

Present Rewritten for the Future

TAMÁS JÁSZAY

Milo RAU. *Theatre is Democracy in Small. Art, Society, Resistance.* Berchem: EPO, 2022. 191 p.

If we claim that the Swiss-born Milo Rau is one of, if not the most, influential creators in Western theatre in the 2020s, we are barely scratching the surface. Since 2024, Rau has been the artistic director of the Wiener Festwochen, Central Europe's high-budget performing arts festival, reshaping and transforming the event under the global slogan *Free Republic of Vienna*. He pursues this mission with such conviction and determination that it raises questions even among his most devoted supporters—not to mention the local politicians of the extreme right. As a firm believer and practitioner of the principle of 'permanent revolution'¹, Rau is rethinking institutional frameworks from the ground up, testing the patience and adaptability of the festival's patrons, participating artists, and ultimately, the ticket-buying audience. (His activities in this regard can also be read as a commentary on the failed strategies employed in handling the impact of Covid on the performing arts. As Rau has repeatedly emphasised, it is sheer hypocrisy and self-deception to pretend that everything can return to 'normal' after the pandemic subsided.)

I believe the most fascinating aspect of Rau's grand experiment is precisely this: how one can steer a long-established, safely operating "corporation" off its well-trodden path—or at the very least, nudge it in a different direction. A factory that exists independently of the artistic director and where the person

appointed to lead is, at best, just another cog in the vast machinery. Recognising this seemingly simple truth requires a high degree of self-discipline and self-reflection on the part of the "CEO". As Rau himself notes in the volume under review: "...an institution you happen to become artistic director of, for a finite amount of time, is a machine that has already functioned for a long time and that will continue to function after you are gone."²

Will Milo Rau produce a similarly reflective summary at the end of his tenure as director of the Wiener Festwochen, akin to *Theatre is Democracy in Small*, published in 2022? Between 2018 and 2023, Rau served as the artistic director of NTGent, the city theatre of Ghent, Belgium, and the internal logic of this volume is primarily shaped by the theoretical considerations and practical events of that period. The book offers insights not only into the creative processes behind certain productions but also into the thinkers and artists—writers, philosophers, and theatre-makers—whose work and ideas Rau considers worth following. Additionally, it sheds light on what the city theatre of the future could be (or could have been) in light of the practical experiences surrounding the implementation of the highly influential *Ghent Manifesto*, issued by Rau and his collaborators in 2018. As for the rhetorical question posed at the beginning of this paragraph, the answer is, in all likelihood, yes—if only because Milo Rau is one of the few theatre-makers who diligently and systematically document their own work.

It cannot be emphasised enough that Rau's productions do not exist solely on stage

¹ Florian MALZACHER, „'My Leadership Model is Permanent Revolution': Milo Rau", Spike Art Magazine, <https://spikeartmagazine.com/articles/interview-leadership-model->

[permanent-revolution-milo-rau](#), accessed: 10 February 2025.

² Milo RAU, *Theatre is Democracy in Small: Art, Society, Resistance* (EPO: 2022), 166.

but also extend beyond and around it—one need only consider his documentary films capturing rehearsal processes, the *Golden Books* series co-published by NTGent, numerous other publications, and the countless round-table discussions, symposiums, live-streamed and archived conversations, and lectures featuring him and his collaborators. On one level, *Theatre is Democracy in Small* encapsulates everything Rau stands for and has accomplished as the artistic director of NTGent. On another, it serves as a practical guide for those who believe that the ultimate essence and purpose of theatre is not merely to produce an endless series of new premieres but to change the world.

Although Milo Rau is credited as the sole author on the book's cover—clearly identifying and emphasising the brand that his name has become in recent years—the voices of his NTGent collaborators are also present throughout its pages. This decision carries several implications. Firstly, it is unsurprising that the questions and remarks from his colleagues largely align with Rau's own perspective, even as individual distinctions emerge. Secondly, the book, comprising texts originally created for different purposes and audiences, contains a significant amount of repetition and parallel ideas. This is not a criticism but a fact—one that further underscores the importance of the educational aspect of Rau's work, which constitutes a substantial part of his artistic practice.

A significant portion of the texts compiled in the volume consists of *speeches* delivered on special occasions—such as a theatre season opening or a ceremony awarding an honorary doctorate degree—presented to an audience that presumably supports the speaker and agrees with their statements. By their very nature, these texts lack the possibility of direct feedback and can be read more as declarations made for a particular occasion. However, the backbone of the book, as well

as its longest chapter, is fortunately structured around an intellectually invigorating four-part *dialogue* between critic and dramaturg Marijn Lems and Milo Rau, organised around key thematic focal points.

Dialogue itself is one of the fundamental concepts shaping Milo Rau's artistic thinking. Before delving into the summaries of individual chapters, here is a brief list of the most frequently recurring terms in the book: *real, reality, representation, distance, violence, tragedy, process, resistance, change, institution, community*. While the conceptual network woven around these terms may seem overly broad, it is important to emphasise that neither Rau nor his collaborators attempt to offer ready-made formulas in the book. Instead, they synthesise experiences accumulated over varying timeframes and articulate their hopes and aspirations. As a result, *Theatre is Democracy in Small* becomes both an empirically grounded account of lived experiences and a forum for sharing best practices. At the same time, it is also a utopian handbook—one that some will read with longing, while others may approach it with scepticism and disbelief.

The book, divided into four chapters, begins with a concise foreword by Lily Maeve Climenhaga, who studied Milo Rau's work as part of her doctoral research. She successfully accomplishes the seemingly impossible task of summarising, within just a few pages, the future-orientated thinking that characterises Rau's theatre—one that deliberately brackets the here-and-now nature of theatrical performance. Already in this introduction, she touches on the concept of *global realism*,³ introduced by Rau, which situates local inequalities and injustices within the framework of a global supply chain. Climenhaga highlights that Rau does not believe in storytelling for its own sake, nor in the idea that theatre audiences will take to the streets to protest power structures after a show. Instead, he maintains

³ Milo RAU, *Globaler Realismus. Goldenes Buch I* (Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2018).

that the potential inherent in theatre can be made real, and that this, in turn, can genuinely generate change. The possibility of failure is inherently embedded in such an undertaking, yet this should not be cause for despair; rather, it should be taken as a serious invitation to *listen, learn, and try*.

The first section of the book comprises *The Art of Resistance*, a speech Milo Rau delivered at the 2018 Hannah Arendt Tage. Rau did his homework: as he repeatedly emphasises, while his starting point was Arendt's seminal *The Banality of Evil*, he immersed himself deeply in the philosopher's entire body of work. Already here, we can observe a rhetorical technique that Rau frequently employs—he enjoys and excels at beginning with concrete examples before drawing broader conclusions. In this case, the starting point is his experience with *Hate Radio* (2011/12), a production examining the Rwandan genocide. While we cannot stop the evil that engulfs the world around us, we must attempt to interpret its presence, Rau argues. The first step in meaningful resistance is to look at contemporary reality as if we were viewing the present from the perspective of the future. If we do this, we immediately feel the urgent need for intervention. Moreover, this perspective enables “the development of a prospective, utopian imagination with respect to the alternative possibilities for action.”⁴

The second chapter, dated 2021, is Milo Rau's speech delivered upon receiving an honorary doctorate degree from Ghent University, dedicated to the circumstances of artistic creation. This emphasis is crucial in Rau's case, as many of his projects are not “just” theatre productions. One might even say that his real work often begins precisely where and when theatre traditionally ends. Speaking about *The New Gospel*, a retelling of Christ's Passion set in the context of African migrants and the Italian agrarian mafia, Rau asserts that the work is “not only a film, an

exhibition, a live passion spectacle, and a political campaign, but... it also supported (and remains to support) the first plantation in Italy managed by migrants themselves.”⁵ Everything that predictably—or unexpectedly—follows from such undertakings, from labour organisation and logistics to the very definition of the *event* itself, understandably catches both general audiences and professional observers off guard, not to mention even the participants themselves.

As he reiterates throughout the book, Rau consciously moves beyond the bourgeois concept of art—that is, the idea that theatre is a form of high art produced by a select few for another privileged group. In his view, these culturally homogenous production structures are “purified of social struggles.”⁶ He also assigns a radically different role to critics—both those writing about his work and art criticism in general—than what has long been customary: “I dream of an adventurous, creative, solidarity-based critique that can withstand contradictions. A critique that takes time to delve into a case without identifying with it. A critique that understands the ‘work of art’ as an alibi to reflect on the contexts it is dealing with and thus perhaps finds better, more correct, more precise ways of describing (and maybe even transforming) reality.”⁷

As previously mentioned, nearly half of the book is devoted to an extensive four-chapter interview conducted in 2022 in Ghent between Marijn Lems and Milo Rau. Their wide-ranging discussions revolve around four major themes: (1) violence and its stage representation, (2) art as a form of resistance and a potential path to revolution, (3) an exploration of the term *micro-ecologies*, and (4) the contours of the future city theatre. Even with its inevitable gaps and contradictions, the conceptual framework that defines Rau's aesthetics remains coherent throughout.

Without attempting to be exhaustive, here are some of the interview's key pillars. Rau

⁴ RAU, *Theatre is...*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

once again stresses the importance of process and the construction of *mini-communities*—which he coordinates but does not control—along with the agency afforded to participants. He acknowledges that treating performers as partners and sharing directorial responsibility is a time- and energy-intensive endeavour but insists that introducing collective responsibility more than compensates for the extra effort. (The interviewer takes the discussion in an interesting direction by probing the financial aspects of these principles—a particularly timely issue in an era of declining public subsidies for the arts worldwide.)

A significant part of Milo Rau's work directly challenges the Eurocentric concept of theatre and all its inherited assumptions—one need only think of his productions created in Rwanda, Iraq, Brazil, etc. Perhaps the most crucial realisation Rau has drawn from these experiences is that artistic groups or individual creators working outside the institutional framework of (Western) European art—as well as activists and ordinary citizens—can ask honest, direct, and original questions about canonical works. These questions, in turn, cast a new light on familiar works. One striking example: during *The New Gospel* project, filmed in and around Matera, southern Italy, the activist playing Judas told Rau that he would not hang himself, as his predecessors had done in every previous movie about the life of Jesus. The reasoning? "They only want to tell a story or make art if it furthers their cause"⁸—and suicide, he argued, cannot be the conclusion of an activist's life.

For Rau, the process is more important than the performance, and this refers not only to the process of creating a production but also to everything that happens after the premiere and what follows from it. As he puts it: "I don't want to make an artwork without also redesigning the whole process from the ground up, so it has an impact beyond the artwork itself."⁹ Content thus takes precedence

over form, which in turn calls into question the traditional Western theatre model of the *master-disciple, guru-fan* relationship. Inclusion, diversity, and democracy become the keys to an ideal institution—though Rau himself, for now, only dares to speak of it as a cautious utopia when he says: "to find—I don't know if it's possible—a way to retain the intimacy and democratic potential that you get when you work with a small group, for a whole institution that employs over a hundred people."¹⁰

In the book's final section, other voices alongside Rau's are given space. For NTGent's season announcement on 30 May 2022, artists and collaborators working in various positions within the institution were tasked with providing a brief commentary on each word in the phrase "*The City Theatre of the Future*." Rau begins with "*The*", describing the institution as an agora where diverse voices and stories can be heard. Chokri Ben Chikha—actor, dancer, performer, and playwright—sees the "*city*" as a barometer. Miet Warlop, a visual artist, speaks of a "*theatre*" that is curated, not only programmed. Theatre-maker, curator, and researcher Lara Staal, reflecting on "*of*", considers ownership: who does the theatre belong to, and how does it become a diverse and pluralistic space? Director, writer, producer, and sound artist Jesse Vandamme, discussing "*the*", insists that there is no singular theatre, only fragmented, chaotic stories that are given the chance to intersect. Brazilian writer and performer Luanda Casella sees the "*future*" as something closer than we might think. And the theatre they have collectively envisioned? It is, in reality, an expression of the complex realities of the present.

Finally, the title. *Theatre is Democracy in Small*—in a post-#MeToo theatrical landscape, at a time when the necessity of non-hierarchical working structures is being recognised—functions as both a provocative state-

⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁹ Ibid., 131.

¹⁰ Ibid., 156.

ment and a simple, everyday truth. The writings of Milo Rau and his collaborators stand as a series of firm declarations, urging the arrival of a day when neither in theatre nor in the

world surrounding it will anyone question the truth content of these five words.