



MILO RAU

ORESTES IN MOSUL

Golden Book III

Orestes in Mosul – Golden Book III
Published by NTGent

Editors in chief: Eline Banken, Stefan Bläske
Corrections: Lily Climenhaga, Liam Rees
Layout: Nina Wolters

Printed in Germany

ISBN: 978-3-95732-396-5

NTGent

The Golden Books are a joint project by NTGent and the Berlin publisher Verbrecher Verlag. It is a series comprising programme articles on theatre, aesthetics and politics as well as background pieces on productions and projects by NTGent. A series on both the theory and the practice of a 'city theatre of the future'.

Orestes in Mosul is the third volume in this series. It was published in April 2019 for the European premiere of Milo Rau's theatre production. The volume gathers material and original texts as well as background interviews about the production that has been created with actors from Europe and Iraq and with rehearsals and a pre-premiere in the city of Mosul.

What happens if a theatre group from Belgium goes to Mosul? How can a classic be actualized? And what can we learn from the suffering and the resistance of the population in Mosul under ISIS? This book offers an insight into the production, the research and the characters involved: the making of *Orestes in Mosul*.

Milo Rau was born in Bern in 1977 and works as a director, writer and activist. He is the author of more than 50 plays, films, books and actions. Since 2018 he has been the artistic director of NTGent. His most recent works published by Verbrecher Verlag are *Das Kongo Tribunal* (2017), *Lenin* (2017), *Global Realism* (2018) and *Lam Gods* (2018).



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“War is a pawnbroker – not of your treasures but of the lives of your men. Not of gold but of corpses. Give your man to the war-god and you get ashes.”

AESCHYLUS, ORESTEIA

MILO RAU

WHY ORESTES IN MOSUL?

Director Milo Rau and dramaturg Stefan Bläske in conversation about the Oresteia, working with the classics, and the fundamental questions about art and morality, Europe and the Middle East, violence and responsibility.

STEFAN BLAESKE: The *Oresteia* is one of the canonical dramas of European theatre history. You have, to date, primarily developed and directed your own plays – or even organised tribunals and activist events. So why this antique classic? What about the material interests you?

MILO RAU: I’m interested in connecting the confrontation of the antique tragedy with, on the one hand, the situation in Northern Iraq – thus, *Orestes in Mosul* – and, on the other, with our actors’ life stories. We had already visited Northern Iraq, for *Empire*, and the extreme age of these cultures – Aeschylus wrote his trilogy about 5000 years after the founding of Nineveh, or modern-day Mosul – and the topicality of these images have always astounded me. You find yourself in the antiquity of antiquity, in cultures that already had entire world histories behind them before the birth of Greece. At the same time, you find yourself standing, so to speak, in one of the images you see on TV: for example, in front of a destroyed mosque in Mosul. Everything is absolutely charged with contemporaneity and, therefore, with the themes of the *Oresteia*: with war, revenge, and the hope of reconstruction and forgiveness. The destruction of Mosul during its liberation from ISIS is merely the last step in a series of conquests and destructions dating back a thousand years, as we recount in the play.

During our last visit to Mosul, we were there explicitly searching for actors. There was, for example, a young student who told us how one of her classmates had been kidnapped by an IS-fighter; a man who, throughout the IS occupation, risked his life taking and uploading

Ca. 6000 BC: Foundation of Nineveh ++ Ca. 3000 BC: Foundation of Athens ++ Ca. 1200 – 1100 BC: Trojan

photographs; and another man whose hand had been cut off, because he returned to his family home to retrieve his schoolbooks after they had been confiscated. We're working with musicians who had to play music in secret, but who also played with the militias in control of the city today. When you enter Mosul, you drive through a forest of black flags, but they are no longer IS-flags but those of the Shia militia, and there are daily attacks in the city. The question is: What does the bloodthirsty rhetoric of the *Oresteia* evoke in the people of Mosul when they are confronted with it and with the ideology of democracy, of forgiveness? What about the Belgian and Dutch actors like Elsie de Brauw, Johan Leysen, or Bert Luppens when they have to present *Oresteia* – which they have often seen, and even performed, throughout their long, distinguished careers – in Northern Iraq with us, where they are confronted by these extreme stories? What happens when a psychological, formalist, Western art meets this equally radical and strange art of revolt?

My theatre is one of encounters, of temporal and spatial distancing, of human interaction, of biographies with a text, of countries and cultures. What relationship does Susana AbdulMajid or Duraid Abbas Ghaieb – whose families are respectively from Mosul and Bagdad, but both of whom have also lived in Europe for years – have with their homeland in Iraq? What happens when Marijke Pinoy, who typically works on creating and organising theatre-activism with our artist(s) in residence “Action Zoo Humain”, holds a workshop for acting students in Mosul? What happens when, at the place where IS executed homosexuals, Risto Kübar talks about his own sexuality – which is inscribed into our *Oresteia* in the homoerotic relationship between Orestes and Pylades? And of course, above all else: What happens when, during the trilogy's third part, the Mosul actors take over the roles themselves and perform the (impossibility of?) forgiveness? *Orestes in Mosul* is, so to speak, the making-of of an encounter, of a confrontation. What happens in an encounter among people, in

a place (Mosul), with the material (*Oresteia*) and each other?

STEFAN BLAESKE: At the start of your tenure as artistic director at the theatre, NTGent published a manifesto with ten rules for a “global realism”. One rule demands work in a war or crisis region. Another that the theatre-makers (i.e., the creative team themselves) become authors. How exactly are these rules to be understood?

MILO RAU: NTGent is a grand experiment on precisely this question of how to move from the tradition that was established in the bourgeois era of adapting plays, and later novels and films, towards a specifically theatrical, collective way of writing. Our production period is long because such processes take time and the production teams are extremely diverse. With the *Oresteia*, we once again noted just how absurd it would be to produce this text without the expertise of, for example, the Iraqi actors – because what do we actually know about revenge, about war, about suffering, and about hate? “We are the untouched,” says Risto Kübar, and our *Oresteia* is a play for his generation who are today in their mid-thirties. But we know other things, in the case of Risto it is his experience with chronic pain as well as moving away from Estonia and his homosexuality, which has become incredibly important for his interpretation of his role.

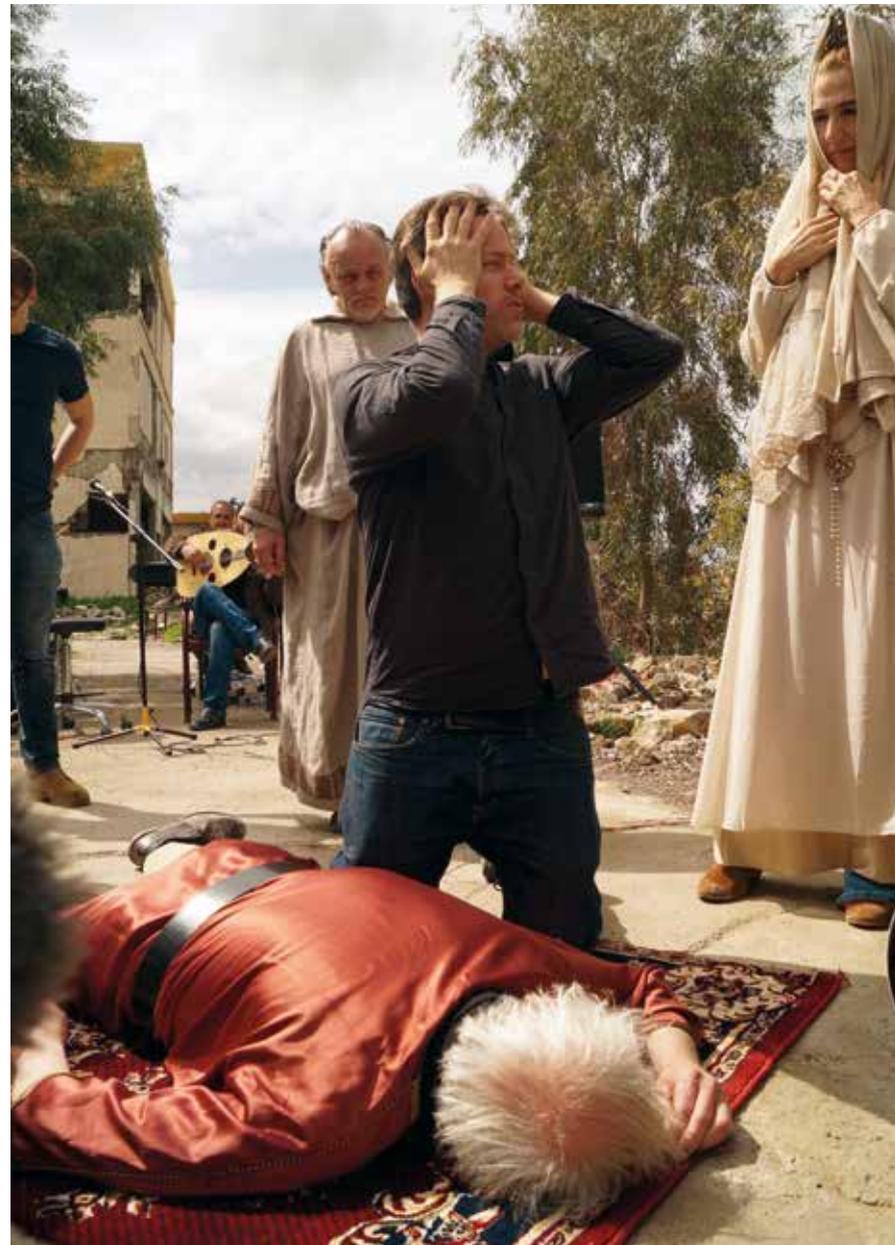
In short: Expertise is demanded from everyone because collective authorship is not a dream but a necessity. Because what else should concern us? When Shakespeare wrote his *Hamlet*, there were already many plays with this name that he could have used – but it was clear to him that, together with his ensemble, he had to write a new version of the material. It was written in rehearsals, in revisions, and even in the trial performances with audiences. Bourgeois theatre studies continue to wonder just how Shakespeare “could have known all of that”: how he could have known the human body, theology, justice – and also be a poet and have commercial success. How could he know about Italy, England, the fairy kingdom, and ancient Rome? The answer is simple: collective authorship knows a lot – and

I'm not talking about what we would ordinarily call "collective": people who speak the same language, who are from the same milieu, who met each other in art school or while studying theatre. No, it's about bringing people from massively different backgrounds and experiences together: different cultures, different languages, and different approaches to theatre.

For example, my production for the grand opening of NTGent, *Lam Gods (The Ghent Altarpiece)*, featured a Muslim cleaning lady, the mother of a jihadist, two actors from the former Ghent ensemble, a choir of children, Adams and Eves of all possible cultural backgrounds, believers, atheists, a new-born child, a dying woman, and so on and so forth. The centrifugal forces at work within the production are of course violent, and it is repeatedly asked: "What are we actually doing here" – on a moralistic as well as an aesthetic level. Is it a dignifying or exploitative act to show someone who's just died as we did in *Lam Gods*? What do you do when the mother of a jihadist is forced by her family to leave the production? How could someone propose the idea of showing the birth of his son on stage?

STEFAN BLAESKE: These were, for pragmatic reasons, played through video as was the slaughter of a sheep. The videos follow the logic of a documentary film: You show something – a birth, a death or the killing of animals – that happens every day but usually out of sight, hidden from our eyes. We also use these pre-produced videos in *Orestes in Mosul*, but this time for the virtual transfer of Mosul's people and ruins onto European stages. But returning to the question of authorship: How does someone who is interviewed or filmed and then appears in a Milo-Rau-evening become a co-author?

MILO RAU: In practice, the answer is simple: By taking part in the rehearsals, by writing the text, contributing his or her stories, his or her knowledge. But theatre is also a physical script, so the question arises morally. When two performers have sex on the stage: Is it an act of prostitution or an artistic metaphor for tenderness? When a



man whose hand was cut off by IS appears in *Orestes in Mosul*, when in *Lam Gods* a woman allows you to interview her on her deathbed – doesn't that, quite simply, cross a line? These questions become even more urgent in Mosul: Of course, because of the danger, but also because of the extreme risks our fellow actors have taken and continue to take in pursuit of their work. What does it actually mean to let two men kiss in front of the same building where gay men were thrown off of? Or, this photographer who secretly photographed executions, ready to pay with his life at any time for his work: How can you describe this practice of using the aesthetic terminology of a completely peaceful society like ours which has cleansed itself of all madness and danger? This is not, of course, a new problem: Until the 19th century, actors were regarded as either insane or prostitutes. Since then, the bourgeois theatre has been freed of – on the one hand – professionalism and – on the other – the principle of literature theatre. The body that returned in performance-theatre was an elite body, and the same is true of documentary theatre, where biographic stories are told not as theatrical or ritual stories but for a mosaic intended to contribute to a higher level of knowledge. But what happens if the theatre returns to the logic of a collective authorship that is not bolstered by some additional informative or performative value? What happens when a completely diverse, more or less random, group of people say: We are here to tell you about our world?

STEFAN BLAESKE: Let's take the work on *Orestes in Mosul* as a concrete example. According to your manifesto, when performing an existing text only a maximum of 20 percent of the original can be used. We're using the basic structure of the *Oresteia* – places and character constellations – and, in a few instances, also using fragments of the original text (in English and Arabic translations).

MILO RAU: The 20 percent rule makes it sound as if you have to erase 80 percent of the text and then completely re-invent it. But I believe that erasure and invention are all part of a dialectical process. It's

about traversing the text, reading and re-reading it, trying it out on stage, looking at what response it triggers or has triggered in myself and in others. It's a matter of transforming the levels of meaning within the text and its tradition. Two factors play an important role here: On the one hand, the question of how to adapt a classic text beyond the usual methods – beyond neoclassical form experiments or its translation into a soap opera where Agamemnon returns as a CEO or war criminal or whatever else. Of course, we were initially seduced by both, and you can see that in the production: As it were, our actors "show" the Iraqi actors "how we do that in Europe". But we didn't want to give in entirely to the seduction of the didactic, and we have, therefore, prepared extensively – almost pedantically – for the production of *Orestes in Mosul*. First philologically with a workshop that lasted several weeks that was dedicated exclusively to the first part of the trilogy and the performance tradition of the *Oresteia*. We then travelled to Mosul, a region we already knew from our research for our production, *Empire*.

STEFAN BLAESKE: During our trip in July 2016 for *Empire*, Mosul was still occupied by IS. To get to Sinjar and the Syrian border, we actually had to drive around it.

MILO RAU: Yes, it's an area whose topography and whose whole world is a warlike one – with a great impact on the lives of those who live there. Back in Sinjar and again this time in Mosul, I was struck by the various connections that stretch from the *Oresteia* to the current situation in the region: The theme of the unbreakable chain of murder and revenge, the desire for and the impossibility of self-determination and democracy, the deadly, entangled relations between the Middle East and Europe – the oil industry and the connected politics of power. In the third stage of preparation, which in truth lasted for several months, we worked on the central questions of "global realism". What is the purpose of a collaboration between European and Iraqi actors, between Iraq and Europe, between artists from Mosul

who have just re-emerged from the IS-nightmare and the twisted aesthetic possibilities of a Western city-theatre – apart from exoticism and misery tourism or, at best, on-site social work? And these were tough debates. What are the possibilities of intercultural collaboration that do not sink into the logic of Western charity or, conversely, self-irony, the petty-bourgeois celebration of failure and the ever-practical Teflon mechanism of “White Guilt” (all of which we celebrate in our production *Compassion*)? Can *Orestes in Mosul* be productive and not merely the repetition of the dependencies in the mode of representation?

STEFAN BLAESKE: And what could the possible answers be to these central questions?

MILO RAU: The practice itself: The answer is what happens on location during the rehearsals, and – in the best case – what develops from it. As Bert Luppés, who plays Aegisthus, said in a discussion: “The question is not ‘Why go there?’ – but more importantly: ‘How could we not go there?’ Especially because the wars happening there are so directly connected to us – by the oil industry as well as the fact that many of the people fighting there are from Europe. We were in the planning phase of the production in Mosul when, much to our surprise, we discovered an extreme hunger for culture: especially for music and dance. Under the occupation by IS, it was forbidden by death sentence to play any sort of music, so people played their instruments – provided they had any – in the basement. We are going to work with the different artistic circles there and above all else with the newly founded Academy of Fine Arts: an institution for art, music, and dance. There are a few professionals there, musicians above all else, who belong to the older generation who had done these jobs before 2014. But there are also many young people there who are just taking their first steps into the field.

STEFAN BLAESKE: But why, of all things, this play? Do you consider its themes timeless and cross-cultural? What does the *Oresteia* still tell us

*“Where is the right
and wrong in this
nightmare?
Each is driven mad
by the ghost of the
other. Who can
reason it out?
Reason fails, mind
is a casualty of this
bloody succession.”*

today with its domino effect of revenge and violence? With its exhaustive description of murder and the atrocities of war? With the Gods who call for the sacrifice of the daughter and the murder of the mother? And why stage the murders that were only described in the ancient theatre close up and en détail?

MILO RAU: During our workshops and debates, it became clear that these were, so to speak, “our” questions, the questions of global realism that are dealt with in the *Oresteia* with a near-pornographic obsession: The relationship between Europe and the Middle East, between “Greece” and “Troy”, between the powerful and the powerless. The observation of violence and the possibility of overcoming it through solidarity, and, in a sense, the very practice of observing. It is as if Aeschylus, or – by proxy – his characters, were disgusted by the description of war and yet couldn’t help but talk incessantly about it. The performances in ancient Athens took place at a time when the young men had just returned from war and the theatre was – in a manner of speaking – a space for a collective traversing of the traumas experienced and dealing with the recent political upheavals – in the case of *Oresteia*, this was the introduction of radical democracy.

We have tried to understand this movement of active processing, this quasi societal allegory game, that underlies Greek tragedy. In other words: Only by dealing with the *Oresteia* in every possible way – as a team, as a collective – were we able to juxtapose the radical, almost self-loathing sadism of the original with our own stories, our own reasons, our own motivations and perhaps even solutions. Why always murder, tragedy, violence? What’s the point? Here, quite simply, a straightforward “performance” of the text wouldn’t do anything. There is no moralistic buckling or cynical rubber-stamp of the ethical and political legitimization problems either. *Orestes in Mosul* is, so to speak, a play that attempts to surrender itself completely to the fundamental problem of collective, global, theatre work.

STEFAN BLAESKE: Was the play just a pretence to return to Northern Iraq?

MILO RAU: *Oresteia* is of course only an alibi to make *Orestes in Mosul*, a frame within which completely foreign things are compiled, in which the disparate biographic realities of the actors and the context for their own interest in the *Oresteia* can be shown. Just like the eponymous altarpiece in *Lam Gods* was only a frame to get to know the people of today’s Ghent and to bring them onto the stage: You always need a frame. *Orestes in Mosul* functions as a truth-machine, as a nearly unsolvable moral and organisational project. It isn’t difficult to make a production of *Oresteia* with professional actors in a Western city-theatre, you need a little bit of patience and a few directorial ideas. But it is incredibly complicated – both dubious and dangerous – to do the same thing in Mosul with a mixed ensemble.

STEFAN BLAESKE: The performance of the classics, as Theodor W. Adorno had already said in the 1960s, is like a “box of chocolates” and are evidence of a lack of sensorium for historical change: “Ca ne va plus!” [It’s not going well!] Is that why the *Oresteia* was relocated to post-war Iraq?

MILO RAU: I have, thus far in my career, never worked with the classics because I’ve never found an artistic or political necessity and urgency in such an enterprise. In other words: It’s just too easy to take Ibsen or Sophocles from the shelf and, as a director, I was never interested in this process of theatrical ornamentation. At the gymnasium¹, I studied Greek and for my final project, I translated *The Trojan Women*. Later, I wrote a completely free adaptation of *The Bacchae* (Montana, 2006) in a contemporary style: Theseus was a CEO, Dionysus promised the workers a basic income and fun, and it concluded with a bloody uprising. The Greeks were always present somewhere in the background of my work. Ten years later with *Empire* (2016), we dealt with *Medea* and also (a little) with *Oresteia*. But to actually, seriously stage a classic in all its foreignness... I’ve never done that. I just didn’t know what could “appear” within this frame, what challenges it would present me with as an author and

1 The Swiss/German equivalent to high school and grammar school.



director. And that's the whole experiment: What does the *Oresteia* reveal to us? What does it tell us about the relationship between East and West? About war? About the news reports about it? About tragic *Geworfenheit*² and artistic freedom – today, in a globalised world?

STEFAN BLAESKE: According to George Steiner, all works of art and all cultural creations are based on “cumulative, collective development” and are more or less “authentic mutations”, variations of stock myths and “grand narratives” developed over the centuries. And this is obvious in our *Oresteia*. But does it also mean that we need to bring power dynamics, experiences of violence, and their legitimations stored within the myths into the performance?

MILO RAU: You have to see the big lines, the mega-narratives of the global market, of wars of faith. We always pretend that capitalism or globalisation, that the struggle for participation or the question about the origins of our identity and our influences (i.e., identity politics) are ideas of the modern era. When you read the *Oresteia*, you understand that it's all nonsense. Agamemnon, the traumatised warrior, brings his trauma home with him. The watchman, the nurse, and ultimately the chorus rebel against their fate of muteness and their lack of destiny, like the “Gilets Jaunes” (the “yellow vest movement”). Orestes and Pylades search for their roles and identities, for the complete entanglement of each impulse in global crises, economy, religion, and heritage: It's shocking just how archaic we are today and how modern archaic societies are. How strange and “antique” our own modern world – which we apparently always have access to – is to us and how uncertain and imaginary the promises of democracy and participation actually are. All this becomes visible in an almost unbearable way when you stage the *Oresteia* in Mosul.

2 *Geworfenheit* (or thrown-ness) is a concept by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) that describes individual human existence as being thrown (geworfen) into the world. The feeling that one is thrown into existence and the present with the frustrations, sufferings, and social demands of society and the attached social conventions.

In the preparations, in the textual analysis, and in the travels, what is in psychoanalysis called “transference” took place: the great, tragic untruth of the idea of a global democracy made up of the free flow of people and data, this idea of the association of all people in art, in the free market – this untruth returns as another untruth, as the radical problem of the project itself. Is there equality, real exchange, democracy? It is as if *Orestes in Mosul* must accomplish something symbolically that the world is unable to achieve itself, and perhaps that's the purpose of art. Of course, our *Oresteia* – unlike the original model – also talks about the failure of this dream. And it closes a circle, like *The Congo Tribunal*: both the will to and tragic impossibility of breaking out of the *So-Sein* (the suchness of being in the world) through symbolic practices.

STEFAN BLAESKE: The notion of “the tragic” has long been dominated in theatre history by the concept that a great, outstanding man who falls from his pedestal. Apart from a personal “fall from grace”, there must also be a societal and social one. Tragedies took place in ruling dynasties and it was only much later, during the so-called naturalism and realism movements that theatre also developed an interest in the “lower” classes. Do you see your theatre – and especially *Orestes in Mosul* – as one that brings (global) realism and tragedy together?

MILO RAU: This is the most difficult question of all: How do you unite democratic with tragic myth? George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* negates this possibility: Were the “fall from grace” missing from *A Doll's House* and were there a little more hygiene, women's and workers' rights, then Ibsen's drama (or any other naturalist play for that matter) wouldn't even be a tragedy. According to this logic, tragedy is an art form of the aristocracy and melodrama is one of the bourgeois, democratic era. By the way, this end of tragedy, of the sublime, and even the (violent) history has always been regarded as positive by the Enlightenment (and also by socialism). In his early writings in Vienna, Trotsky philosophises about a time when even the simplest

worker was involved in drawing up the blueprints for an opera house since their existential problems had all been solved.

Today, in our debates on basic income, you could say that we've almost reached Trotsky's time. But only – and this is why the term "global" is crucial for me – if you put the extreme externalisation of neoliberalism to the side. Over the past thirty years, Western Europe has taken over the purely white-collar side of the production of wealth, while the dirty side of production has been exported to the Global South and the peripheries of the EU. I don't want to go further with this question, as I have dedicated almost all of my entire artistic and theoretical work over the past ten years to it, other than to offer this conclusion: Today, in order to even come close to the tragic, you must symbolically reverse this externalisation, connect these different parts of the world with each other, go back through history (so to speak), and act as if another form of globalisation were possible... A globalisation based on solidarity, cooperation, and authorship.

Once again: Within the Western European theatre, the *Oresteia* is – no matter how much fake blood the actors splash around the stage – a technical exercise in virtuosity. It is an avatar and an ornament of the tragic because the conditions of production are deeply untragic. Conversely, *Orestes in Mosul* is in all respects tragic: all of the externalising forces become wholly obsolete and can no longer function once you write "Mosul" into the rehearsal schedule. It is as if all the ethical issues return in one fell swoop, as if all of neoliberalism's externalisations were obsolete. It's really a paradox: As if one becomes a perpetrator only when they do not profit silently from the colonisation of the Middle East, but instead represents it, repeats it with a solidarity-based approach. This is how art reveals what reality conceals.

STEFAN BLAESKE: The *Oresteia* was born from an interesting historical situation, staged in 458 B.C.E. and awarded first prize: The supreme council of Athens – the Areopagus – which was first dominated by the

high nobility and later the archons, had been stripped of power in previous years. 'More democratic' institutions like the "Council of the 400" took over the duties of the polis, while the Areopagus remained responsible for sacral and kinship duties like blood jurisdiction... precisely what is dealt with in the *Oresteia*.

MILO RAU: That's true: The chorus of old men in Agamemnon joke about the newly displaced former council, describing them as childish, weak, and powerless. But the craziest thing is that Aeschylus – at the same time as the invention of democracy and its celebration of the trilogy's third part, the bloody story's utopian conclusion with Athena's verdict and the abdication of the Gods' revenge – founded the deeply melancholic tradition of the end of the tragedy. In other words: The *Oresteia* is a swansong disguised as a tragedy about tragedy, an operational manual for those great externalising forces of European imperialism. Real, insoluble tragedies were first written by Sophocles at a time when Greek society found an equilibrium as well as a self-awareness – at a moment when they could, so to speak, afford it. The nurse and the watchman, these figures from Aeschylus are so close to us – or at least to me – because they anticipate the sentimentalism of the later bourgeoisie: this senseless waiting, the slow loss of youth without love or fame, this emptiness of non-tragic existence that we know from Chekhov, Beckett, and Botho Strauss. And that's exactly why I wanted to bring these characters – i.e., us – to Mosul, because there, this melancholy that marks the arrival in the post-tragic does not exist. In Mosul, it still makes sense to think about reconciliation and its very impossibility.

STEFAN BLAESKE: Another aspect of the tragic is visible in innocence. You are struck by fate like a bolt of lightning. But maybe – like with trees – it's only the tallest, the greatest that are struck. "Excessive fame is dangerous because Zeus so easily throws lightning from his eyes," says the *Oresteia*. Fame and power, especially in "excess", are ultimately not innocent. Agamemnon, Oedipus, and other erring heroes must either atone for the

“The truth has to be melted out of our stubborn lives by suffering. Nothing speaks the truth, nothing tells us how things really are, nothing forces us to know except pain. Truth comes with pain.”

AESCHYLUS, ORESTEIA

sins of their forefathers or for their own murders and crimes – which are often committed during their rise to power. As someone who has dealt intensively with dictators, what is your relationship to fame, power, and so-called “great men”?

MILO RAU: I have, in fact, always shown these “great men” – Lenin, Ceausescu, and now Agamemnon – at the moment of their powerlessness, their abdication, their death. I am particularly interested in how the private and the political – private and objective forces – intertwine. In my plays, both Lenin and Ceausescu are portrayed in an extremely private way. For example, in Russia at the premiere of the film version of *The Last Days of the Ceausescus*, I was accused of having presented the Ceausescu too privately. At the same time, both plays tell the story of the end of two grand, transcendental experiments: The two endings of the historical communism, once with Lenin’s death in 1924 and again with the Revolution in 1989 – and the twice-failed transition into democracy.

The *Oresteia* also tells a double story: On the one hand, the end of an aristocratic rule that is based on tribal obligations, myths, decisions, disputes, and pulsion of small families and, of course, men (fathers and sons); and, on the other hand, the death of Agamemnon, the physical or rhetorical principle of personalised sovereignty which was replaced by a transitional period of confusion, mourning, civil war (personified in the central part of the trilogy by Orestes and Elektra, by exiled persons in general: the refugees and the homeless), and finally by democracy, the voice of the majority. I have a tragic worldview. In other words: I’m interested in the characteristic hopelessness of the individual – but, as a sociologist and Marxist, also in a concrete historical situation and concrete individuals. It is not “Agamemnon” but Johan Leysen in his portrayal of the character, which invites him and us (in the act of observing him) into Agamemnon. I’m not interested in “Argos”, “Athens”, or “Greece”, but rather in the concrete situation of a post-conflict zone, a city, a

discusses the loss of the tragic in his book *The Death of Tragedy* ++ 1967: Foundation of the University of

nation that has just emerged from civil war: Mosul in Iraq. But comparing does not mean equating, and I think that sometimes my methods are misunderstood. Again, Aeschylus is talking about an absolutely concrete historical situation: The end of the aristocracy, the tendency of this form of rule to cause civil war, and finally the beginning of the post-tragic, democratic era. The methodology of tragedy – talking about the current situation in Athens through the retelling of traditional mythology – is a comparative methodology. Likewise, it is the methodology of poetry and analysis in general. It is, at the same time, about the repetition of Aeschylus's metaphorical gesture but with the specific possibilities of a set situation and team.

STEFAN BLAESKE: The fall of a ruler has seldom been so visually presented, so "televised", as it was in Iraq with Saddam Hussein: His statues were pulled from their pedestals, while he ended up hidden in a hole in a basement and ultimately with a noose around his neck. Would that be called "tragic"? And what about the fate of his officers and soldiers who were sent "into the desert" after the US invasion (which was itself based on a lie) – and which then made possible, or even caused, the terror of the militias, the Taliban and ISIS? Or is this focus on perpetrators itself problematic? Doesn't the experience of tragedy lie, above all else, with those who are at the mercy of violence?

MILO RAU: What differentiates the tragic situation from the dramatic one? To once again quote George Steiner: The tragic is hopeless, the dramatic serious. Nora can leave her husband and begin a new life, while conversely, Orestes *must* kill his mother. Here, the aristocratic rules of pride are in effect and these could, of course, also be other, objective rules: religion, power politics, and so on. Saddam Hussein is a doubtlessly tragic figure in the same regard as Ceausescu or Lenin: Since they came to power through violence, they could not so easily retire. After Hussein's fall from power, his situation was not just serious but absolutely hopeless, and the same is true of Orestes: He can be pardoned, but no "retirement" is possible for Orestes,

which in our production we express – as said – through the metaphor of chronic pain.

The same holds true, not only for leaders and tragic figures, but also for people in extreme situations in general: for Saddam's former officers, for the civil population. This played out clearly before our very eyes during our interviews with the citizens of Mosul. Almost every person we talked to found themselves repeatedly, sometimes daily, in situations where the smallest decisions were life or death. That's the reason why, as I've often said, early on in the process many things suddenly become much clearer for me as someone who has never been able to get much from Western identity politics. In 2014 in Mosul, it was tragic whether you were a woman or Shiite, a soldier or a member of the government, an artist or a homosexual: because no matter who or what you were you would be oppressed and in many cases killed. Mosul is an altogether tragic region: extramarital sex, music, even films were punishable by death. You could say that every artistic gesture in this city is loaded with an absolute significance. What does it mean in this city to put the close, maybe homosexual, love between Orestes and Pylades up for debate? What does Cassandra's power mean here, in a city where women were oppressed? What about revenge and forgiveness, and yes: democracy?

STEFAN BLAESKE: "Go through the camp from gate to gate! Every man must slay his brother, his friend, his neighbour." This is how Moses calls on his followers in the Old Testament to kill all the non-believers. Egyptologist Jan Assmann explains that the idea of the one and only jealous God was not only accompanied by a language of faithfulness and jealousy, but also by a presentation of excessive violence and cruelty. Deuteronomy demands that one's own brother and friend be denounced and judged if he loses his faith: "Thou shalt stone him, and he shall die." Old Testament scholar Othmar Keel has shown that the passages from Deuteronomy transfer elements from the political sphere into the religious one, they are in part literal (word-for-word) copies taken from the Assyrian regime