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Theater should be a transformative experience: Milo Rau's cheerful and non-cynical brand of political drama

[Joost Ramaer](#) | October 17, 2014 | [Interviews](#), [Theater](#) | [No Comments](#)



Milo Rau

An interview by Joost Ramaer

[Milo Rau](#)'s political theater projects are almost always multistage rockets. Only, with him, the stages are not just fuel canisters, to be discarded when empty. In a Rau production, each stage launches its own astronaut or satellite, creating havoc in orbit. *The Moscow Trials*, a documentary film now touring Europe, began in March 2013 as a three day 're-enactment' – a Rau speciality – of three criminal trials that had targeted 'subversive' art in Russia: the one against the band Pussy Riot and two against the visual art exhibitions *Caution! Religion* (2006) and *Forbidden Art* (2003).

The exhibitions had taken place in Moscow's Sakharov Center, a memorial to Andrei Sakharov, the legendary dissident against the Soviets and Nobel Peace Prize winner. The Center also continues Sakharov's campaign for democracy and civil liberties in Russia. *Caution! Religion* and *Forbidden Art* were smashed up by members from Russia's violent ultranationalist movement, who considered the art on show there 'blasphemous' and an insult to the Russian Orthodox church.

Their crimes went unpunished. Instead, the shows' curators were prosecuted and, in the end, fined. The Pussy Riot girls, as we all know, were sentenced to two years in prison for 'hooliganism motivated by religious hatred'. The three cases were copies of Stalin's show trials in the 1930's. Travesties of justice with a pre-ordained outcome.

And then, Milo Rau came to Moscow, this self-professed political left-winger from Switzerland. The Swiss are not well known for their sense of humour, but Rau (37) is a fun guy to be with. While telling you about his clever theatrical ruses, he will regularly burst into infectious laughter.

Rau staged his re-enactment also in the Sakharov Center, and scrupulously followed the rules governing Russian court proceedings. (Such rules do exist, the Putin regime just chooses to ignore them.) He used real judges and lawyers – two of them had defended the art show curators – and a jury of seven members who actually were a representative cross-section of Muscovite society.

The leading prosecutor, and arguably the star of the show, was Maxim Shevchenko. It was a remarkable coup. Shevchenko is the host of a popular TV-show that actively promotes Russian nationalism and Orthodox religion. Think Rush Limbaughski. Why on earth would a guy like him want to work with a 'Jewish fascist', a favourite invective of the nationalists? (Rau has Jewish forebears, but technically he is not a Jew himself.) 'It took me about a year to convince him,' Rau told me during an interview in the Dutch port city of Rotterdam. Our talk preceded a double bill of his work at festival De Keuze (The Choice) on September 28: *The Moscow Trials* and *Breivik's Statement*, about the Norwegian right-wing extremist Anders Breivik, who bombed and shot 77 people to death in 2011.

Eventually, Shevchenko agreed to take part. Rau wasn't surprised at all. 'Shevchenko had three reasons to work with me. First, he knew personally one of the people I was working with on this project. Second, he and I developed a mutual respect. Although we draw very different conclusions from it, we are both anti-globalisation. Third, he must have realised, I think, that participating in my play was simply a unique opportunity to promote his cause in front of an international audience. The mainstream media never take somebody like him seriously. They are very anti-Russian, especially in Germany.'

Rau had not actively advertised his mock trial in the Sakharov Center. He knew word-of-mouth among Muscovites would ensure him a full house anyway, and he didn't want to encourage the usual hooligans. Still, the re-enactment was disrupted twice, in typical Putin fashion. First, by the immigration police, allegedly to 'check' on the papers of Rau and the other non-Russian crew members. And later by a bunch of angry men in Cossack outfits, eager to defend the church by swinging their bats and fists again. The film shows us who came rushing to Rau's defense: Maxim Shevchenko. You see him arguing with the intruders. 'Please go away, your actions will give the Russian state a bad name,' he tells the police. 'There is nothing untoward happening here,' he says to the Cossacks. 'I give you my personal word.' Sure enough, they retreat to their expensive SUV's and leave the scene.

The environment created by Rau, and the mix of people he introduced there, turned a virulent Russian nationalist into a staunch defender of civil liberties – welcome to the successful launch of this rocket's first stage. During the next half year, the second stage went off: a camera registration of the full three days' proceedings toured European festivals – among them De Keuze in Rotterdam – as a video installation. And now, there is the 90 minutes long documentary film, weaning a much wider worldwide audience away from the simplistic anti-Russian rhetoric prevailing everywhere in the West.

Because, watching Maxim Shevchenko at work, we also develop respect for him. He appears to be a serious and intelligent man, who states his case against the suspects eloquently, and even with an occasional bout of wry humour. To our relief, he does not win: Rau's fictional court, being far more worthy of the name than the real ones he had re-enacted, acquitted all three suspects, albeit with a narrow majority among the jury members. One of them, a staunch nationalist, resigns in protest. But here, the clash of convictions leads to debate instead of violence. The nationalists stick to the rules, and as a result, we start to listen to their argument. Rau's projects may create a lot of disturbance in our universe, but it is of a deeply positive and uncynical nature.



"CITY OF CHANGE," 2010/11

Leaving Valhalla in disgrace

Milo Rau was born in Bern in 1977. He studied sociology, German and classics in Zürich, Berlin and Paris, where Pierre Bourdieu was one of his mentors. At one point, he wrote an essay about Roland Barthes which was published in the prestigious *Feuilleton*-section of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the daily bible of the Swiss establishment. 'The editor of the *Feuilleton* at the time was one of my former professors,' says Rau. He then fell in love with a girl from Berlin, so he moved to the German capital. The paper made him its Berlin correspondent. Only 23 at the time, he became the youngest foreign correspondent in the history of the NZZ. Simultaneously, he started working as a theater director and writer.

The two careers, peppered by Rau's cheerful brand of left-wing politics, soon clashed. 'My first theater projects were often demolished by NZZ-critics,' he says. 'Turning the page, the reader hit upon one of my own articles, which the paper's editors did not find objective enough. It became an increasingly absurd, untenable situation.' So, after six years, Rau left the NZZ. 'My mother had been so proud of me, and now I had to leave this Valhalla in disgrace. Imagine the shock to her!' He erupts in laughter.

A year later, in 2007, he founded his own production house. Based in Zürich and Cologne, it goes by the magnificent name of [International Institute of Political Murder](#) (IIPM). 'Of', not 'for', obviously. Hahaha! In its first seven years, the IIPM has realised ten projects. The subjects range from *The Last Days of the Ceausescus* (2009), via resettling 500,000 Palestinians in the Oder-Neisse region between Poland and Germany (*Land of Hope*, 2010), to the genocide in Rwanda (*Hate Radio*, 2011). They are all ambitious, multimedia and multipartner undertakings, based on exhaustive research, often staged in historically and politically charged places, and the actors always bring personal ties to the subject matter.

Would film not have been a better medium for this type of work? 'Germany does not have a film industry to speak of anymore. What it does have, is a strong and well-financed theater scene, which is basically open to any good idea. And you can use theater money much more freely than film funds, where you have all these very strict rules.' Rau developed his format by trial and error. One of the first examples was a re-enactment of a 1999 incident in St. Gallen. That year, a Kosovo-Albanian inhabitant of this modest Swiss town shot and killed one of his daughters' teachers in the local *Realschule*. It was a private drama, revolving around honour and sexual abuse. But it shocked the Swiss into efforts to improve relations with their immigrants.

Rau jumped onto this bandwagon with a project called, at first, *The St. Gallen's Teacher Murder*. At the time, the wounds were still too fresh. Rau and his family received death threats, and the parliament of the St. Gallen *Kanton* (province) forbade the show. Reluctantly, the Theater St. Gallen decided to cancel it. 'And then I made a very clever move,' Rau says with twinkling eyes. 'I renamed it *City of Change*, a positive, optimistic title. Suddenly, everybody embraced it. And I hadn't made a single change to the content!'

His re-enactments are not simple repetitions, but reconstructions 'of past events in today's density of meaning'. Rau blends all these ingredients from different sources, and then cooks them into a strongly flavoured stew. His theatrical missiles are not

restricted to their stages. Their trajectories are strewn with accompanying lectures, debates, exhibitions, installations and publications. To try out ideas, and to help build awareness of the end product. 'You have journalists who go to press conferences and pass on what they hear there. And you have journalists who try to find a deeper truth. It is the same with theater. I love Chekhov and Shakespeare, I love directing their plays. I just don't want to restrict myself to texts written by others.' Neither to documentary. 'Theater has to be a transformative experience. During my lectures at theater schools and universities I always tell my students: your assignment is not to make a play. Theater can also be presented in the form of a film or a book.'



"HATE RADIO," 2011

***Hate Radio*: a typical Rau transformation**

A striking example of such a Rau transformation is *Hate Radio* (2011), his play about the genocide of Tutsi's and moderate Hutu's in Rwanda in 1994. The stage is occupied by a glass box. Inside we see the crew of a radio station at work, mixing racist rants with popular music. The station is styled after the infamous Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), one of the main instigators of racial hatred and violence before and during the slaughter. 'Before 1989, Rwanda was just as closed off from the outside world as the Soviet Union,' Rau explains. 'Then it opened up, and "democracy" became the new buzzword there. RTLM came about because the UN urged the Rwandan government to have independent media! That is why I call the Rwandan disaster a democratic genocide.'

His actors, many of them Tutsi survivors, do not stick to the original RTLM-script. 'Much of their text comes from other, often unexpected sources,' Rau says. 'For instance, I made extensive use of what was said during a press conference where the UN presented a report about the tragedy.' The crew in *Hate Radio* plays music from Nirvana. 'I don't know if the real RTLM ever aired their songs. I use them because for me, Nirvana's music is synonymous with the after-1990, where-are-we-now generation.' Rau grew up in an ideological vacuum. 'Nobody talked about Marx anymore, nobody had a clue what The Left stood for. And this was reinforced by the electoral success of Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder. When you go back to their speeches and writings, it is astonishing that anybody even thought of them as left-wing politicians. They were so conservative.'

Young Rwandans were even more confused. 'The people working at RTLM called their racism "black power". They smoked grass and hated Hitler. Their hero was Nelson Mandela. It really was that weird. That is why one of the girls in *Hate Radio* wears a Mandela T-shirt.' During the creation of the play Rau discovered that his actors had listened to the same music as he had at the time. 'Nirvana. MC Hammer, the American rapper. Me, the little rich kid in Switzerland, and them, in the middle of a genocide. *Hate Radio* is also about international youth culture.'

Rau's plays often have unexpected effects, even for him. In Belgium, for instance, a country still fraught by a complex mix of guilt, self-justification and denial about its colonial rule over Congo, one of the roots of the evil in 1994 and long after. A Belgian journalist wrote that *Hate Radio* was 'only telling half the story', Rau remembers. 'Her article went like: "The slaughter was just a reaction to the earlier attacks by Tutsi's from Uganda. It was a result of the Rwandan civil war, not a genocide." ' At first, Rau considered the journalist 'a *Genozidleugnerin*', a genocide denier. 'But she was actually a very nice person.' Then it dawned on him that she probably thought like many of her fellow countrypeople. 'They try to reason everything as far away as possible: "There is this other side to the story, you know, there were victims on both sides ..." In this way, they hope the genocide will end up somewhere else.'

When the same journalist later moderated a talk with Rau after a performance of his play in Brussels, he pulled a little trick on her. 'We inserted some core sentences from her article in the script for that night. Afterwards, she asked me with this quizzical look on her face whether that had been an accident or intentional.' The umpteenth burst of laughter. 'I found that really funny!' Actually, he often adapts his shows to new developments, or new places. 'At the festival in Avignon we included a recording of *Vive la France* by Mireille Mathieu. The Rwandan *génocidaires* sang this song when the French army intervened with Operation Turquoise, a bid to stop the killings which actually made things worse.'

THE MOSCOW TRIALS WMOSKAUER APROZESSE МОСКОВСКИЕ ПРОЦЕССЫ

“THE MOSCOW TRIALS,” 2012/13

Cynical humanism

Disastrous interventions by the West in the rest of the world will remain one of Rau’s main sources of inspiration for years to come. *Hate Radio* and *The Moscow Trials* are still touring, and his new play *The Civil Wars* will continue touring on November 15 during the NEXTfestival in the Belgian town of Kortrijk. It is the first part of a trilogy about Europe. ‘*The Civil Wars* started with a question in my head: “Why are young Europeans going to Syria to fight?”’ It ended up as Rau’s most personal political piece so far. Four seasoned actors speak about their youths, how they dislodged themselves from dominant fathers. From there, they go on to reflect on madness, faith and political convictions, or what’s left of them. How do these confusing times work out on their private lives?

The second part, *Fuck you Europe*, will open in April 2015 in Munich’s Residenztheater. ‘It is about the NATO-bombing of Belgrade in 1999.’ The third and final part will open in the Berliner Schaubühne in October 2015. It offers yet another perspective on Europe’s violent history, given away by the title: *The History of the Machine Gun*. More or less simultaneously, Rau hopes to bring out *The Congo Tribunal*, his first film which actually started out as such. ‘For this project I really wanted an international release, and that is only possible with film money.’ *The Congo Tribunal* will revisit the Rwandan genocide, or rather its terrible aftermath: the civil war in Congo, which is still raging after twenty years and three million deaths.

The West prefers to ignore it, and keeps it going at the same time. Behind the scenes, our politicians, diplomats, weapons traffickers, mining companies and non-profits all have big stakes in this huge conflict.

‘I’m moving away from human behaviour, into robber capitalism,’ Rau says. In his eyes, the civil war in Congo is the biggest story of our times. ‘East Congo is dominated by Western Non-Governmental Organisations which are anything but. They are all funded by the USA and the European Union, and this completely dictates their actions.’ He gives an example. ‘There are 1,400 mines in East Congo, and they are the world’s main source of minerals for smartphones and other modern electronic devices. In 2010 the American Dodd-Frank Act declared the whole industry illegal, except for the mines certified as “conflict-free”. The certification process is run

by the Enough Project, an ngo funded by the US Congress, and executed on the ground by a German company owned by Enough and funded by the EU.'

A totally absurd situation, according to Rau. 'What these ngo's consider illegal, comes from China, or from the poor Congolese themselves. In an area without a functioning government, they make the law. I call it cynical humanism. We are humanists, but only in our own backyards.' He read and admires *Congo – The Epic History of a People*, by the Belgian historian and writer David Van Reybrouck. 'What I find really interesting about David's book is his view that Congo does not resemble Europe as it used to be, in the Middle Ages, but as it will be. Congo shows us the future of our own political system: no state power.'

Joost Ramaer (1958) is a freelance journalist based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. For fifteen years he worked at *de Volkskrant*, a leading Dutch daily newspaper, as a staff reporter, first on Economics (1993-2003) and then on the Arts (2003-2008). He left the paper to research and write a book. *De Geldpers* (The Money Press) tells the sad story of how the publishing company of *de Volkskrant* and other serious newspapers sold itself to the British private equity investor Apax, and was nearly wrecked in the process. *De Geldpers* was published in December 2009 by Prometheus in Amsterdam to universal critical acclaim and sold 4,800 copies. Theater is one of Joost's lifelong passions. During the last two years, he has also made it into a new theater of work.