

Keynote Speaker Announcement: Milo Rau

We are delighted to announce that **Milo Rau** will be one of the two keynote speakers at the 37th ITI World Congress, delivering his address **on the morning of 19 September**. This year's Congress, themed "Connect and Embrace," emphasizes our commitment to promoting cultural diversity and fostering international collaboration in the performing arts.

The title of Milo's speech "***HOW TO RESIST - or why the only answer to nationalism is global and diverse.***"



Photo credit: Magdalena Blaszczuk

Milo Rau is artistic director of [Wiener Festwochen](#) (Vienna Festival) and director, curator and artist in residence at NTGent. He created many acclaimed productions, including *La Reprise*, *Lam Gods*, *Orestes in Mosul*, *The New Gospel*, *Antigone in the Amazon* and *Medea's Children* and initiated and curated the prestigious series *Histoire(s) du Théâtre*. Since 2002 he has published over 50 plays, films, books and actions. Rau's theatre productions have been shown at all major international festivals, including the Berlin Theatertreffen, the Festival d'Avignon, the Venice Biennale, the Wiener Festwochen and the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels, and have been touring in over 30 countries worldwide. Milo Rau has received many awards, including the European Theatre Prize for his work. In 2019 he was the first artist ever to be appointed Associated Artist of the European Association of Theatre and Performance – EASTAP.

HOW TO RESIST?

Opening Keynote at the International Conference of the ITI “Embrace and Connect” Antwerp, Belgium, September 19, 2024

Milo Rau

Dear friends,

I come to you from Central Europe, more precisely from Vienna, the capital of Austria. Vienna is the fifth-largest and fastest-growing city in the EU, thanks to immigration from Eastern Europe: from the former Yugoslavia, Hungary, from Ukraine and so on. Demographers estimate that Vienna will overtake Paris in terms of population next year. Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, is an hour's drive away, and Budapest, the capital of Hungary – Victor Orban's kingdom - just over two hours. Both countries, Austria's neighbors, are ruled by authoritarian regimes.

Three days ago, I had a debate close to here, in Amsterdam, together with the general director of the Slovak National Theater, Matej Drlicka, who was dismissed by his Minister of Culture. The reason given by the Minister – she's a former TV presenter who had been dismissed from her station for making homophobic statements - was that his theater's programme was too "activist" and not "national" enough - in other words, too diverse and too global. The Slovak arts industry has since called a warning strike, and so far 300 institutions have joined in. When I heard about Matej's dismissal - that was in mid-August - I called him. He asked me to write an open letter to the Slovak Prime Minister Fico, which we - myself and 2,000 cultural workers from all over Europe - did. We wrote: "Where you start to measure the work of experts by the yardstick of political compliance - and where this is lacking, to speak of "activism" - democratic society ends and with it artistic freedom."

As far as Austria is concerned, the far-right FPÖ, the Austrian's Freedom Party, is set to win the elections on September 29. The expected coalition with the ÖVP, the conservative People's Party, is expected to achieve an absolute majority of 60 percent. Together with Elfriede Jelinek - we are currently working on a joint theater project - I therefore published an appeal two weeks ago against FPÖ, which - I think that says it all - is campaigning under the Joseph Goebbels quote "Fortress Austria". The "two genders" are to be enshrined in the constitution, "remigration" is to be radically implemented and so on. In the event of an election victory, the FPÖ wants to "gain full power over the three essential elements - government, space and people", as they announce. In the area of cultural policy, the FPÖ wants to proceed like its role models Hungary and Slovakia: a cut in subsidies for "woke events", specifically the "European Song Contest" and the "Vienna Festival" – my festival.

The simple question that arises is: how can we resist? Perhaps some of you have read my books - most recently, for example, "Theatre is Democracy in Small" or "The Reconquest of the Future". There I asked how artists can create an art of resistance, what its forms are, what its beauty is and what its limits are. Today I want to ask what we can do together, as a field, as a large association of theater makers: structurally. I will therefore be talking about money, politics, generational shifts and history, and almost exclusively from my, the Middenland Eastern European perspective. I apologize for that.

1. The Second Coming. Or: Abandon all hope, you who enter.

This speech is part of a debate tour called the "Resistance Now!" tour. After the publication of the two open letters I told you about - one for the Slovak National Theater, the other against the FPÖ - I felt the need to connect with other artists. In other words, to find out specifically what attacks they have to contend with. Because the helplessness of all of us has to do with exactly one thing: that we do not combine our struggles, that we each fight them for ourselves, in heroic solitude, so to speak. But, simply put, we need an International of Struggles. The theme of the ITI World Conference is "Embrace and Connect", and that is exactly what I am calling for here: In order to fight nationalism, we need to connect globally, we need global alliances.

As we all know, talking about art means talking about money. I remember that in 2019 - that was before I moved to Vienna and was still Artistic Director of the NTGent, about an hour's drive from here, as close as Bratislava is to Vienna - we demonstrated against the budget cuts of the Flemish government, which was then (and still is, by the way) determined by the right-wing conservative party NVA. The strike, accompanied by numerous appeals, had no effect. When we wrote our artistic program for the coming five years during Covid, we did so within the framework of an already reduced cultural budget. Metaphorically speaking, the process of allocating subsidies was like distributing food after a natural disaster: the institutions and independent companies were thrown together into a pool, which in turn had far too little money at its disposal.

First come, first serve: in familiar neoliberal fashion, the actual problem - namely a far too low amount of subsidies - had been translated into a competitive conflict. As we speak, a similar process is taking place in the Netherlands and in Germany, and as you all know, cuts in culture are nothing other than the beginning of its censorship. I remember the 1980s, when the neoliberal doctrine emerged: back then, merging cultural players seemed like a good idea. In Germany, for example, multi-genre houses were founded, a process that accelerated after the reunification of Western and Eastern Germany. After some time, however, a limit became apparent: further streamlining of artistic institutions led to the destruction of art itself - its fundamental opportunity for experimentation.

From the noughties onwards, many global structures were therefore established or reestablished. An international touring network emerged, a lively independent scene, what the late Hans-Thies Lehmann called "post-dramatic theater": a theater that was committed to experimentation, international exchange, the search for a global form - a kind of second modernism, of which I myself and my so-called "global realism" are a child. When neoliberalism reared its head again towards the end of the 10s, shortly before Covid, I thought: Why again? During the Flemish budget cuts I was talking about, an independent study was commissioned that looked at the ratio of investment to return in all sectors - the cultural sector came out on top with 8 euros profit for 1 euro investment. And I don't need to tell you what happens to 1 euro invested in the army.

So when the budget cuts came again, I understood that this time it wasn't about money, but about politics. It was about the transformation of society, about the breaking of relationships - between the independent scene and the big houses, between the genres, the continents, the different artistic backgrounds. Last week, the "Resistance Now!" Tour made a stop in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden: the country's most important independent company, "Konträr", had just had its funding withdrawn. As in Flanders a few years ago or currently in the Netherlands, nobody wasted a single thought that this could have something to do with saving money - or some other rational economic reason. "They want us to disappear," Freja

Hallberg, the director, told me. Because, as I said, culture is the most productive sector in Europe.

In short, we are in an age in which certain liberal illusions are coming to an end - or, like independent theater, are simply disappearing. In Eastern Europe the so-called clear-cutting is almost complete, here in the West there is the usual Atlantic delay, but by the end of the decade the work will be done here too by the NVA in Belgium, the "Party of Freedom" in the Netherlands and what they are all called. My Hungarian friend Kornel Mundruczo staged the last play of his theater company - "Parallax" - in Vienna last spring because it was no longer possible in Budapest. President Orban did not ban his work as it was done in the days of communism - he simply withdrew all financial support. We live in a time when we don't fight an idea by criticizing it, but by depriving it of financial support.

Lua Casella and I belong to the same generation, and I think most of those present here also belong to our, the so-called middle generation, which in sociology is called "Generation X": the "golden generation" of neoliberalism. To stay with Europe: The often mocked generation of "boomers" that preceded us, brought down communism in the East and fought for civil rights in the West. My mother, born in 1950 and therefore a typical boomer, was unable to vote for three years of her life, as women's suffrage was not introduced in my home country, Switzerland, until 1971. The legalization of homosexuality, abortion, etc. took place in the same years. So I'm talking about very recent events here, but for me, who was born in 1977, they seem far away and are part of the natural history of liberal democracy.

When I started doing theater in the late 90s, in my early 20s, in Germany, then in Europe and later all over the world, Fukuyama's theory of the end of history seemed to be confirmed. Liberal democracy, the social market economy and certain associated ideals - such as the idea of transnational cooperation, the free movement of people, decolonization, the idea of a polyphonic world theater in general, institutionalized at major festivals - triumphed. It was the time when we all began to think in terms of "projects": the future was open. Form was everything, and everything political was done. Because politics smelled of the past, in short: politics smelled of the "boomer" generation, the generation of our parents. I would even say that politics in Europe back then smelled at worst of lack of freedom and at best of school.

More philosophically, you could say that in those years, when the revolutions of 1989 were still close at hand, Europe was proud to finally realize the universal utopia of the Enlightenment, the idea of Europe as a continent of democracy and participation for all. And what was really impressive: Europe's guilt as a double perpetrator continent - namely colonialism and the Holocaust - was seriously dealt with in those years, both socially and artistically. To quote Hegel, these were dialectical years: what was done was also criticized at the same time - especially the institutions - and it was not theater that was made, but meta-theatre. Some European *idées fixes* were laid to rest: the idea of the sanctity of the canon, the idea of artistic genius, the idea of improving the world through art and so on. Everything was deconstructed, the text, the author, the tragic, the language, the genres, the drama. It was a wonderful process of liberation.

I don't know exactly when all this began to crumble. Post-drama became drama again, global culture imperceptibly turned back into national cultures, enriched with a few pinches of exoticism. Surely you know the story of the frog sitting in a water pot: he doesn't notice how hot it gets because the temperature only rises degree by degree - and in the end he dies without noticing. As for me personally, I mistook the first signs of a new nationalism as echoes of a past that was already doomed to die: like a drunken patron being thrown out of a

nightclub, shouting and complaining. It took me almost 10 years to understand that history was actually going backwards. And that we would probably lose the battle.

"Abandon all hope, you who enter": When Dante, guided by Virgil, enters the underworld at the beginning of the "Divina Commedia", this famous motto is emblazoned above the gate. As you know, Dante had not booked this horror trip to the zombies of the underworld. He had lost his way in the forest - and therefore any path that led outside was the right one, even if it led to the realm of the dead. And so I ask you too: abandon all hope. Because this battle we are waging is political in a way that could not be more political. The believers here know what "The Second Coming" of the Messiah means: the apocalypse, the end of the world as we knew it. And "The Second Coming" of Neoliberalism (and Nationalism) means the same for culture: it's not about a project more or less, it's about the way we want to live.

2. King Oedipus. Or: Those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

Speaking of forests, you've probably heard the saying that you can't see the wood for the trees. This refers to the fact that the better and more concretely you know a problem, the less you can contribute to its solution. At the debate in Amsterdam a few days ago, a political scientist was also present. She drew my attention to the fact that if an alliance of Europe's right-wing parties were to agree on their stance on Putin, they would have an absolute majority in the European Parliament. But the Russian threat looks different for each individual country because of its history and geography. For the German, Austrian or French right, for example, Russia is a partner for the defense of a nationalist policy against the EU. For the Baltic states or Ukraine, on the other hand, Russia is the logical enemy of their national independence.

If the disunity of the enemies of democracy is good, the disunity of their friends is a problem. I don't need to remind you of the thousands and thousands of factional battles that dominate every debate among artists, for example between the identitarian left, which comes from the civil rights movement, and the classical Marxist left, which is committed to distributive justice - and considers linguistic and institutional criticism of the kind we are engaged in here to be nothing more than an elitist gimmick. But it is another conflict that is currently dividing the European liberal left: the conflict between two competing perpetrator traumas, the Holocaust and colonial crimes.

I am constantly going back and forth between Belgium, the Netherlands and France on the one hand, and Germany and Austria on the other. Germany and Austria - the countries that carried out the genocide of the Jews - are deeply marked by their guilt, especially in every artistic debate. But as soon as I come to France, Belgium or the Netherlands, the trauma of the colonial past comes to the fore, the millions of deaths in the former Belgian Congo, Indonesia or French North Africa, for example. This is why the Israel-Palestine war is read in Western Europe primarily as a conflict of occupation, as the final, genocidal chapter in decades of oppression of the Palestinian population and indigenous peoples throughout the world.

A few days ago I was at the Dutch Theater Awards, and in every second speech the war in Gaza was condemned as what it is according to the UN: a genocide. In Austria and Germany, on the other hand, the term "genocide" is reserved for the Holocaust and is not only considered anti-Semitic propaganda with regard to Gaza, but its use is banned by law. When I invited French writer Annie Ernaux and the former Greek Minister of Economy, Yanis Varoufakis, both critics of Israel's policies, to the Council of the Republic, an intellectual advisory body of the "Vienna Festival", both of them and I were labeled anti-Semites in the

German-language media. And don't delude yourself: the Dutch Theater Awards would have been shut down by the police in Germany.

That brings me to the motto of this section of my keynote, which is obviously the inversion of that quote from the philosopher Santayana that we all learn in school: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I believe the opposite is true: by staring at its own past, its own crimes (or its own suffering), each family not only becomes, as Tolstoy so beautifully put it in the beginning of "Anna Karenina", unhappy in its own way. As in Greek tragedy, such as the Oedipus story, the fixation on past injustice often prevents us from seeing the present for what it is: a tragedy of its own magnitude.

Just as King Oedipus triggers the plague in Thebes by refusing to relinquish his sovereignty of interpretation over his past, the German-speaking countries tragically cover up the military atrocities in the Gaza Strip precisely because of their responsibility for past guilt. On the other hand, the necessary solidarity with the democratic forces in Israel is prevented by the Manichean view of the conflict as a purely colonial war, in which the Palestinian side - and in extreme cases even the mass murderers of Hamas - are always right.

However, in addition to the cyclical model in classical tragedy, in which violence is constantly repeated, there is another original narrative that comes from the theater. It is that of Aeschylus' "Persians", which develops an aesthetic of fragile compassion for the enemy. "The Persians" is set at the Persian royal court, directly after the sinking of the fleet of the Great King Xerxes in Salamis. A poet who himself fought against the Persians - who had a clear plan to wipe out the Greek cities - writes a play from their point of view: are we still capable of such dialectics today? Probably not, but we have no other choice.

For where politics fails, where it chases after national discourse gains, only art can provide a remedy: a place where empathy with others, but also with one's own blind spots, becomes possible. A place where a new, tragic poetry with all its contradictions and moral pitfalls can emerge. A place where, despite the many trees, we try to see the forest. A place of international cooperation, of exchange, a place where the neoliberal competition of victim and perpetrator narratives becomes something like a global narrative of solidarity between different stories of guilt and suffering. Because we cannot overcome our specific blindness on our own - only together.

3. Critique of purity. Or: Only social-democratic realism is worse than socialist realism

That's a sentence I always say when the mood gets too good in meetings like this one: The only thing worse than socialist realism is social democratic realism. What I mean by this, of course, is not social democracy as a party, but the discourse - which I also engage in here - that accepts the system's iniquity everywhere except in art. Or more specifically: The safe space of the theater, where tolerance and self-liberation reign, is only the flip side (or the truth) of a global system of subjugation and exploitation. And where socialist realism, as aesthetically shallow as it was, still worked on the utopia of another world, social democratic realism is content with what is usually called "engagement": the aesthetic or discursive placebo of real practice, of real change. With revolution as a subject of study or performance.

So that you understand me correctly: I consider social-democratically updated liberalism to be a completely justifiable political way of dealing with the oblivion of history and the mental limitations of human beings. But in art, in the theater, on stage, it is precisely the antagonism,

the helplessness, the gentleness, but also the maliciousness of man, of human relationships, that must destroy any moral self-assurance again and again. In the theater, there must be no "firewall" of democracy, in the theater there must also be a place for fascism, depravity, stupidity - everything must have its place. Or in other words: seeking the boundless, the global in our work, we should make no secret of the limits set by the historical moment, our origins, our nature and ultimately our bodies.

Because why would we sit here together if we weren't all, on our own, incomplete and defenseless. And if we're honest, some of the enlightened myths of moral purity and loyalty to suffered injustice are not entirely unlike the right-wing myths that I have called nationalistic. I therefore want to declare war here on any purism, any commitment that implies control. To help you understand my concept of the negative definition of the canon with which my intellectual generation grew up: I have nothing against folk culture or elitist culture, nothing against brass band music or Mozart operas. Next year, I will open the "Vienna Festival" together with a brass band and the Vienna Boys' Choir, among others – only they will perform together with Congolese opera singers, Pussy Riot and Laurie Anderson. A few hundred meters from here, at the Flemish Opera, I staged Mozart's "La Clemenza di Tito" last season – together with wonderful singers, but also with people we cast from the city: South Americans, Africans, people from the Middle East and so on. Because Antwerp may be ruled by the right, in reality it is a diverse city.

I am therefore pleased that my friend Lua spoke before me and that she praised impurity. There is no speaker, no speaker position that is reliable, that should be reliable. I remember seeing Lua's first show, "Short of Lying" – and I immediately knew that this artist had to work at NTGent. Almost at the same time, in 2017, I organized a so-called "World Parliament" at the Schaubühne in Berlin: similar to what happens here, we discussed the possible topics and limits of a world democracy with 100 delegates from around the world, that is, how to overcome national and thus neo-colonial power structures. When a member of parliament from Turkey refused to recognize the Armenian genocide as such, the European members of parliament wanted to throw him out of the parliament. But then the president of our World Parliament, a politician from Namibia, stood up and said: "Turkey is the only nation that recognizes the German genocide against the Herero. If he has to go, I go too."

I don't know how you would have handled that situation, certainly more skillfully than I did. But that is precisely the political art I am talking about: let's not rely on our morality, our commitment, our perspective, our own history – let's remain suspicious. So, if you will allow me to correct Dante: I think we should not abandon our hopes in the fight against the zombies from the neo-nationalist underworld, but only our illusions. As James Baldwin once said: "In our time, as in any time, the impossible is the least that can be demanded." But let us not forget that we are all unfinished, that the impossible seduces us as much as it frightens us, that we all have part of the truth and no one has the whole truth. And that is why, I repeat, we depend on each other.

4. In praise of beauty. Or: resistance has no form, resistance is the form

Every classical tragedy has four acts, even if most people believe it had five. Which brings us to the last, perhaps most important point, to the *deus ex machina*: to the praise of beauty. I have just made fun of social-democratic realism. Please don't get me wrong: this is not a call for socialist realism, for propaganda, for agitprop and some kind of popular front politics. I think, as I keep repeating, that beauty and scandal are two sisters who were separated at birth. But above all, unlike all socialist or fascist realists, I think that resistance doesn't *have* a form,

but that it *is* a form. Let me explain.

As you may know, my plays are regularly prosecuted or campaigned against in very different countries such as Switzerland, Germany, Taiwan, the US, Brazil, Russia or Belgium. The arguments are always political: the feelings of this or that section of the population would be hurt, be it the Orthodox believers in Russia or the Catholics in France or Brazil – although the latter are neither involved nor even informed. In Paris, for example, a right-wing Catholic minister launched a petition against one of my performances, a poetic children's play about abuse, "Five Easy Pieces". 10,000 "concerned Catholics" signed the letter, which appeared in some media. On the evening of the premiere, there was a march in front of the theater, paint bombs were thrown, and the audience could barely enter the hall.

However, the performance refuted all the accusations: the poetry, the humor, the freedom of the child actors dissolved all projections, just as snow melts in the sun. The Orthodox Cossacks loyal to Putin, who stormed my performance of "The Moscow Trials" in Moscow, had a similar experience: they wanted to beat us up, but then sat down in the audience in confusion when they saw their favorite priests and their favorite TV presenter debating with dissidents on stage. "It was," the director of the Sakharov Center, which has since been closed, told me later, "like a surreal dream. Except that it was real."

What I want to say is that theater does not *has* to be political; it *is* political anyway. Theater must be surreal, crazy, hallucinatory, unbearably contradictory. Sometimes – as is currently the case in Slovakia, in Hungary, in Austria – art must become a weapon to defend one's own freedom. The appeal by Elfriede Jelinek and me, directed against the nationalist, anti-art election program of the FPÖ, is a cry for help from civil society. Because art must remain free, that is to say: complex – diverse and unpleasant, radiant and confusing like reality itself. Brass band music and queer performances, Chekhov and storytelling, rituals, all this is theater. Because theater, like all art, never has a clear "message"; it is always ambiguous. Theater is therefore always unreliable: it is an institution that was built against all other institutions – against the idea of an institution itself – and at the same time intends to become the ideal, the most democratic institution of all.

Which is why the political theater I am talking about makes its point by putting itself between all fronts and asking fundamental questions about how we live together, about our beliefs, and how we represent the world. It is one thing to stage a play in today's Moscow – it is quite another to do so in Palestine, Italy, Brazil, Hungary, the Democratic Republic of Congo or Austria. It is deeply political to step onto a stage as a human being. Because there is always a political or social situation that you are reacting to, if only through the audience, who project their own views, hopes and traumas onto the stage. I remember a panel discussion in Paris a few years ago: I criticized the dull European classic karaoke, the eternal playing of the same canon over and over again.

An artist from Iran interrupted me and said: "Performing Chekhov in Tehran is a revolution, it means freedom! No offense to Chekhov, please!" And she was right. Because, as we, each trapped in our own blindness, repeatedly forget: resistance *has* no form, resistance *is* the form – and it looks different everywhere. When we were talking about the rise of the radical right in Amsterdam a few days ago, one of the audience members introduced himself as Slovak and asked Matej Drlicka a question: "Were we too gentle? Is that why we lost the fight against the radical right?" Matej thought for a moment and finally said, "There is nothing bad about being gentle. We must defend our gentleness. And in the end we will defeat them – with the power

of love."

Thank you for the work you all do here. Thank you for your generosity and for your patience. And let me congratulate you on the great theme of this year's congress, which seems more important to me than ever: "Embrace and connect."