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# The Ruins of Europe: Milo Rau's *Europe Trilogy* and the (Re)Mediation of the Real\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper takes Milo Rau's *Europe Trilogy* as a prism through which to examine the potential of theater as a medium not only for political and social critique, but also for presenting an alternative European imaginary and community of memory. *The Civil Wars* (2014), *The Dark Ages* (2015), and *Empire* (2016) explore the foundations of European memory and identity against the backdrop of war and genocide, religious fundamentalism,

exile and displacement. Structured around the points of intersection between the actors' own lives and key events in recent European history, the trilogy troubles the distinction between reality and artifice, representation and reportage, and deconstructs the single narrative of European memory by multiplying voices and stories, emphasizing the transcultural interconnectedness of present-day Europeans.

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### Part I: Alas, Poor Joris

Before the beginning of Milo Rau's 2014 performance piece *The Civil Wars* the audience enters to find a replica of the balcony of a baroque theater, complete with red velvet curtains, cherubs, and chandeliers. When the performance begins, the stage rotates to reveal a small bourgeois living room, with a pale green sofa at its center. Four actors are on stage: two are sitting on the sofa, one on a chair, and one sits behind a camera that is set up slightly towards the right of the living room, aimed at the sofa. After a prolonged silence, one of the actors, Sébastien Foucault, begins to speak—not to the audience, but to the side, into the camera. His face appears, magnified and in black and white, on a large screen above the stage, facing the audience. “I don't know if you remember,” he says in French,

the video in which a functionary of the Assad administration is publicly executed by young jihadists. It is all being recorded on an iPhone. They slit his throat with a knife, and suddenly, from the off, you hear voices shouting in Flemish: *op z'n buik, op z'n buik! On his belly! On his belly!*<sup>1</sup>

Like many people at the time, Sébastien explains, he was taken aback by the sudden irruption of a familiar idiom in this radically alien context. Rather than a manifestation of a distant “barbarism,” this act was suddenly and uncannily much closer to home: not only are Europeans among the jihadists, but Belgians as well! He wonders: “What is it that drives young people who were born here, who grew up here around us, to run off and to take part in the horror of a civil war that is not theirs?” What does this war have to do with them and, moreover, if “they” are really “us,” then is this in some sense our war as well? Why is it that these young men are spurred to action, whereas his own response to the news from Syria and the Middle East is a feeling of benumbed apathy? Sébastien tells us how he began to research the background of the conflict in Syria and to seek out the families of the young men who joined ISIS. In this way he learned about Joris, and met Joris's father, who went

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.





to Syria to bring his son home. In his living room with the pale green sofa, the family photos and knick-knacks, Joris's father told Sébastien how he was taken for a spy and tortured, how he eventually managed to flee, but had to return to Belgium without his son. Deeply impressed by this man's strength and determination, Sébastien wondered: who would not dream of a father like this? Would his father have done the same for him? And, moreover, what kind of father is he for his own children? What has he actively done to make the world a better place for them?

Against this background, as if to respond to the question of what drives these young men to leave and to fight, in a sense, against Europe, *The Civil Wars* zooms in on the society in which they grew up, the backdrop to their childhoods. These jihadists are children of our time, of our Europe, our society. Throughout the play, the examination of this society unfolds through a series of monologues in which the actors Sébastien Foucault, Sara de Bosschere, Johan Leysen, and Karim Bel Kacem recount episodes from their own lives. They speak about their childhood and youth, their lives as actors, their families, but mostly about their fathers, who were all failures in one way or another, either through their absence, weakness, or their tyrannical violence. The performers' problematic relationship with their fathers and their search for alternative father figures and role models constitutes a point of connection between them and the jihadists, a fact which is reinforced visually by the stage-set: a replica of Joris's father's living room.

In what follows I show how the first two parts of the *Europe Trilogy*, *The Civil Wars* (2014) and *The Dark Ages* (2015)—the third part, *Empire*, will premiere later this year—explore the foundations of European identity and memory against the backdrop of war and genocide, religious fundamentalism, migration, exile and displacement, but also reconstruction and reconciliation. What does it mean to be European now, and how does Europe's past continue to haunt its present? Moreover, which events in the past are deemed foundational for European identity? There is a by now well-established tradition of regarding the Holocaust and the Second World War as the “founding myth” of contemporary Europe, and particularly the European Union (Diner; Assmann; Probst), but such a genealogy tends to leave out European citizens whose roots and heritage lie elsewhere (cf. Leggewie;





Pakier and Stråth). Second- or third-generation immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, for example, may legitimately feel that this past has little to do with them, which, in turn, may exacerbate feelings of exclusion from the imagined community of Europe. Furthermore, the persistent emphasis on the Holocaust and the Second World War tends to coincide with self-congratulatory conceptions of Europe and the EU since then as an inherently peaceful and humanitarian entity; a perception that culminated in the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU in 2012, in the midst of the growing refugee crisis, domestic terrorism, and the continued rise of right-wing populist parties throughout Europe. Part of the ambition of Rau's trilogy, I argue, is therefore first to create a sense of European *dis*-unity and heterogeneity, and subsequently to find alternative points of connection and alternative genealogies in order to forge a different community. In short, the *Europe Trilogy* deconstructs the single narrative of European memory by multiplying voices and stories at the same time as it undermines nationalist and essentialist anti-European rhetoric by emphasizing the transcultural interconnectedness of present-day Europeans.

While the overall structure of *The Civil Wars* is roughly chronological, the stories do not form a coherent narrative. Rather, it is a collage of different fragments assembled into five chapters (or five acts, with prologue and epilogue; recalling the structure of classical tragedy) that provide a loose framework and dramatic arc. Their titles, "The Great Movements," "The Elect," "History of Madness," "Treatise on Method," and "Apocalypse," projected onto the screen and accompanied by baroque music, serve not only to separate the acts of the play and present moments of reflection for the audience, but also to introduce a complex web of intertextual associations. For example, the third chapter, "History of Madness," recalls Michel Foucault's influential work and is thus on the one hand a play on Sébastien's family name—indeed, as we discover, his father's name was actually Michel. On the other hand, however, it also serves as an allusion to the Western discourse of reason, enlightenment, and universal history, as well as the institution of biopolitical control and population management that went along with it. Furthermore, these chapter titles attain a different valence when seen in the context of contemporary Islamic extremism: ISIS also consider themselves a great





movement of liberation, moving toward an apocalyptic end of history. Thus, traditional Eurocentric rhetoric of progress, emancipation, and freedom is reflected back via a distorting mirror. On the concrete level of Rau's piece, this framework creates resonances and echoes among the different stories of the actors, as well as between their stories and those of Joris and other jihadists.

In this way, *The Civil Wars* emerges as a kaleidoscopic and intimate portrait of the wars within our own living rooms; a reflection on the points of intersection of these personal wars with the larger, collective political events and developments within and outside of Europe. The lost battle against capitalism, the uprooting experience of migration, moral and emotional disorientation, spiritual homelessness—each story is a variation on these themes. Sébastien's father, Michel Foucault, lost control of the family firm when it was swallowed up by a large conglomerate, and after many futile attempts at regaining his footing he began to gradually lose his mind. In the end, he died of cancer. Sara's father, a Trotskyist, but also a successful and passionate computer engineer at IBM, wanted to change the system from within but ended up in the psychiatric hospital. Karim's father, having come from Morocco to France in the 1970s to seek a better future, instead found poverty, crime, and destitution. He succumbed to alcoholism and took out his frustrations on his wife and children. Johan's father died in a car crash when Johan was still a child. The four actors' life stories are connected through their fathers' absence, be it literal, as in Johan's case, metaphorical, through financial ruin or ideological disillusionment and depression, as in Sébastien's and Sara's case, or, as in Karim's case, wished-for (Karim recounts how he once plotted to kill his father but never went through with it).

At the beginning of the play, Joris's father is established as a counterpoint to these ineffectual and failed father figures, as the agent in a narrative of reconciliation and redemption. Following his initial abortive attempt, Joris's father returned to Syria and in the end succeeded in bringing his son home. This narrative arc invites comparisons with the parable of the prodigal son and thus allegorically stands for the reinstatement of the family bond and patrilineal succession. Thus, in the epilogue, when Sébastien meets Joris at his home, the viewer, familiar





with narratives of redemption, will expect a *dénouement* in which order is restored and the nuclear family reunited. These expectations are immediately thwarted, however, when Joris reveals himself to be thoroughly unrepentant and just as convinced of the jihadist cause as before. The father, seated on his pale green couch watching TV, seems “unwilling or unable to recognize that he has lost his son for good,” as Sébastien says. This in turn renders the couch as the centerpiece of the stage-set ambiguous in its significance: whereas prior to this moment it might have served as a symbol of *Heimat*, homecoming, and reconciliation, it now takes on resonances of deliberate blindness regarding disharmony, discord, and alienation. The *Heimat* has become *unheimlich*. In the broader context of the piece and the trilogy, if the living room had stood for Europe as a shared living space, then this final revelation indicates the blindness of the fathers of Europe to their own inefficacy. At the same time, the living room has become a setting for the lateral exchange of stories and experiences between the four actors.

Based on these intimate accounts, *The Civil Wars* establishes a series of key issues that sketch out the thematic parameters for the *Europe Trilogy* as a whole: the relationship between fathers and sons, self and other, individual and collective, history and memory, and between engagement and responsibility versus quietism and apathy. According to Rau, the trilogy aims to “map out the moral, political, historical, and emotional concept of Europe” (Rau, “Empire” 3). But beyond that, it also addresses pressing questions about the premises for political engagement today, and reflects on the potential of theater as a medium; not only for political and social critique, but also for presenting an alternative model of community and European imaginary.

Both *The Civil Wars* and *The Dark Ages* gather an international cast from across Europe and are structured around points of intersection between the actors’ own lives and key events in recent European history. On stage they take turns listening to each other’s stories, which, given their traumatic family histories, presents a way for them to form a communal bond outside the family: a lateral, elective, and transnational affiliation. Critics have read the pieces in terms of psychoanalysis as a form of group therapy, where the intergenerational and interpersonal relationships form a prism through which the actors and the audience





explore the larger questions about Europe and its specters, conducting a “political psychoanalysis of an old continent ... which may not produce all that many wars any more, but does bring forth ever new fighters” (Fellmann). Certainly, the trilogy lends itself to and even openly invites a psychoanalytic reading (not least given the prominent position of the couch in *The Civil Wars*). At the same time, in addition to stylistic devices like the revolving stage, the five-act structure, and the real-time video projection, the pieces that make up the trilogy also employ multiple layers of mediation, remediation, intertextuality, and allusion. These function as a means of extending the significance and relevance of the personal stories, but also of complicating our relationship to and understanding of them. It is significant that the performers should almost all be professional actors: even though the stories they tell are their own, they are inflected through their experience of playing various other roles, prompting a reflection on the reciprocal relationship between their personal and professional lives, between reality and artifice, truth and fiction.

It is important to note that this blurring of distinctions is not undertaken in the mode of postmodern irony or merely for its own sake. On the contrary, Rau’s approach is entirely sincere, without being moralizing or didactic in the way that documentary theater can often be. As a result, Rau’s work becomes very difficult to place within any established contemporary theatrical genre. Rau’s handling of historical documents and sources is far too free and opaque for his work to qualify as documentary theater; nor can it unproblematically be characterized as postdramatic theater in the tradition of Heiner Müller, Elfriede Jelinek, and Heiner Goebbels, with its poststructuralist preoccupation with semiotics and authorship, even though Rau’s use of media on stage clearly owes a debt to this tradition (cf. Bossart 7–8; Lehmann). Rau is not interested in exposing the artificiality of everyday life or the constructed nature of media discourse, but rather, unapologetically, in revealing the truth.<sup>2</sup> His is a theater not of realism but of the Real. In

2. In this regard, his approach to history and representation is perhaps most closely aligned to that of Alexander Kluge, who also makes use of “authentic” documents and found materials, but transforms and adjusts them to suit his purpose, and does so without indicating his editorial interventions or even the sources he is using.





Lacanian terms, the Real is that which cannot be represented and falls outside the symbolic and imaginary orders. Every encounter with the Real is always immediate (unmediated). The idea of a “remediation of the Real” may appear as a contradiction in terms, but it is nevertheless an apt description of Rau’s theater: interested neither in mimetic realism nor in immersive spectacle, but rather seeking to facilitate an encounter with an effect of the Real, which one might call the “uncanny.” The uncanny may be described as an irruption of the Real into the symbolic order, resulting in a sense of disorientation. We might for instance regard the moment when Sébastien hears the ISIS militants speaking Flemish as such an uncanny moment: for him, it was the visceral experience of the coordinates of his image of the world recalibrating themselves. This experience cannot be represented or recreated directly, and nor can the performance hope to induce an analogous experience in the audience mimetically. The aim of Rau’s performances is not to provide an alternative representation of “Europe as it really is,” or to communicate information that would cause the audience to reconsider their attitudes, but rather to facilitate encounters between lives, histories, and memories that may engender an unforeseen point of connection or reorientation. The theater, for Rau, “is not an information medium, and it’s not an educational medium, it’s a medium for the present or, rather, for presenting the present” (qtd. in Scheller 145). The implication of this definition is that we do not in fact experience the present fully, and that it must therefore be (re)presented—made present—to us, so that we may, as it were, experience it for the first time. This, moreover, takes the form of an event; it happens in the present moment, and the outcome cannot be determined in advance. In this way, one might characterize Rau’s aesthetics as an aesthetics of emergence.

## Part II: “Just so”

The cornerstone of Rau’s aesthetics is laid out in his 2009 manifesto entitled “Was ist Unst?” (approximately, “What Is [ ]rt?”), namely the principle of the “just so” (*genau so*). The *Ünstler*, or [ ]rtist, is committed to an exact reproduction of reality, which is not a mimetic representation but something more akin to a re-enactment or repetition. The *Ünstler*





must have faith in “the given moment,” in which, like the *bricoleur*, s/he must discover the tools necessary to “unpack” or “dissect” it. That is to say, *Unst*, as Rau conceives of it, is a form of realism that is radically contingent and open, and hence, while not eschewing framing devices and intertextuality, refuses to inscribe that reality within a linear narrative framework or pre-conceived teleological arc. As a result, Rau’s pieces are simultaneously authentic, heterogeneous, and open-ended assemblages of real-life experiences, *and* fully scripted, highly stylized, and intertextually overdetermined. This in turn complicates any psychoanalytic reading that we might conduct, in that psychoanalysis, as a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” tends to want to move beyond surface appearances to a deeper, hidden or repressed truth. What lies on the surface is thus only ever a symptom of something else. Rau’s aesthetics of the “just so,” by contrast, is committed to a careful and faithful reproduction of reality as it appears in the given moment. That is to say, although the personal stories told by the actors in *The Civil Wars* and *The Dark Ages* exhibit certain communal traits such as, for example, a preoccupation with absent fathers, this does not mean that they can be reduced to mere allegories, even though the allegorical dimension certainly does play a part, as we shall see.

In the prospectus for *Empire*, the third part of the trilogy, Rau offers a typology of his theatrical work with the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM), of which he is the founder and artistic director. This work can be grouped in three distinct formats, which the IIPM have developed: reenactments of recent historical events, including the trial and execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, the radio broadcasts during the Rwandan genocide, and Anders Breivik’s statement in his own defense at his trial in Oslo; secondly a hybrid genre of show trials on controversial current issues, including censorship in Russia (the Pussy Riot affair among others), press freedom and xenophobia in Switzerland, and neo-colonialist involvement in the civil war in Congo. These performances involve actual lawyers and individuals implicated in the issues at stake and are conducted like a real trial, complete with a jury and a final verdict that remains unclear until the end. Perhaps more than any other, this form of theatrical performance exemplifies the contingency and openness of Rau’s aesthetic as well as its un-ironic





blurring of the boundary between real life and theater. The *Europe Trilogy* constitutes the third category, which Rau labels narrative theater, specifying that it does not hinge on the “exotic singularity of the individual narrators” but rather seeks to find a “universal language for the tragedies of our time”:

Europeans tell anecdotes from their lives, but the further they delve into their most personal and private fears and traumas, the more their lives assume a historical character, revealing themselves to be intimately bound up with the history of our continent—this is reinforced by the simultaneous projection of their faces onto a giant screen. In this way, private individuals become allegorical figures or, as *Der Spiegel* wrote about *The Dark Ages*: “They speak their lines which of course are their own, as if they had been written by some other author. The effect is that their personal, private stories take on a universal dimension.” (Rau, “Empire” 6)

There are thus at least two different doublings at work in these performances: on the visual level there is the doubling of the speaker’s face through the video projection. This is preceded by the doubling of the text, whereby the actors’ own stories are transformed into a script that they then perform like any other role. To this we can add a third doubling, namely that of the audience. Throughout the performance, all the actors are on stage, and while only one of them speaks at a time, the other three, particularly the one operating the video camera, form the primary audience for these stories, and the fourth wall remains intact. The actors do not look directly at us, except via the medium of the video camera. In this way the impression is less that of an intimate confession or testimony with the actors confiding in us but rather of a series of interviews that we are shown on screen in the form of a documentary. Ultimately, the performed interview becomes a reenactment or repetition of the interviews Rau conducted in preparation for the pieces.

The intercession of the video camera and the documentary aesthetic that emerges as a result complicates our relationship to the material as well. When Sébastien begins his narrative by saying “I don’t





know if you remember,” it is ambiguous who this you (*vous*) is. Is he addressing the other actors, the audience, or an unknown and absent viewer of this recording? The multiplying of doublings and repetitions troubles the authenticity and immediacy of our access to these stories, which themselves become in some sense spectral, haunted by their own future absence, and by the as yet unforeseen arrival of an addressee. This dynamic is further complicated by the presence of a second camera suspended above the coffee table, looking down. At various points in the performance the speaker will place a photograph or other document beneath this second camera, whereupon it appears on the screen. These documents provide a visual record of the past relating to the story being told by the actor. What we see is a reproduction of a reproduction, a copy of a copy, which in turn is embedded in real time within this performance, which itself is a reenactment of an earlier act of narration. In this way, past, present, and future become entangled. In “Was ist Unst?” Rau insists, somewhat enigmatically, that through the work of the *Ünstler* the past, present, and the future become one and the same. Through his or her commitment to the “just so” of the present moment (*Jetztzeit*), the *Ünstler* in some sense produces posterity (*Nachzeit*), which itself can only ever be conceived of as a given moment that occurs contemporaneously (*gleichzeitig*) (Rau, “Was ist Unst?” 117). The given moment always takes place in the present, it happens “now,” but it also contains itself as its own past and having-been-future. Each given moment is thereby divided against itself, it is both contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous with itself. In this way, it corresponds to what Jacques Derrida calls “[a] spectral moment,” a moment that “no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: ‘now,’ future present)” (xix). The present is always haunted by the past and the future, just as presence is always haunted by absence. This is what Derrida calls “hauntology” (10), a (semi-playful) neologism to describe the non-self-presence of being to itself. Every “ontology,” every being and every moment, is haunted by the specters of that which is not present, both in the sense of those who are no longer here because they have died, and those who are not yet here because they have not yet been born. For Derrida, any conception of justice or responsibility,





politics, and ethics, is grounded in this spectrality or hauntological structure. On a formal level, we can say that the pieces that make up the *Europe Trilogy* enact this haunting in the multiple ways just described, and on a thematic level the pieces revolve around questions of inheritance, heritage, justice, responsibility, the debt to the past, and our debt to the future. And in keeping with the dualism of the personal and the allegorical, these questions pertain to the actors' personal histories and to the cultural heritage of the European continent.

This is underlined by the use of canonical intertexts that resonate with the actors' stories, producing patterns of diffraction. Indeed, the choice of intertext is itself contingent on the diffraction patterns that emerge out of the preliminary interviews that Rau conducts with the actors. For *The Civil Wars* it is Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, which Sara brings up in act four. In Chekhov's play, the orchard served as a metaphor for Russia, and particularly the legacy of feudalism and exploitation that built it. In the context of *The Civil Wars*, it becomes a metaphor for Europe, when Sara and Johan act out a scene. Sara plays Trofimov, a young student, and Johan plays Anya, the daughter of the estate owner.

**JOHAN [Anya]:** Why don't I love the cherry orchard as I used to? I loved it so dearly, I thought there was no better place on earth than our orchard.

**SARA [Trofimov]:** All Russia is our orchard. The land is great and beautiful, there are many wonderful places in it. Just think, Anya: your grandfather, your great-grandfather and all your ancestors were serf-owners who owned living souls, and those human beings must surely be looking at you from every cherry-tree in the orchard, from every leaf, from every trunk, don't you hear their voices ... We've got at least two hundred years behind, we have nothing at all yet, no defined relationship to the past ... it's so very clear that to begin to live in the present we must first redeem our past, finish with it, and we can redeem it only by suffering, only by exceptional, ceaseless labour. (Chekhov 316, trans. mod.)





In this scene, the aforementioned problems of inheritance, responsibility, and debt are clearly evident. Europe as the cherry orchard has been bequeathed to us by our absent fathers: a debt-ridden liability. The financial debt is compounded by a moral debt to the ghosts of these “living souls,” whose un-free labor has built the orchard. But much as we might want to rid ourselves of this debt or refuse the inheritance altogether, this is impossible. Such is the nature of specters: “*one must reckon with them. One cannot not have to, one must not not be able to reckon with them*” (Derrida xx). But neither can one accept the inheritance fully in a way that would lay the past to rest and put a stop to the haunting. Even if the goal would be to “finish with” the past, as Trofimov puts it, this requires a “ceaseless labour” and suffering on our part, which, by definition, cannot come to an end, but which we must nevertheless carry out. This is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [working through of or coming to terms with the past] as an ongoing and never-ending process, but one that must be undertaken for the sake of the future.

### Part III: The Ruins of Europe

This “ceaseless labour” continues in *The Dark Ages*, where the intertext is, appropriately enough, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Against the backdrop of the war in Yugoslavia, the piece continues the exploration of the overarching themes of European identity, heritage, and memory, political action, guilt, and personal responsibility. The piece features five performers, two from Germany and three from the former Yugoslavia. They are Manfred Zapatka, a well-known German actor, who tells of his childhood at the end of the war, his decision to become an actor, and the conflict with his brother over the inheritance of their father’s house; Valery Tscheplanowa, an actress who emigrated with her mother from the Soviet Union to Germany in the late 1980s, whose story also revolves around her acting career and her relationship with her father. The personal histories of the other three performers reveal very different experiences of the conflict in Yugoslavia. While the Serbian actress and artist Sanja Mitrović describes the NATO bombing of Belgrade as the best time in her life, characterized by parties, drugs,





and rock 'n' roll, Vedrana Seksan, an actress from Sarajevo, narrowly escaped with her life on several occasions. The fifth performer is Sudbin Musić, a Bosnian Muslim who is not a professional actor but works for an NGO dedicated to helping survivors of the war find their relatives in mass graves. The stage-set is a replica of his office where he listens to the survivors' stories. Sudbin is himself a survivor. In 1992, he witnessed how Serbian militias massacred the Muslim population of his town, including his father, whom they threw into a well. In 1998 he was present for the exhumation of his father's body, which, by that time, was reduced to a skeleton. Sudbin recognized the sweater his father was wearing, which had, in fact, belonged to *him*, and, being made of synthetic fiber, had not decomposed to the same extent. "Imagine," Sudbin says, "holding your father's head in your hands. Nothing but bones. Just a skull." But a skull is never just a skull. So while Sudbin may literally have held his father's skull in his hands in order to identify him, this gesture is also so culturally overdetermined that when remediated in *The Dark Ages*, it precipitates his transformation into an allegorical version of himself as Hamlet, marked visually by his donning a renaissance style doublet.

The association with Hamlet continues to resonate through the piece: immediately following Sudbin's story Valery recounts how she played Ophelia in Dimiter Gotscheff's Berlin production of Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*. Gotscheff, who played Hamlet in his own production, had arranged to take the play to Cuba, but, having been diagnosed with cancer, was unable to travel. Instead, a recording was made which could be projected during the performance onto a large screen. Gotscheff died the day before the company left for Cuba, and so his performance took on an additional spectral dimension: Hamlet too had become a ghost. At this point the recording of Gotscheff as Hamlet appears on the screen above the *Dark Ages* set, implicitly acknowledging the fact that Rau's own scenography is also haunted by the ghosts of the dramatic (and postdramatic) tradition. Furthermore, this strange transformation of the son into the father was already prefigured uncannily in Sudbin's story, where the father was exhumed wearing the sweater belonging to his son. This recognition of the father's remains is then ultimately a kind of self-recognition. And this figure





of self-recognition in the father returns in Valery's narrative when she describes how she reconnected with her father who had stayed behind in Kazan when she and her mother emigrated to Germany. As she explains, he had become a stranger to her until a specific gesture triggered the realization that they had the same hands and the same gestures. This, too, is an inheritance, which she cannot refuse. Years later, when her father died, she discovered that he had left his apartment to her, and, not having any use for it, she sold it. Some time later she received a videotape that showed her father with his best friend and colleagues, where again she recognized her own hand gestures in his. In the final shot, a woman's voice off-camera tells them to wave, but her father just smiles. This haunting image of her father refusing to wave goodbye marks the end of *The Dark Ages*.

### Conclusion: The Play's the Thing

In this description of *The Dark Ages* I have emphasized only one strand of a much more complex web of stories, associations, and memories that make up the piece. A peculiar feature of the *Europe Trilogy* and of Rau's open aesthetics is that its rhizomatic structure allows for almost unlimited points of entry and, depending on which facets one emphasizes, the resulting image will be remarkably different, but equally grounded in the text. This is important to emphasize as a counterweight to the focus on spectrality and the ghosts of absent fathers, which threatens to reinscribe these dynamics within an Oedipal structure of patrilineal succession and intergenerational conflict. Thus, if I have now presented a psychoanalytic and intertextual analysis, singling out the *Hamlet* references and the inheritance narratives, this reading leaves out other possible and equally prominent aspects, particularly pertaining to the war in Yugoslavia, and, above all, the themes of homelessness and displacement that recur in all of the performers' biographies. This creates parallels between the end of the Second World War in Germany (Manfred Zapatka, whose family home was destroyed in the Allied bombings), the end of the Soviet Union (Valery Tscheplanowa, whose parents lost their jobs under Perestroika), and the dissolution of Yugoslavia (the three performers from the former





Yugoslavia were all displaced during or after the end of the war and in some cases did not return). All five were born in nation-states that no longer exist and so their personal histories follow a trajectory from the horrific reality of displacement to an acceptance of a cosmopolitan or even nomadic identity as Europeans.

The motif of homelessness as a constant or even “transcendental” state informs the *Europe Trilogy* as a whole. In *The Civil Wars* the homelessness is primarily, though not exclusively, metaphorical, spiritual, and ideological: the biographies of the actors attest to the disappearance of the traditional European grand narratives and political positions (the crisis of the left and the rise of neoliberalism) and the demographic shifts in the wake of decolonization. In *The Dark Ages* this spiritual homelessness is compounded by the reality of post-conflict displacement within Europe. The third part of the trilogy will broaden the perspective yet further to focus on refugees coming to Europe from outside, across the southern and eastern borders. As Rau writes in the prospectus for *Empire*, the piece will focus not only on the current refugee crisis, but also on previous waves of refugees, e.g. the “boat people” (“Empire” 6). Taking its cue from the current debates about the refugee crisis and placing it in a wider historical and cultural framework, *Empire*, Rau writes, will consider “the question of ‘the New Europe’: a Europe that draws distinctions between welcome Syrians and unwelcome Bosnians, that plunders Africa’s resources, but rejects its refugees” (6). Like the first two parts of the trilogy, *Empire* will use intertextuality as a counterpoint to these current questions. The choice of the specific work will depend on the stories and the points of connection between them that emerge during the casting and interviewing process, but, according to the prospectus, the intertext will be taken from the classical Greek tradition, or, as Rau puts it “Europe’s first imperial age” (4). This characterization in turn adds another dimension to the intertexts for the other two parts of the trilogy, which were written in the early 17th century and the late 19th century, respectively—two key moments in Europe’s colonial history.

While the critical reception of *The Civil Wars* and *The Dark Ages* was largely positive, the pieces’ openness and heterogeneity also prompted some to complain that they lacked coherence and





failed to come together as a greater whole (Villiger Heilig). One critic even added that the references to Hamlet were too thin to provide a framework (Leucht), which is a negative confirmation of the fact that these allegorical aspects and intertextual elements cannot be read as a master-key to unlock the true significance of the pieces. Nevertheless, that same critic was moved to write that “as long as it is still possible to share such images and stories—across national and other boundaries—there is still hope for Europe as well” (Leucht). The emphasis on sharing experiences and stories is important here since this is the basic gesture of community. And it is also a fundamental function of the theater. As Hans-Thies Lehmann writes, theater is the site of a “*real gathering*, a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organized and everyday real life takes place” (17, original italics). The theater is thus not simply a medium for the transmission of content to a recipient but rather a forum, a place of assembly, in which something is produced communally. This is what Lehmann refers to as a “joint text” (17). In this light we might re-read Hamlet’s famous phrase “the play’s the thing” in terms of the etymology of the word “thing” emphasized by Martin Heidegger and re-appropriated by Bruno Latour as a place of gathering, assembly, and of working out communal “matters of concern” (Latour 232–4). Milo Rau’s specific brand of realism precisely emphasizes the collaborative and open-ended nature of this negotiation. In this regard, Rau is less an author than a facilitator of an encounter both on stage and off, between the audience and the play. What does this mean for his conception of Europe? Undoubtedly, Rau sees Europe as a question, a “matter of concern,” and not a “matter of fact,” and if his theater can be regarded as critical, which surely it is, then he is a critic in the Latourian vein: not one who “debunks,” but one who “assembles,” who “offers the participants arenas in which to gather” (246).

It is also in this light that we can begin to grasp the significance of the revolving stage, which in each of the three parts of the trilogy juxtaposes a domestic or private space with a symbol of the public sphere or the *polis*: the living room in *The Civil Wars* versus the baroque theater box; Sudbin’s office in *The Dark Ages* versus a massive stone tribune that recalls the aesthetics of totalitarian political rallies. In





*Empire*, the flipside of the stage will be a replica of a watchtower. Within the architecture of the trilogy as a whole, it is significant that the theater box should be on the side of these obvious symbols for authoritarianism and state control. Clearly, Rau is calling for a new form of theater that is not based on passive spectatorship and bourgeois conservatism, but rather on active participation and interpersonal dynamics. In each case, the “public” side is largely empty and sterile, whereas the “real gathering” takes place in the “private” setting, the *oikos*. This is where stories are exchanged and communities are formed.

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