

GOETHE MEDAL 2018

LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR MAPA TEATRO

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Anyone who asks where the icons of the revolution have all gone may find them between fiction and reality in the work of Mapa Teatro. “Welcome, old white man,” a shaman in the jungle says to Karl Marx in the play *La Despedida* (The Farewell), “I’ve been waiting for you! For two whole centuries my song has guided you. To this place. I am the spirit of this forest.” Marx, as if trying to dispel a misunderstanding, introduces himself, “Allow me, Karl Marx from the forests around Trier, Germany.” A farewell party is supposed to take place here. Where did they all go?” The shaman answers, “They’re dancing on the ruins.”

The play was created as the final chapter of an exploration of violence and festivity entitled *Anatomía de la Violencia en Colombia* (Anatomy of Violence in Colombia). Despite the major subject matter of the revolution it does not retreat into the dialectical, but rather in a Rimbaudian manoeuvre, ready for time in hell, *une saison enfer*, bidding farewell to the mistaken belief that contradictions can be resolved definitively. The long period of time – seven years – that Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden spent working on this subject proves their tenacity. They are tireless in grappling with a subject whose essential characteristic is attrition: violence.

On the 269th birthday of Goethe, in Weimar they have been awarded the Goethe Medal, an official decoration of the Federal Republic of Germany for “outstanding international cultural relations.” It is perhaps a signal against the distortion of culture as a means of national or identity delineation. Goethe’s idea of “world literature” does not mean literature that is perceived across national borders. He means literature or art that emerges from a cosmopolitan spirit. The awarding of the Goethe Medal to the Abderhalden siblings honours just this cosmopolitan spirit. Their universalism never signifies a turn from the local. On the contrary, they find their way to it through radical and precise advances into the abysses of the society in which they were socialised. By looking dehumanisation in the eye on site, they find their way to what is genuinely human.

After being educated in Europe, the Abderhalden siblings founded their theatre collective Mapa Teatro in Paris in 1984 where they initially handled the works of Beckett. As early as 1986, they moved back to Colombia where they were born in the 1960s as the children of a Swiss immigrant father and a Colombian mother. Here, they produced Heiner Müller with inmates in Bogotá’s largest prison. “From Beckett, we learned stillness,” says Heidi Abderhalden, “from Heiner Müller, we learned to speak.” They developed their transdisciplinary approach early on, which is not concerned with the juxtaposition of different forms, but with transcending formal boundaries. In *Testigo de las Ruinas* (Witness of the Ruins), a work from 2005, the boundaries between the audience and performers also disappear: Like Prometheus they bring light to the people on fallow land where their houses once stood, where their lives once took place. The entire district was demolished by the city. The fallow land becomes the stage. On a large screen set up there, the saviour of

Prometheus, that Heracles, is played by none lesser than a nine-year-old neighbourhood boy. He, too, is in festive clothing among the acting residents of the eradicated neighbourhood and watches himself as in a cinema of the moment.

Their work on the *Anatomy of Violence in Colombia* began in 2010 with the play *Las santos inocentes* (The Innocent Saints). The play looks at a community and its festivals in a region ruled by paramilitaries. In 2012, Mapa Teatro's work *Discurso de un hombre decente* (Speech by a Decent Man) looks at all of a society shaken by drug wars. Two years later, in *Los Incontados* (The Uncounted), a child and a magician in a middle class living room – this time a look at private life – are waiting for a feast, a feast that never happens. While waiting, they hear quotes from the radio. It is the voice (or acted voice) of the priest Camilo Torres, who in the mid-1960s joined the ELN, one of Colombia's two guerrilla organisations, announcing, "The carnival must end in order for the revolution to begin." The sentence stretches across the theatre stage, as it is here that masks are used not to hide, but to reveal what otherwise seems unrepresentable. Thus Torres's sentence reverses to the opposite: without a mask, there is no unmasking, without a carnival, there is no revolution. And yet what may have been originally meant is not nullified: We have to look into our own bared faces to see who we are and what has become of us in order to change the political circumstances. This, too, is applied in the theatre situation: In the acting, the audience meets itself. A postcolonial motif is added: a white mask on a black face. This was a key observation of Frantz Fanon, one of the founders of postcolonial theory, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. The system of white supremacy requires the black subject to wear a white mask, to thus submit to his subjugation and deny his own face in favour of the rules dictated to him. At the end of the closing monologue of *Los Incontados*, the black actor, while still uttering the final words, removes his white mask in front of the child who is now standing outside his own living room looking at him: is it revolution after all?

La Despedida, the last play in the cycle of violence, was produced in 2016, the year of the Colombia peace treaty meant to end the 52-year civil war. El Borugo guerrilla camp becomes a museum. For Mapa Teatro, it is a loop in history: After indigenous tourism, now, in the same forest, we have revolution tourism. *La Despedida* tells of soldiers returning to the guerilla camp, now a museum, to stage their own story and that of the guerrillas as a play. In this fiction, the camp becomes the site of a big farewell party where the icons bid farewell to the revolution that never happened.

On the way to bidding our abstractions farewell, we meet the spirit of the forest who has been waiting for us since the beginning of time, and while we dance at the big farewell party, the ruins of our existence are already crumbling. We are the white man the shaman expected. Life after catastrophe seems to be timeless. The Mapa Teatro laboratory examines Colombia's catastrophe. The patterns they see under their microscopes apply to all of us. No one can extract themselves from the position of the distant observer. In the end, we are all sitting in the same jungle. The simultaneity of festivity and violence is a feature of our time: The beaches, which are both graveyards and tanning beds, the summers in which the forests are burned and hiked, a world full of antitheses to which Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden respond by making experimentation an essential part of their work. This excludes clear answers. But is not an excuse for not taking a position. On the contrary, the questions they ask are always the search for a position in the face of irresolvable contradictions.

For their work, which originates from a cosmopolitan spirit and in which the transcendence of boundaries becomes method, for the precision of their local view, which may also shake

our centrism here on the other side of the Atlantic, they are being honoured today with the Goethe Medal. Congratulations.