



THE ART OF RESISTANCE ON THEATRE, ACTIVISM AND SOLIDARITY

NTGent, Golden Book IV

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The Golden Books are a joint project by NTGent and the Berlin publisher Verbrecher Verlag. It is a series comprising programme articles 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.

The Art of Resistance is the fourth volume in this series. It gathers speeches, essays, interviews and manifestos, written and performed by artists, activists, journalists and lawyers. How can we practice solidarity? Fight an unjust system of imperialism and neoliberal capitalism? Give a voice to the unheard?

With contributions from Colette Braeckman, Luanda Casella, Maria Lucia Cruz Correia, Aminata Demba, Douglas Estevam da Silva, Heleen Debeuckelaere, Béatrice Delvaux, Ulrike Guérot, Dalilla Hermans, Prince Kihangi, Daniel Lima, Robert Menasse, Ogutu Muraya, Yoonis Osman Nuur, Brunilda Pali, Milo Rau, Hendrik Schoukens, Yvan Sagnet, Lara Staal, Terreyro Coreográfico / Daniel Fagus Kairoz, Marc-Antoine Vumilia, Harald Welzer, Veridiana Zurita.

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STEFAN BLÄSKE, LUANDA CASELLA, MILO RAU, LARA STAAL
EDITORIAL. THE ART OF RESISTANCE

How can we practise resistance, responsibility and solidarity? How can we, as artists and theatre makers, make our globalised world a better one? This book gathers speeches and essays, performance texts and manifestos, written and performed by artists, activists, journalists and lawyers within the last years. The contributions are diverse: statements and reflections, analyses of our racist and neo-colonial world order, accusations and examples of 'best practices' as well as calls to action.

Theatre is often understood as mere fiction, as "words, words, words" and acting 'as if'. But spaces of art can be places where we pre-enact, where we can search for and rehearse alternatives. We should not underestimate the power of performativity: speaking is a social action and language never only describes the world, but also creates one. So, let us use words as swords, as weapons in our battle against injustice caused by imperialism and neoliberal capitalism. We must ask ourselves: how can we get into action and offer platforms to voices we should listen too much more, how can we give power to the powerless? How can we collaborate better?

This book gathers texts that are related to theatre events and artworks: be it manifestos or speeches held to open theatres and festivals, be it accusations presented in staged trials and tribunals. Geographically, *The Art of Resistance* focusses on regions related to projects that were initiated by NTGent or editors of the book: in Brazil, in Central Africa (Congo, Kenya, Rwanda) and in the Mediterranean on the border, where inhumanity and exclusion of the European Union and the so-called civilised West become overtly visible.

CHAPTER 1 is a collection of speeches and manifestos held in 2018 and 2019, most of them in Ghent, Belgium. At the opening

weekend, when Milo Rau became the new artistic director of NTGent, writer Dalilla Hermans insisted on the fact that the arts, literature and theatre do not just reflect society or zeitgeist – but make society. They implement new thoughts and shape the hearts and minds, and therefore should be used to decolonise, to deconstruct and to derail. Together we should “march ahead into a new daybreak”.

Journalist Béatrice Delvaux, at the opening weekend of NTGent as well, quoted Hannah Arendt: “In your fight against the world, give the world a helping hand. For, to educate the world, you must love it.” Describing Belgium’s division between the Flemish and French-speaking people, she exemplifies how important it is to collaborate, to unite. The ambition to change the world is not megalomaniac, it is our responsibility. In that ambition, she feels that, as a journalist, she is not alone, because “you, stage directors, writers, and artists, are there alongside me, close by, and you are not giving up”.

On the 10th of November 2018, hundred years after the end of WWI, political analyst Ulrike Guérot, writer Robert Menasse and director Milo Rau presented a manifesto: “The Proclamation of the European Republic”. It is founded upon the principle of universal political equality – irrespective of nationality and social or ethnic background. “The sovereignty of states is hereby replaced by the sovereignty of citizens.” The manifesto was proclaimed simultaneously on balconies all over Europe. “Of course, it is symbolic politics”, Milo Rau writes, “but is it inevitably powerless?” Institutions must be conquered, first symbolically and then in real terms. “Reality comes from utopia, and that is why everything can change today.” Rau gave his speech in Ghent at the alternative summit “The Art of Organising Hope” with activists and grassroots organisations from all over Europe. Focusing on Europe alone is of course not enough in our colonial world order. That’s why the manifesto states: “We recognise that Europe’s wealth is based on the exploitation of other continents

and the suppression of other cultures over centuries.” We must think in terms of global responsibility (and restitution). The authors of the manifest state that the European Republic should only be a “first step on the path to a global democracy.”

In her opening speech for “Same Same But Different. International festival about decolonisation and identity”, activist Heleen Debeuckelaere questions the concepts of objectivity and uniformity. In every collaboration, it is about accepting different points of view, different ways of being in this world. “The concept of knowledge is a colonised one.” We must learn not to listen to the loudest voice in a room. To embrace vulnerability. “Representation without any true power is dangerous”, and safety is impossible. “We are dancing on the edge of the volcano, looking into the abyss of what is ahead and wondering how we got here. We are not safe but we are holding on tight to each other, we are vulnerable, we are listening and last, but not least, we are dancing.”

Also theatre maker Luanda Casella presents a sharp analysis of our time: “The shipwreck of politics, the arrogance of the powerful, the kingdom of the false, the vulgarity of wealth, the cataclysms of industry, the rampant misery, the naked exploitation, the ecological apocalypse – we are not spared from anything, not even from being informed about it.” What, she asks, can we do? In her opening speech at “Het Theaterfestival” in Ghent, she presents twelve principles. Her “Morning Manifesto” invites us to be truthful and humble and curious. It asks us to produce and share knowledge. To behave, to stay in character, to “be a killjoy feminist and spoil the enjoyment of others every time violence is manifested”. We are challenged to use active verbs, because they provoke movement: “I order, I demand, I plead, I yield, I challenge, I provoke, I dare, I claim, I name, I condemn, I disrupt, I evoke, I initiate, I resist...” Casella closes: “Through art we can widen the scripts for what counts as ‘a good life’.”

The last speech in chapter I was held by Italian-Cameroonian activist Yvan Sagnet in Matera, Cultural Capital of Europe in 2019. He is speaking in the name of ten thousands of refugees that arrived in Europe and are stuck in the very south, due to European refugee politics and the Dublin Treaty. There, they are working in slave-like conditions, producing the fruits and vegetables for European supermarkets. As a spokesman for the local plantation workers, he declares that “freedom of movement is a human right”, that “no one is illegal” and “all people must have access to adequate housing. Unused infrastructure and abandoned land are public property. We call for the occupation of this space!”

Yvan Sagnet calls for these actions as himself, but also in the role of Jesus, prophet of the Bible – and activist against the Roman Empire. His speech is part of Milo Rau’s theatre and film production *Il Nuovo Vangelo*. Therefore, it also suits as a transition to Chapter II, where we present poetry and theatre texts. *The Old Testament* teaches us the power of language. “In the beginning was the Word.” How can we make constructive use of it? Yvan Sagnet – as Jesus – sets up a revolt: “The Revolt for Dignity is the struggle of our time. If we do not fight now, all united, then all other struggles will be useless. Hasta la victoria siempre!”

CHAPTER II is dealing with the questions of representation and power from a black perspective and questions the ways in which, for example, white women pretend to be feminists and white theatre makers portray Africa. The chapter starts with two poetic texts: in “Don’t cry when I call you racist”, writer Dalilla Hermans addresses white paternalism and feminism – “Just because you say so, our struggle is not the same” – and criticises a solidarity that only pretends to be one. “Don’t twerk with me if you won’t work with me. / I don’t want you near me, until you hear me.” Her text also questions white institutions and their way of using black people for their own benefit: “Don’t put me on your

cover to show diversity / Don’t use me on a poster for your white university.”

Actress and author Aminata Demba describes her feeling as a black woman of not being seen, of not being listened to. “I am tired of trying to convince you that my experience is real, that it sometimes hurts, that it matters, and I want to make things better for those who come after me. I am tired of screaming it out loud until you get it. They say, don’t lose courage. But how?” She wonders how to deal with all the ignorance. “The fight against the minds is real. You get mad because we want to fight you with the same weapons you use to fight us. We should find kinder ways? We should stay calm?”

Writer and theatre maker Ogotu Muraya makes the effort of presenting three different perspectives on the same event: invited by curator Lara Staal to reflect on *The State of Beauty*, he links the aesthetic with the political and chooses a theatre production called *Africa* (produced at NTGent in 2013) as his starting point. The production was based on the experiences of white Belgian actor Oscar Van Rompay in Migori, Kenya, where he owns a farm. It was performed successfully for many years in Western Europe, but now is questioned radically: “The feelings of being wronged came with the certainty that a crime had been committed and there was no trial and therefore no verdict and no sentencing, and I wanted a trial and I wanted a conviction, but of whom?” Based on talks and interviews, Ogotu Muraya wrote three multi-layered and self-reflexive texts about *Africa*, from the perspectives of Oscar Van Rompay, curator Lara Staal and himself. Using the style of forensic reports, Muraya investigates different positions and arguments and asks: “What really is the crime – black facing, stereotyping Africa and Africans, the generalisations and clichés, the catastrophising of Africa, the hypersexualisation of black bodies, white innocence and its unresolvable desires?” Although trying to avoid thinking in right and wrong, there is no excuse in the end: “What is the