

## FOCUS Milo Rau's *Antigone in the Amazon*

# 'It's not enough to deconstruct the system, you need an alternative'

For the final part in his Trilogy of Ancient Myths, Milo Rau is transporting *Antigone* to the Trans-Amazonian highway. The artistic director of NTGent and his Brazilian cast tell **Natasha Tripney** about their collaboration and the vital issues that it raises

**O**n April 17 this year, Milo Rau, artistic director of NTGent in Belgium, and a group of Brazilian activists, blocked a section of the Trans-Amazonian highway, the road that cuts through the Amazon forest.

They were re-enacting events that took place 27 years ago on April 17, 1996, when Brazilian police opened fire on farmers who had occupied a stretch of that highway in northern Brazil. Nineteen people were killed on that day and two people later died of their injuries. It remains a source of national trauma. The re-enactment featured dozens of activists, including survivors of the massacre. "It was like a passion play," Rau says.

Footage of the re-enactment will form part of the Swiss director's new show, *Antigone in the Amazon*, a collaboration between his company NTGent and the Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST), a mass social movement fighting social inequality in rural areas of Brazil. The production will star Brazilian artists alongside the NTGent ensemble. The indigenous actor and activist Kay Sara will play *Antigone*, and Zé Celso, the Brazilian actor, activist and co-founder of theatre company Teatro Oficina, will play *Teiresias*.

Rau was already familiar with the campaigning work of the movement when he was approached by the Brazilian dramaturg Douglas Estevam to work together. Sophocles' *Antigone* seemed like a natural thematic fit. They had the idea to form a choir from the activists and survivors. "I hate choirs in European theatre," says Rau, but in Brazil he found that "people understand the political power of a choir". In fact, the idea of using choirs is an integral part of MST's training programme.

One of the methods the MST uses for strengthening the sense of collective identity within the movement is the practice of 'mística', a form of performance in which communities tap into the collective memory of the oppressed. The 1996 massacre is, says Rau, "a story that is told and retold".

Each year, on the anniversary, people set up an education camp where they make speeches, blocking the highway for several hours, he explains. This time, for the re-enactment, the police arrived, says Rau, "heavily armed as their colleagues were 20 years ago". The official line is that police were attacked in 1996, but the MST is an unarmed movement, Rau explains. This year, when the police arrived at the scene of the re-enactment, the activists explained the significance of what they were doing, and after an hour or so, the police helped them to block the street, Rau says.

"Some of the perpetrators were traumatised too," he says. "So it was important they were present. It was an emotional event." However, afterwards, far-right media in Brazil circulated images of the re-enactment and accused the MST of spreading a fake narrative.

*Antigone in the Amazon* will conclude Rau's Trilogy of Ancient Myths, which includes *Orestes in Mosul* – part created in the former capital of Islamic State – and the film *The New Gospel*, which was shot in Italian refugee camps. The final part was supposed to premiere in 2020, while former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro was still in

**'Putting indigenous issues in a play is a better way of getting people to listen'**



Milo Rau in rehearsals with actors Ailton Krenak and (bottom right) Kay Sara; Below: the re-enactment of the April 17 massacre



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power. The company had already started rehearsals when the project was derailed by the pandemic.

Although it has evolved since its inception, Sara has been with it since the beginning. "The process so far has involved a lot of dialogues and discussions," she says, via an interpreter. "Now we are putting all of these questions inside the piece. As activists, we cannot afford to put our heads down, we have to keep on speaking."

"I have made a choice to show the truth about indigenous people," she says. "While I cannot claim to speak for all indigenous peoples of Brazil, I know the reality of indigenous people who live in the forest and in the cities."

Covid-19 had a particularly devastating impact on the indigenous people of Brazil, who had a cultural memory of white people bringing sickness. A lot of older people died, taking with them their stories and their histories, Sara explains. This production is important, she continues, "because on stage and in the media, I will finally have the opportunity to talk about indigenous issues". By putting this in the form of a play, "it's a better way of getting people to listen, rather than just talking at them".

Having been at NTGent since 2018, Rau was recently appointed artistic director of the Vienna Festival, one of Europe's biggest annual arts festivals. How does he envision these values, along with those outlined in his manifesto, translating to a festival context? "If you think of what a festival actually is," says Rau, it's an opportunity to "create a global space where you invite voices that didn't exist before".

As the *Antigone in the Amazon* production prepares for its premiere in Europe, "they are working together

to create a safe environment" for participants, explains Sara, but since she has been with it from the beginning, she "feels comfortable saying this is who I am and this what I want".

This intersection between art and activism clearly inspires Rau, along with the wider philosophy of MST. It is not just a campaigning group, rather a different model of educating, working and living. This is something that has informed the production. "It's not enough to produce a show, you have to ask bigger questions," he says. "What does it change for the people involved in this project? What does it change for the movement? Why are we doing this?"

The production's premiere will coincide with the launch of a campaign against the greenwashing in which Europe is complicit. "The big transnational companies use words such as diversity and sustainability" while still causing harm, he says. The European Parliament will be called upon to stop awarding green certificates to companies such as Nestlé and Pepsi, which have been accused of being complicit in environmental destruction in the Amazon region. As part of the campaign, there will also be a call for a boycott on products made by these companies. "We say the system has to change, the madness has to stop," says Rau. "We need a new distribution system."

Campaigning groups in Europe could learn from MST, he adds. "It's not enough to deconstruct the system, you have to ask: 'What then?' You have to have an alternative."

***Antigone in the Amazon* opens at NTGent on May 13 before touring Europe. For more details, visit: [ntgent.be](http://ntgent.be)**