

Stefan Kaegi is a director and playwright and composes, together with Daniel Wetzel and Helgard Haug, the Rimini Protokoll. The group was created in Giessen, in the early 2000s, and it is of a generation that came a little later than the one described by Hans-Thies Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre (Postdramatisches Theater)* (1999). The group is characterized by working with multiple languages and artistic genres, such as: documentary theater, theater with non-actors, performance art, installation, radio play, among others. Along with other important groups in the renewal of the German documentary theater scene, the Rimini Protokoll was often produced at the beginning of its trajectory by the HAU Hebbel am Ufer theater and today presents its plays in the five continents. In recent years, it has presented or produced projects in Buenos Aires, Caruaru, Havana, Lima, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Santiago de Chile and São Paulo.

In this interview - held near Ufer Studios in Berlin in February 2019, where he did the final rehearsals for *Granma. Trombones from Havana (Granma. Posaunen aus Havana)*, which premiered in 2019, - Kaegi affirms his critical and theoretical positioning on theater and comments, especially, on this play with Cuban non-actors, and the robot play *Uncanny Valley (Unheimliches Tal)* (2018). In order to contextualize these two plays within the creative trajectory of the Rimini Protokoll, it is important to highlight the group's history as linked to two principles of creation: theater with non-actors and theater with the audience systems. These principles can appear alone or they can be combined and, according to Kaegi during the interview, they are not settled in defined historical moments.

In any case, since its emergence in the professional scene with the four ladies living in an asylum, protagonists of *Cross-Word Pit Stop (Kreuzworträtsel Boxenstopp)* (2000), the Rimini Protokoll makes theater with non-professional actors (DREYSSE, 2016). The group prefers to call these people, who are called by critics as non-actors, as everyday specialists (MENDES, 2017). With this, the group's directors seek to emphasize the knowledge of ordinary people who play their role on stage, and not their lack of artistic practice.

In addition to *Cross-Word Pit Stop*, there are other plays from the group created with non-professional actors playing the role of themselves as protagonists such as: people who dedicated their lives to study or had their lives affected by the interpretation of Karl Marx's book for the play *Karl Marx: Capital*,

Volume One (Karl Marx: Das Kapital, Erster Band) (2006); former military police officers who want to give their version of what the police institution is in *Chácara Paraíso* (2007), (SOLER, 2015); workers and politicians whose biographies contain stories similar to the characters in Friedrich Schiller's classic in *Wallenstein - A documentary-play (Wallenstein - Eine dokumentarische Inszenierung)* (2008), (BAUMGARTEL, 2008).

In the Brazilian context, it is interesting to remember the series *100% City (100% Stadt)* (2008) (GARDE, 2016), which had its *100% São Paulo* version produced by MITsp in 2016. In this version, one hundred non-actors were selected to reflect the population of São Paulo's statistics of gender, age, place of residence and race (TELES LEÃO and SILVA, 2015). On stage, the hundred non-actors succinctly tell their biographies, make a performance about their daily lives, as well as participate in various question and answer games that demonstrate their opinions on social issues.

Therefore, the play *Granma. Trombones from Havana* is a result of twenty years of research on theater creation with non-actors. This play places four young Cubans on stage to tell the story of their grandparents and the Cuban Revolution from the sixties to the present day. The play is constructed by mature procedures for problematizing the construction of the historical narrative, such as the display of dissenting points of view among non-actors, the exposure of layers of contradictory questions about the relations between the people and the governments of Cuba and outside the island, and moments of direct public interpellation.

Theater with the audience and the audience systems, the other principle of creation, is a practice that goes back to the group members' experiments at the University of Giessen, before they started working together. In this type of creation, what matters is the direct relationship of the audience with a system, an organizing mechanism for a social event. The Rimini Protokoll makes use of various types of systems in its creations, from the seemingly simple to the surely complex.

Among the pieces of direct interaction between the audience and the systems, the following can be highlighted: the tour with division of groups in real time by audio tracks in *Remote X* (2013); the synchronization of tablets in *Situation Rooms - A multiplayer video piece (Situation Rooms - Ein Multi Player*

Video-Stück) (2013), (SATURNINO, 2017); the simulation of the UN Climate Conference in *World Climate Change Conference (Welt-Klimakonferenz)* (2014); the device that prints the rules of the game in *Home Visit: Brasil em casa* (2017); and the simulation of the Davos Economic Forum in *Davos State of the World (Weltzustand Davos)* (2018); until it reaches the creation of the robot piece *Uncanny Valley*.

Uncanny Valley is a play performed exclusively by a humanoid robot shaped like the body of the writer, Thomas Mellen, who collaborated with the creative process. The play discusses the limits between man and machine through the dramaturgical elaboration of the themes of the lecture given by the robot. Although a small part of the robot's head is deliberately open and with the wires exposed, the facial movement and the eloquence of the sitting robot make a very strong impression on the viewer, due to its similarity to a human being. Thus, the play allows the viewer to reflect on the near future in which humanoid robots may be circulating, among humans, almost without being noticed.

Below is the interview, in which Stefan Kaegi exposes his positions, both on the plays *Granma. Trombones from Havana* and *Uncanny Valley*, about his work procedures and his artistic choices in general.

Which questions were you most interested in when doing *Uncanny Valley*?

I have experience with projects without protagonists. After doing a lot of work with non-actors, for the past ten years, the Rimini Protokoll - or at least my own interests - has focused on works that put the audience at the center of the play. Works such as *Situation Rooms*, *Nachlass - Pièces sans personnes* (2016) and *Remote X* are also systems. Systems that somehow leave the audience in the situation, in a very central position. The audience is confronted, for example in the case of *Nachlass*, with a set design (scenography) with the dead, those that are not there. This absence of the protagonist interests me. *Nachlass* was a project with eight people who were soon to die and a system. This is an entryway.

Another question is that theaters nowadays are highly technological places, they are pre-programmed in many ways, light, sound, microphonization. Nowadays everything works with a lot of technology, but normally the human being is at the center of it all. The human being is then the live, living art, *live*

art as said in English, and *art vivent* in French. Can we replace that last part of life that intends to be live? It is not only in the sense that the actor reacts, but in most cases it is also pre-programmed. In rehearsals with actors, we try to find the perfect way to almost do something that today a film could perhaps do better. So, this is another entryway.

And a third entryway is Thomas Mellen. He is a person who writes, so writing the text was a new challenge, to work in collaboration with another author. In Germany, he is well known as an author for several plays, several novels, he's won several awards. His latest book which really made him very famous and is being translated into multiple languages, is the book he talks about in the play. It is very special because the book is highly autobiographical, it talks about his bipolarity and the logic of this disease makes him highly sensitive to repetition. He revolts against repetition. What interested me about him is that, somehow, he had a reason to say "my mind is so unstable; my psychology is so dangerous to myself and others; it both scares me to be in public and bores me. There are several aspects that I don't like about repetition, for instance, giving interviews - which are always the same. So, I studied the possibility of finding a way against this. Initially, to combat psychological problems. Then came this idea to investigate prostheses and, as a next step, to replace the entire body.

Was the *Uncanny Valley* project created by you or Mellen?

I wanted to make a robot that would act and I started to investigate what the center might be, the original with which I would develop the text together. Who could it be? So, I found him. For both of us it was challenging. We both had a certain fear of doing this. For him, because he usually defends a much more traditional form of theater. For me, because I had never collaborated with an author. I also ran the risk of producing a double of him that would later be left to me.

Are you interested in continuing to research in this direction?

I just started thinking about a project that is still very vaguely developed, but it would be a dance piece with a cast of dancers and a cast of drones. Again, it would be about systems. In *Uncanny Valley* a subject or an object is at the center; there are all these issues of identification, complacency, empathy with a robot, a person, or a substitute for a person. In addition to being used

to increase our individual efficiency, to facilitate our commute, to extend our life, technology also develops a lot among people. Networks, social media and other systems are means of promoting meeting between us, and this social aspect interests me. From the development of classical ballet - which is highly hierarchical - to perhaps a much more democratic model among dancers with the intelligence of the horde, it is a kind of revisit of the theme of *Remote X*. It is still very early, but it interests me as, in a way, a continuation of *Uncanny Valley*.

How can the history of the Rimini Protokoll be divided? A first stage focused on working with non-actors and a second stage with devices for direct interaction with the audience?

I don't know if it has such clear chapters. As I said, at the beginning there was a moment where our impact, or our innovative act for German theater, was to introduce the specialists of everyday life, at some point it was what was important at the reception. Nowadays, this is nothing special, there are many groups that work like this. We've started with another track that is more at the center of our work at the moment, which is the direct interaction with the audience. This is what perhaps brings many of our works together. The viewer takes on some role, whether they step into the shoes of one of those arms dealers in *Situation Rooms*, be a delegate to a global warming conference at the *World Climate Change Conference*, or a manager of PepsiCo in *Davos - State of the World*. The viewer then plays the role as in that theatrical game of pretending, of being another, rather than being what the actor does, in this case, it is the viewer who does this.

The Rimini Protokoll has produced pieces in places as different as Iran and South Korea. What is your relationship to the institutions in those places?

How do we get in touch with them? It is rare that we come into contact with someone we do not know. It has happened, but it is not common. When we have a very fixed idea that we want to realize, sometimes we look for co-producers. However, in most of those more distant places, such as South Korea, people had seen our work and then invited us to do it.

Is putting on shows in countries other than in Europe or in North America something you are looking for in some way?

First, I have to say that in Germany there are two structural ways of producing theater. There is the state theater, which consumes something like eighty-five percent of subsidies, which have their castings fixed. They are basically there to always make new plays within the city with a schedule that has very defined standards of something we would call “production industry”: each piece has six weeks of rehearsal, has the scenography, in the center there is a cast. Sometimes it’s a contemporary text, sometimes it’s a classic. So, basically they have a task of producing formats that are quite predefined.

On the other hand, there is the free scene, which has no fixed subsidies, but can find co-producers and seek money through certain mechanisms. So, the pieces within the free scene also subsist from the fact that they move between cities, nowadays more than before. There used to be more site-specific pieces that were made for a place. At the moment, I have the impression that this model has almost disappeared.

Now, taking a piece on tour can mean many different things. A strategy, from about 2006, that perhaps could also be described in the Rimini Protokoll’s path is the idea of inventing formats that travel without repeating exactly the same piece, but reinventing a certain idea in different places. I say 2006, because in 2006 I made *Cargo Sofia-X - A Bulgarian truck-ride through European cities* (*Cargo Sofia-X Eine europäische LastKraftWagen-Fahrt*), which at the time was a very site-specific piece, but which was carried out according to certain standards established in Berlin. We did a different play, but with the same dramaturgy and the same narration in Essen, in Avignon, in many cities. These projects are a little site-specific and need more time than simply traveling with a play, as we are going to travel with *Granma*. That is the standard within the free scene that moves from one theater to another. We have two days, or a set-up day and then on the second day in the evening we have the show. Then, the following day has the second show and we travel to another city. This is a model and these formats that I say are very different because sometimes few people travel. For instance, in the case of *100% City*, there were three of us, in the case of *Remote X*, also three - two audio-designers and a writer. But they stay for two weeks in the city to carry out the new version, to investigate in detail and adapt to the language, the context, the geography of the place and to recreate a new local version of the same project.

Was that called city-specific?

Yes, it was. But, classically, site-specific has always been a piece that was not transportable. We even established a festival with Lola Arias called *Ciudades Paralelas - Parallel Cities* (*Ciudades Paralelas - Parallele Städte*) (2010) which was precisely for formats that could be transported from city to city. The title *Ciudades Paralelas* implied, in a certain way, that there were certain mechanisms that were very similar from city to city. We can take advantage of the fact that globalization has made us alike and, if we can afford to have enough time, look at local differences.

Do you have specific interests in working with and in Latin America?

One personal reason is that I was married to Lola Arias and we worked together for a long time. I also speak Spanish and Portuguese which gives me an affinity that other German artists may not have to work in Latin America. I have always been curious about how Brazil, Argentina and other countries develop.

How was the beginning of the *Granma. Trombones from Havana*?

It must be ten years since I have been going to Cuba from time to time, on different occasions such as when I was invited to participate in a festival or to give a workshop and I have always been curious if it was possible to carry out a project. There are theater artists there who are a little frustrated by the fact that the older generation occupies the central places, as it is also the case in society in general. This generation is made of theater directors who have been directors for at least many years. They are old white men and they have left no room for young people who have new interests. These young people have a documentary interest, an interest in innovative approaches, which finds a small audience, but does not find institutional support. Thus, we started to think about ways we could invent a project in which some of these young directors could, on the one hand, participate in research learning how to make documentary theater, and also, to collaborate and contribute with their ideas.

How was the work process? How did you choose the question, the theme and the structure?

Around two and a half years ago I went to Cuba with the intention to work with five young directors for the first time. We interviewed a lot of people

and with those interviews we defined what kind of people we would be looking for, the ones we found searched for more people and interviewed them. They sent me a lot of materials so we could pre-select the interviews.

Then, when we went to Cuba, we chose some people from the pre-selected ones. In the end they came here (Berlin) and we worked seriously on the theme of the generation of grandparents. We chose it because many Cubans have this personal connection with their grandparents: they live in the same house since moving to your own place is not so easy in Cuba. At the same time, it seems interesting that, in the young generation, there are many people revolted by what the older generation created with the Revolution with his utopias and which later became complicated for different reasons.

It is a way of telling the history of the country and, at the same time, telling the story of a place of projection for the global left. Also from Brazil, which has just expelled Cuban doctors, but, during the time that the PT (Workers' Party)¹ was in the presidency, Brazil was very connected with Cuba. There was a friendship between them and the projection of a form of justice, of social security - quite unique in Latin America.

At the beginning of these projects with non-actors, do you usually have a previous goal of telling a certain story or is the process open to things that come up in the research?

It is very different in each project. In *Davos* we knew exactly what the set design was going to be like before looking for our protagonists, and we knew how the audience system of assigning each viewer a role would be. In *Granma*, the format was the only thing defined - it was going to be stage performance with a traditional audience disposition - but the focus changed a lot. In the beginning we wanted to do a play with elderly people from that generation of the grandparents. While being there I realized that I didn't really want to work with these people who have always dominated the discourse in Cuban society. Having young people as protagonists seemed more interesting.

On the opposite side from Cuba, we have had the radicalization of fascist discourses in Europe and Latin America. What theatrical manners can we

¹ NT - From 2003 to 2016 Brazil was run by this political party, with the former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and his successor, President Dilma Rousseff. In 2016 Brazilian Congress removed then-President Dilma Rousseff.

take up in this world of political radicalization?

There are approaches of artistic radicalization, of escape and of mediation. The Radicalization approach here in Germany can be seen, for example, in groups such as *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit!*. These groups genuinely use theater as a place of activism. In many cases, they come out of the theater, creating kinds of *media sculptures*. There has been this tradition since Christoph Schlingensiefel, a very important director who was highly political and also highly disseminated through the media. At some point he even had his own talk show and it was very polemical. This polemic and counter-polemic practice is a possible attitude.

In addition to it, I see a lot of escapism at the moment, a theater that doesn't really get rid of politics completely, but looks for more formalism. It works with a form of cyber-aesthetics, mythology and many works around magic, and all sorts of things that I haven't seen for a long time.

In this context, our work remains a way of understanding, of generating an understanding, of being integrative. If you take a job as the play *100% City*, you see the desire to integrate the whole society during the casting to find these hundred people. So, you can also see in this work the desire to have a variety of people on stage, including those who have conservative political views. Sometimes we want more and sometimes less variety of controversy, but we want to have non-racists and racists, both people who believe in global warming and others who say it is a conspiratorial invention. We want to have people in favor of gay marriage and people who think that letting gays adopt a child would be the end of the world.

The coexistence of all these attitudes seems to me to create the possibility of a social force, of a very interesting social movement because I see a limit on people's patience when listening to others and a common desire to form opinions very quickly. I have always been more interested in the other side of society, and not so much in the ones that I understand and have affinities. Still, I see that our communication technologies on social media, and its sociability consists precisely in uniting people who think alike and exclude those who have a different opinion. I believe that Brazil could be a place with a lot of potential, a place with the possibility of listening to the other side.

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