

# Up Front

## ON MILO RAU

*Tom Sellar*

We hope this will be the first in a series of issues of *Theater*, spread over a few volumes, documenting the work of individual artists who recalibrate theatrical form to address issues of human rights and social justice. We're starting with a director and author whose global work remains relatively unknown in the English-speaking world. Milo Rau, the Swiss-born founder of the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM), began as a journalist covering the Zapatista movement, studying with Pierre Bourdieu before turning to directing and activism. Over the last two decades he has traveled in Russia, South America, Africa, and elsewhere working on what he has called a "description of this global network of capital, its nightmares and hopes, its underworld and counterculture"—a "global realism."<sup>1</sup>

Among the questions guiding his work: How is it possible that the West could overlook its complicity in the mass killings in Congo, Syria, and elsewhere? (As he observes in this issue, "Neoliberal humanism ends at Europe's borders.") How does the relationship between conventional drama and sentimental notions of empathy make possible the existence of global conditions based on intolerable suffering? Where does Western compassion end and begin? Can the actor or spectator become a witness to such violent histories and not merely depict them, represent them, or consume them? And what responsibilities does that altered mode of witnessing imply?

Although Rau is in some ways the embodiment of the postwar European stage director (whose presumptive centrality has rightly been questioned in recent times), he is also a rare stage artist who uses his enviable position to expose deeply uncomfortable political truths. His subjects invite debate, and his collaborations hold complicated layers; he has occasionally courted controversy by presenting the words of extremists to uncover the psychology of hate and the workings of oppression. His productions explore the crises that currently afflict the global majority—from voting rights to genocide—and he insists on the possibilities of a political theater that responds.



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Milo Rau. Photo:  
Sabine Gudath

Gathered here are selections from Rau's own writing in translation, as well as newly commissioned critical articles examining the nuanced phases of his stage work to date. We are grateful to Kaatje De Geest, Carmen Hornbostel, and the staff at NTGent and IIPM for their assistance with this project, and to guest coeditors Lily Climenhaga and Piet Defraeye for their vision and guidance.

## NOTE

1. Milo Rau, *Globaler Realismus (Global Realism)*, Goldenes Buch 1 (Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2018).