

The Last Generation
or *The 120 Days of Sodom*

Inspired by Pasolini and Sade
Directed by Milo Rau

World premiere
on Sunday 5 November in Théâtre de Liège

Press file



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THÉÂTRE
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THEATER
STAP

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Synopsis

With *The Last Generation*, or *The 120 Days of Sodom*, highly acclaimed Swiss director Milo Rau continues to research the limits of what can be portrayed on stage. It's a reflection on today's postmodern society, which balances between hedonism and doom, between 'just be normal' and the petty-bourgeois lust for scandal. It is an unforgettable bilingual drama about the (ab)normality and the value of life, staged with a group of so-called professional actors and actresses with disabilities. Navigating between a poetic interpretation and a disturbing appropriation of Pier Pasolini's films *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* and *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, it amplifies the fascistic, fundamentalistic, and excessively capitalistic tendencies of modern society. The foundations for this new production were laid in 2017, when Milo Rau worked closely with Swiss Theatre HORA to stage the play *Die 120 Tage von Sodom*. With *The Last Generation*, Milo Rau reworks this project, focusing on the socio-political context of Belgium. The four actors referred to as "professionals" – the Belgians Jacqueline Bollen and Koen de Sutter, French Olga Mouak and Swiss theatre icon Robert Hunger-Bühler - interact with their colleagues from Theater Stap, a Flemish company for actors and actresses with a disability.

Who decides on what is normal? Why do we preach diversity while continuing to exclude it? Little by little, the questioning turns into a game that is as brutal and perverse as it is satirical. Cruelty and humanism, beauty and disgust become intertwined to the point of unbearability. Are we, apparently more tolerant and sensitive than all previous societies, perhaps the real fascists? The text of *The Last Generation* draws on the actors' personal views of Pasolini's two films and, as such, of the normal and the deviant, fiction and reality, life and death - dichotomies that are as much universal as they are socially determined. Playing in their mother tongue (French or Dutch), the actors tackle the cultural barrier and political differences between Flanders and Wallonia. *The Last Generation* will premiere at the Théâtre de Liège in November 2023, on the eve of the Belgian federal and regional elections.



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Credits

With Ann Dockx, Bram Vaneekhaute, Els Laenen, Gert Wellens, Gitte Wens, Hazina Kenis, Jacqueline Bollen, Koen De Sutter, Leen Teunkens, Liesbeth De Hertogh, Luc Loots, Olga Mouak, Robert Hunger-Bühler, Tanne Lemmens

Based on *The 120 Days of Sodom* by Marquis de Sade and *Salò, o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* by Pier Paolo Pasolini

Text & direction Milo Rau & ensemble

Assistant director Manon Pfrunder

Scenography and costumes Anton Lukas

Dramaturgy Dr. Stefan Bläske, Joline Vermeulen

Research & cooperation dramaturgy Joline Vermeulen, Kaatje De Geest

Artistic director of Theater Stap Marc Bryssinck, Ingrid Van den Bergh, Bart Van Gyseghem

Technical manager Yannik Fontaine

Camera Coralie Denooz

Video control Gwen Laroche

Sound control Jérôme Mylonas

Light control Renaud Minet

Stage management Gilles Maréchal

Adaptation of sets and costumes Ateliers du Théâtre de Liège

Production Théâtre de Liège, DC&J Création

Co-production Theater Stap, NTGent, Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles

With the support of the Tax Shelter of the Federal Government of Belgium, Inver Tax Shelter, and the Corporate Partners Club of the Théâtre de Liège

Tour calendar

- [Théâtre de Liège](#) : 5 to 10 November 2023
- [De Warande](#) : 16 November 2023
- [NTGent](#) : 8 and 9 December 2023
- [Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles](#) : 19 to 21 December 2023

Interview with Milo Rau

By Simon Vandenburg, Dramaturg at Théâtre de Liège

Drawing on both the works of the Marquis de Sade and Pasolini's film, Milo Rau proposes a reflection on the fascistic tendencies of our society, in which the destruction of the body is evoked. In choosing this subject, the Swiss director raises the question of the limits of performability and the use of stage space.

While the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* and its adaptation by Pier Paolo Pasolini are renowned for their cruelty, excess and unbearable nature, they also tell the story of a decaying, collapsing society. Was this an important factor in your decision to immerse yourself in these works?

The Last Generation is obviously a portrait of the society in which we find ourselves. Pasolini, by transposing the book to a fascist world, wanted to address his own time through Sade, just as I want to address my own time through Sade, with the addition of Belgian fascism.

But for me, it was above all a question of immersing myself in the definition of fascism associated with the idea of excess, which is very present in bourgeois art, and fits in perfectly with Sade's work. Then there's the constant quest for perfection in human beings, the perfection of the body, and the excesses that ensue. It's this combination that particularly interests me.

Your work on this play is very similar to *Five Easy Pieces*, in which you staged the Dutroux story performed by children. Here, most of the actors are mentally disabled. How do you work with these individuals whom society wants to both protect and hide?

We have worked very closely with the management of Theater Stap and with psychologists who have known them for over twenty years in some cases. They are true partners and we almost direct the show together. I take care of the artistic side, but the translation and the psychology of the actors are their responsibility. For instance, it was easier to work with children in *Five Easy Pieces*. Why was that? Because I have children, because I was once a child myself, and so I have a certain knowledge of their logic.

With *The Last Generation*, it's different in many ways, and not just with the bodies. How do you handle the text? How do you deal with their history? How do you deal with the trauma, the psychological aspects, which I think are more complicated than the physical ones? When we worked on *Five Easy Pieces*, there were never any difficulties with the topics we were dealing with, but rather with the tensions that could emanate from the group. That was the real problem. The rest was often just projections, including my own, like the - paranoid - fear of making a mistake with the show.

You mentioned the question of the body, which is also very present in *The Last Generation*.

Yes, it's another essential element: the destruction of bodies. It's very present in fascism with the abuses linked to euthanasia, where the aim was to eradicate imperfect forms of life and lead humanity and its body towards perfection. This is something that is very present in our modern societies. Unfortunately, I think that this destruction is also linked to the idea of a certain pleasure, which is found in the work of Sade. The destruction orchestrated by fascism has often been described as very mechanical, very objective, almost thought-out, even though numerous studies show the purely sadistic side to this destruction.

And is this destruction directly linked to people with a disability? In Belgium, 95% of cases of positive diagnosis of Down's syndrome lead to abortion. Was it important for you to show that these people still exist? That they are an integral part of life and society?

This raises the issue of performability, which is more complex than it seems. We use the stage to show excessively what we don't want to face - or see - in the reality of our societies. We give minorities a place on stage, but never in society. So I'm trying to politicize this stage space by asking the question: "Why do we constantly show on stage what we never do in everyday society?" Worse still, why are we killing these people? When we created the first version of this show, we worked with Theater Hora in Switzerland, whose members suffer from mental disabilities. They have won every possible theatre award, and at the same time society wants them to be the last generation. I sometimes have the impression that we are giving them a good time before they disappear, a bit like a swan song. This destruction of life in our societies through laws and individualization is what I want to show on stage. I felt that Sade's text and Pasolini's film were the right tools to support this idea. *The Last Generation* is in fact a critique of the stage, a critique of the representation of the oppressed. I've always had a lot of trouble with the idea of giving them a place on stage, and then afterwards nothing... That's what I'm thinking about.

Could this be linked to the issue of voyeurism? Putting the audience in a position where they are looking in a defined and limited space at something they don't want to see in society? Putting them in a position where we insist on the fact that they come to see minorities simply because it's entertainment and not real life?

The question of involving the audience is an important one. There are two levels, the first linked to pleasure, and the second linked to criticism. In all my plays, there is always a very cruel, very direct dimension, which is part of life. I confront the audience with something profoundly tragic, but real. This tragedy of reality is sometimes difficult to understand. Yet Christians have always been in touch with this tragedy. The first thing they look at is Jesus crucified! And we ask ourselves: "Why do we have to look at this? Of course, it's a representation of humanity, but there's this feeling of guilt that arises as we stand by and watch, with this sort of joy of being alive that we feel when someone dies, as if we were suddenly more alive.

But I'm not trying to put the audience in the role of voyeur. Simply because for me, voyeurism is linked to not being seen. In the theatre, as a spectator, physically present, you are always seen. It's not like in front of a screen. I don't believe that voyeurism can exist in the theatre in the same way as it can when we watch a film. That's another reason why I wanted to do this adaptation after Pasolini and Sade. What doesn't work in their works is that they are books or films, and for me this work has to be a play. We must be present, reality - however difficult it may be to accept - has to be present.

So there is a connection to physicality that must take place?

Yes, everyone has to be physically present. Especially for this play. It's very important to me that this play is performed here and now, in the very moment. It's a gesture of presence. With Molière or Chekhov, you can record it, watch it later, it's less important, because in the end it's more or less the same thing. But here, without the co-presence of the actors and the audience, it's meaningless. With one of my previous plays, *Familie*, we shot a film afterwards; and even though people preferred it to the play, I felt that it didn't make sense. The gesture was missing. This family had to commit collective suicide on stage, the audience had to watch them live; the actors and the audience had to spend two hours together for it to really make sense.

Yet you often use devices that remind us that we're in the theatre. With the use of the camera, the theatre workshop in *Five Easy Pieces*, the casting in *La Reprise. Histoire(s) du Théâtre (I)*, or the film being shot in *The Last Generation*.

There are several explanations for this. Firstly, I'm interested in the creative process. When I watch a film, I rush to the director's comments, because sometimes I'm more interested in that than in the film itself. When you shoot a documentary, you decide how to edit it, you decide to choose this shot or that shot. It's a choice: you create a finished product, but everything else is lost, hidden; and I always wonder what happened along the way.

There is another possible answer, a more political one. I think it's important that every work produced should question the way it is produced and why it is produced. This is the second point of the Ghent manifesto: "Theatre is not a product, it is a production process. Research, casting, rehearsals, and related debates must be accessible to the public". This reflects the idea that the creative process is more important than the product.

A play is always in motion: people leave the project, others join. This is never a problem because they can add their own story. It's an almost ideological approach, linked to the question of representation: you can't represent reality without showing how the representation is made. I really believe in the phrase "to produce is to humanize", and I want to show this humanization on stage, even if what we produce is extremely morbid and sadistic.

Is that why it was important to work with a group that was already formed, whose members are already very close, like Theater Stap? And to make them feel the pleasure of performing?

The pleasure of the production is extremely important. When we directed *Five Easy Pieces*, for me the children were simply performing. The story was first and foremost about my generation, traumatized, not by the Dutroux case, but by the way society handled it. It had a terrible impact, children couldn't go out anymore, everything was different; we began to question the political elites a lot more. We were the ones who were affected. For the children on stage, it was like a black and white film, a fairy tale like *Hansel and Gretel*, far from them. They're just telling us a story, and they're taking pleasure in seeing us terrified by it, a pleasure that was felt on stage.

It makes me think again about voyeurism. I don't think it's the spectators who are voyeurs, but the actors. They watch the audience with their emotions and reactions, without the audience feeling that they are being watched. I have in mind the example of a little girl who played a victim of Marc Dutroux, and who always wanted to act in such a way that the audience would start to cry. But I ended up telling her that it was sadism, that you couldn't do that on stage, and she understood. It's a power you have on stage; you make the story your own through the emotions of the audience.

It also raises the question of limits. Is it possible to perform everything onstage? How do you define the limit if it exists at all?

My limits are above all those of the people onstage. I must accept that. But the limit is never where you think it is. An actor can perform a horrific murder, they can perform completely naked, but it will be harder for them to talk about themselves. Because it's something personal, authentic, and private. It's easier to play something objectively cruel and despicable than to talk about oneself.

Then there's the question of legitimacy. What is legitimated by what we say and what is not? What can be used in a historical perspective to describe the world? What is right and what is absurd excess? This is in fact the main question of realistic art: what is cathartic? We must portray reality in its objective form, to try and reach those little moments when we actually touch reality, when we try to understand

what it means to be human, to be together, to be alive, to die... That's why we must have these moments of intensity! We need these Pasolinian and Sadian moments of intensity! To understand each other better. And always ask the question: why produce theatre, how produce theatre?

So why produce *The Last Generation*?

I'm a bit of a melancholic Marxist like Pasolini (he laughs). Our society is becoming too rhetorical in the way it lives. I need new experiences to think about another society. In Western Europe, primitive life is really being eradicated... The ideology of primitive life, of traditional life, has been thrown into the arms of the right wing. The title *La Dernière Génération* (*The Last Generation*) comes from a poem by Pasolini, in which he laments our way of life, in which we constantly strive for perfection, perfection in the body, perfection in a language without accents, and so on.

In Pasolini's work, there is also the issue of the standardization of life. Everyone looks the same, regional specificities are disappearing. Is *The Last Generation* also a way of celebrating difference, particularly with these bodies that we no longer want to see?

With Pasolini, we are very different in many ways, but I want to talk about the disappearing of life, I want to show life, celebrate life! In the first version, when I was working with the actors from the Theater Hora, I was very shocked by their absence. I only saw them onstage, never in the streets. They are invisible: they are either in institutions or onstage, but they are totally excluded from society. When I was a child, I saw people with Down's syndrome regularly, they were my neighbours. There were some in my village, and not just because I lived in a small Swiss village (he laughs), but because we lived in a society that was used to being around them. And for the last thirty years or so, we've been excluding them, and in the next thirty years, we're going to make them disappear. So I want to show these bodies! I want to ask the question: Why do we only find a few particular spaces where they can be present? Why should they disappear? And we do it in the cruellest, most fascistic way: by killing them all.

About the team

Milo Rau

Milo Rau is a Swiss director, writer, filmmaker. He studied sociology, German and Roman languages and literature in Paris, Berlin and Zurich with Pierre Bourdieu and Tzvetan Todorov, among others. Critics call him the “most influential” (Die Zeit), “most awarded” (Le Soir), “most interesting” (De Standaard), “most controversial” (La Repubblica), “most scandalous” (New York Times) or “most ambitious” (The Guardian) artist of our time. Since 2002, he has published over 50 plays, films, books and actions. Rau’s theatre productions have been shown at all major international festivals, including the Berliner Theatertreffen, the Festival d’Avignon, the Venice Biennale, the Wiener Festwochen and the Brussels Kunstenfestivaldesarts, and have been touring in over 30 countries worldwide. In addition to his work as a director, Rau is also a television critic, lecturer, and an extremely prolific writer with 15 publications to date, which have been translated into English, French, Italian, Dutch, Chinese and Norwegian, among others. In 2023, Milo Rau was appointed as the new curator of the Wiener Festwochen, leaving the position of artistic director of NTGent that he held since 2017.

More information on <https://www.ntgent.be/en/ensemble/milo-rau>

Theater Stap

Theater Stap is a professional theatre company creating performances in which mentally disabled people take centre stage. The performances’ artistic quality legitimises the company’s unique position within Flanders’ mainstream theatrical landscape. Theater Stap strongly believes disabled artists possess the capacity to move their audiences while performing. The company offers the actors a working space to develop their talents and individual artistic careers. In collaboration with various professional artists Theater Stap creates productions putting first the actors’ authenticity, increasing the visibility of disabled people, and livening up broad discussions about theatre. Since its foundation in 1985, Theater Stap has created more than fifty productions, which have been performed in various cultural centres in Flanders, but also in dance theatres or renowned festivals in Europe and even beyond. Theater Stap doesn't limit itself to theatre, and is a truly multidisciplinary organisation. They made feature and short films that won awards at film festivals around the world. The actors of Theater Stap conquered the hearts of Flanders with *Tytgat Chocolat*, their own fiction series, in prime time on Flemish Television. Members of the Theater Stap ensemble performing in *The Last Generation* are: Ann Dockx, Bram Vaneeckhaute, Els Laenen, Gert Wellens, Gitte Wens, Hazina Kenis, Leen Teunkens, Liesbeth De Hertogh, Luc Loots, Tanne Lemmens.

Jacqueline Bollen

After studying at the Royal Academy of Liège, Jacqueline Bollen acted in productions by Isabelle Pousseur, Michel Dezoteux, Philippe Sireuil, Thierry Salmon, Frédéric Dussenne, Lorant Wanson, Hélène Theunissen, Philippe Blasband, etc. She has performed in institutions such as the Théâtre de la Place (former name of the Théâtre de Liège) and taken part in numerous shows at the Wallonia-Brussels National Theatre, as well as in smaller venues. Internationally, she has performed in Geneva and Saint-Etienne, and at the Gibellina and Avignon festivals, among others. In the cinema, she has worked with the Dardenne brothers and Joachim Lafosse, among others. For some twenty years she taught at the Royal Academy of Brussels.

Koen De Sutter

Koen De Sutter is a Flemish actor and director. He graduated from acting school at Studio Herman Teirlinck in 1990. In 1996, he started also started working as a director. His directorial debut was with the play *Under the Milky Forest* by Dylan Thomas. At Zuidpool, he directed Kurt Schwitters' *Anna Blume hat ein Vogel*, Jeroen Olyslaegers' *The Invreter*, Martin McDonagh's *Kussenman* and several plays by Arne Sierens, among others. From 2001 to 2006, he was artistic director of Theatre Zuidpool, where he continued acting and directing. In 2006 and 2007, De Sutter toured Flanders with the monologue *Martens*, which dealt with the life of Belgian ex-premier Wilfried Martens. During the same period, De

Sutter was artist-in-residence at LOD, where he created *The Attendants Gallery*. He directed a total of about 25 productions and acted in about 40 shows. He directed among others: *Aleksej* (HETPALEIS, 2010), *All Too Loud Solitude* (Theater Zuidpool, 2014) *Maat voor maat* (Theaterproductiehuis Zeelandia, 2016). Latest main roles were in the performances *Tartuffe* (NTG, 2011), *Faust, orte krakeling beneden de louteringberg* (Theater Zuidpool, 2012), *Montaigne* (KVS, 2016), *Risjaar Drei* (Olympique Dramatique, 2017), *Othello* (Théâtre de Liège, 2018). *Wachten op Godot* (Olympique Dramatique, 2020), *Wie is bang* (Ntgent) and *Qui a peur* (Théâtre Varia, Solarium) *Bovary* (KVS).

Robert Hunger-Bühler

Robert Hunger-Bühler grew up in Switzerland. His career as a director and actor began in Vienna. There he founded the theater group 85 and then joined the avant-garde groups “Ensemble-Theater” and “Werkstatt-Wien”. Robert Hunger-Bühler's engagements as an actor took him to all the major stages of German-speaking theaters. In Goethe's integral Faust project he played *Mephisto* directed by Peter Stein. Hunger-Bühler was a member of the ensemble of the Schauspielhaus Zurich until 2019. He worked with the directors: Jürgen Kruse, Peter Stein, Jossi Wieler, Klaus Michel Grüber, Andrea Breth, Luc Bondy, Stephan Pucher, Barbara Frey, Frank Castorf, Christoph Marthaler, Peter Zadek, Johann Simons and Milo Rau. Robert Hunger-Bühler has appeared in numerous cinema and television productions, including *Unter dir die Stadt* (Cannes Festival 2010), *Labyrinth of Silence*, *Orpheline* and *Vacuum*. He received numerous invitations to the Berlin Theatertreffen and international festivals. He has received numerous awards, including the Swiss Theater Prize for “Outstanding Actor” from the Federal Office of Culture. Robert Hunger-Bühler is a member of the German Academy of Performing Arts and the European Film Academy.

Olga Mouak

Olga Mouak is a French actress based in Paris. She was born in 1990 in Orléans and raised there. She began her career in the performing arts in Bordeaux, studying dramaturgy and art history at Montaigne University. After a brief stint at RESAD in Madrid, Olga joined the École Nationale d'art dramatique in Montpellier, from which she graduated in 2016. Since then, she has worked with directors such as Gwenaël Morin, Milo Rau, Eva Doumbia and Robert Wilson, honing her skills on the stages of several European countries. In 2019, Olga founded her company Bidden Zingen Dansen, a platform for creating and launching her artistic projects. Her first show *Vanilla* premiered in autumn 2020 as part of the Jeune Théâtre Européen festival in Chalon-sur-Saône.

Press quotes

From Milo Rau's 2017 production *Die 120 Tage von Sodom* (Schauspielhaus Zürich/Theater Hora):

"Without concession or complacency, Milo Rau takes on controversial topics and unsettles audiences by confronting them with their impulses, fantasies, and anger... And the result is brilliant."

Nicolas Chaplain, toutelaculture.com

"Instead of conjuring up a cheerful counter-world on stage that flatters our self-image of being an enlightened inclusive community and claiming that all people are equal in rights and dignity, the factual inequality is clearly highlighted here and the real power structure is revealed. [...] With the choice of material and its drastic staging, Rau demonstrates that the hunt of prenatal diagnostics for the disabled foetus is not primarily about economic aspects, as is often claimed - but about a brutal logic of violence and discrimination that threatens to rule our society."

Martina Süess, Die Wochenzeitung

"An extremely effective sledgehammer approach that drives the feeling of trepidation into ever higher spheres."

Michael Feller, Berner Zeitung

"An incomparable evening. [...] Rau goes far beyond the established limits of the theatre world, as only Christoph Schlingensiefel previously dared to."

Betting Schulte, Badische Zeitung

"When Gianni Blumer and Fabienne Villiger undress and caress each other, when they step out of their roles as Pasolini's humiliated and find tenderness in the nude, the trap snaps shut. For who is on stage here is our view, our longing to enjoy a moment of authenticity with these disabled people, to grant them something 'real'. That one denies the artistic character with this and grasps them as poor disabled people, instead of actors, is the small perfidy. A great effect."

Tobi Müller, Deutschlandradio Kultur

"It is the pointed ambiguities that fascinate about this production, the contradictory situations that it knows how to create."

Andreas Klaeui, SRF

"Milo Rau carves his way through the well-kept glass house of the visual habits of bourgeois theatre [...]. A man who published his 'critique of postmodern reason' under the Lenin title 'What is to be done?' spares us nothing, not even the bleak brutality of our conditions. Nor our guilt."

Alexandra Kedves, Tagesanzeiger

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