questions. In volume 5 of the book series we want to broaden the focus and ask: Why theatre at all? Why is this art form so unique, so indispensable? What is YOUR personal 'why' as a theatre-maker, spectator, activist, citizen – or simply as a human being? We are interested in the whole range of theatre: from classical theatre to performance art and dance, from activism to political theatre and the performativity of everyday life.

You determine the content and format of your contribution: whether you want to start from a concrete artistic experience as a theatre-maker or spectator, or write from a theoretical or utopian point of view. It can be a short essay, a memory, a manifesto, an invented dialogue, a poem, a letter to someone. A moment of epiphany, strong emotion, insight or confusion. A utopian text about the theatre of the future, post-capitalist theatre or one without any ideology, about Oedipus or the performance of birds outside your window. Whatever comes to mind when you ask yourself “Why theatre?”, whatever seems neuralgic to you or makes you feel confident.

With solidarity and kind regards,

Milo Rau, Carmen Hornbostel and Kaatje De Geest”

Why theatre? Because of all that follows... ↳ ↳ ↳ ↳



A CONSTANT JOURNEY OF DOUBT AND EXPERIMENTATION / MOHAMMAD AL ATTAR

When the world was seized by collective panic, I was left with the same nagging questions: Who cares about theatre? Who cares about culture at this point, in the middle of a pandemic?

I don't have easy answers at this time, so I would like to return to March 2011 when the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime started. Back then, I grappled with the same question: "Of what use is theatre today?" My answer was clear. This was not a time for theatre. Playwriting seemed a frivolous pastime compared to writing political articles and organising demonstrations. I held on to this opinion until, upon the urging of a few friends, I began writing the play *Could You Please Look Into the Camera?* As part of my research for the play, I interviewed 10 young men and women in Damascus, who had been arbitrarily detained by regime security forces during the first few months of the revolution. They all asked me the same question: "What's the meaning of dramatising our stories today?" My answers sounded confident. I highlighted the role of theatre as a witness, and its power to humanise our stories in a way that the dry prose of news media with its facts and figures fails to do. But deep down I was still searching for answers that could help dispel any remaining doubts about the work I was doing.

The answers emerged during the initial meetings I had with each of the individuals who narrated in detail the horrific experiences they had endured and that shaped the persons they had become. Our discussions about prison were accompanied by conversations about food, music, cinema, and love. The meetings helped me realise that the importance of the work lay precisely in those moments and not necessarily in the prospective act of performance per se. It lay in the participants' need to talk and my need to listen—in their liberation from unspeakable images and mine from the fear of sharing a similar fate, for it was merely coincidence that separated those who were detained from the ones who survived in Syria. That text later became the medium through which we all—the director, actors, technicians, and I—engaged with the events around us as the regime's brutality against the revolutionaries grew. Rehearsals became our only safe haven for discussions and arguments. Was our audience

able to register any of this later? I can't be certain, but I believe some of it must have been felt. Through our post-performance discussions with the audience in places far away from Damascus like Seoul or much closer like Beirut, I became convinced that as professionals in the field of theatre we still have a role to play in such a time of devastating wars and crises. And, so I returned to theatre after months of prevarication.

Since that time, I have come to believe that answers will emerge from engaging with the work itself, and that our theoretical knowledge about theatre and its role is not sufficient during times of radical transformations. In the summer of 2013, during a theatre workshop that I held with a group of young people in Raqqa following the liberation of the city from the grip of the Syrian regime and only weeks before it fell under ISIS control, we found meaning in the friendships that developed among us. Theatre didn't change our lives or fates. Shortly after, one of the workshop participants was killed in a regime airstrike and, later, two others were kidnapped by ISIS fighters and still remain missing to this day. The rest of the group became refugees scattered around the world. All that survived from that workshop are the enduring friendships that have helped us live through the painful memories of loss.

In Beirut, while working on the play *Antigone* with some Syrian refugee women who lived with their families in squalid camps in the Lebanese capital, once again I struggled to answer the same question posed by the women: "Of what use is theatre today when we lack basic life necessities?" I decided to set aside the arguments I had prepared in advance and invited them to discover the answer together. And, so we did. During three months of working together, we discovered many answers—in their challenging of male authority, their reclamation of the narrative of the Syrian crisis, their growing confidence in themselves, their voices, and their bodies, and their grappling with the racism they had faced in a society dominated by a rigid, hierarchal class system. At the end of one performance, Wafaa, one of the performers, came up to me and, pointing at a group of elegantly-dressed women standing outside the theatre, said: "they used to see me only as another cleaner for their homes, but now they lavish me with praise for my stage presence." I asked her jokingly, "what about the other women who haven't seen the play?" She responded with a chuckle, "I don't care about that anymore—what matters now is how I see myself."