

# GOETHE MEDAL 2015

## LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR EVA SOPHER

### BY HANNA SCHYGULLA

WEIMAR, 28 AUGUST 2015

- Check against delivery -

---

It must have been ten years ago...

I am in Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil. Measured against the vastness of South America it was a mere stone's throw from Buenos Aires and the magnificent Teatro Colón, where I had the honour of performing a few days before. But the theatre that I am standing in front of now here in Porto Alegre is no less magnificent looking, which is astonishing when one compares the two cities.

The lady of the house herself wants to show me around inside, which is also astonishing because theatre directors usually are quite content to give me a brief handshake before or after the performance, if at all... No, we do not need an interpreter for our unusual meeting. She speaks German, Frau Eva Sopher.

And there she is, standing in the afternoon emptiness of her domain, a petite, erect silhouette. She is waiting at the top of a beautiful stairway if my memory serves me right... I sense her Jewish background and think, 'the cup of the pogroms probably did not pass from her or she wouldn't be here.' My heart started beating fast the way to does when I - a member of the generation "after," after Hitler - meet someone who escaped. And what was the price?

She warmly shakes my hand and we easily exchange words that perhaps incorporate a silence about much that is left unsaid. Can she feel anything of my hidden trepidation? She doesn't let on that she does. The first thing that comes to my mind is to thank her for her prompt addition and correction of the Brazilian subtitles practically at the last minute. That, too, is unusual.

I do not yet know that such quick solutions are her daily bread. I do not yet know that she opens her theatre every season to dozens of guest performances. Sometimes performances by international soloists, theatrical and dance ensembles and symphony orchestras change daily each week.

Actually, I don't know anything about her yet except that she is a great person. She is "the precious pearl inside a glowing oyster of a rather grey city," wrote Susanne Linke, the dancer and choreographer from Germany in the guest book. But at this point in time I have not yet read the entry either.

Also, I do not yet know what all this woman has done for her Teatro São Pedro. Of course, she did mention that this site first was saved from demolition and then, over fourteen years of rebuilding, continued to survive as a living cultural site. She did not mention that this

reconstruction was her own accomplishment. I read this now in an interview written for the 190-year anniversary of German immigration to Porto Alegre:

She and her husband arrived in Porto Alegre in January 1960. Her first week there, she meets a colleague on the street who greets her with the crisp German sentence, "Roll up your sleeves and get to work." And she, the exile from the culture into which was she born in Frankfurt, Germany, did just that. Following her flight to Brazil, with guest performances from around the world she was able to draw her own audience here in Porto Alegre with whom she kept this "secular temple of the arts" alive for the next forty years. Furthermore in this interview from last year, the now over-eighty-year-old says she has no time to deal with the Jewish community, with German immigration or anything else. "Art is my religion," is her credo.

As a young girl she learned drawing and sculpture in São Paulo and was working in an art gallery at the age of sixteen. Later, she made it her mission to open wide the gates for other artists from around the world and, of course, the arts that came from Germany. She can say "of course" without casually brushing what happened aside. She allows space for the innocence of new relations.

The list of German productions that were invited here is a long one.

Productions/German guest performances (excerpt):

1984 Folkwang dance studio

1986 Susanne Linke solos (the first time)

1990 *Miss Sara Sampson* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Münchner Residenztheater, director Frank Castorf

1995 Cantus Cölln: *Monteverdi and the Madrigal*

1996 Urs Dietrich Solo, *Da war plötzlich...*, production Hebbel-Theater Berlin

1997 *Othello*, Ismael Ivo & Johann Kresnik, Theaterhaus Stuttgart in cooperation with the Deutsche Nationaltheater Weimar

1998 Ensemble Avantgarde with works by Hanns Eisler

2000 Leipzig String Quartet

2000 Henschel Quartet

2008 *The Persians* by Aeschylus, adapted by Heiner Müller, Deutsches Theater Berlin, director Dimiter Gotscheff

2012 *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* by Bertolt Brecht, Berliner Ensemble, director Claus Peymann

And amidst them, about ten years ago I was also able to stand on this stage with my musical autobiography. It begins with a line by Eichendorff: "Sleeps a song in things abounding that keep dreaming to be heard..." and then I segue to the first words of my biography:

"As I was still sleeping and dreaming in my mother's womb, loud songs were bellowed in the world...Nazi songs. Actually my name was supposed to have been the very Nordic, Germanic Dagmar, but then at the last minute my mother changed her mind and called me Hanna. Hanna...a name that sounds more Jewish, although I am not Jewish and when I asked my mother later why she named me Hanna, she merely said, 'I once knew a Hanna; she was so special.' I do not know why I never asked what came of this Hanna..."

Then I sing the song "Transport." The lyrics are the words of a camp inmate and it was composed by the Jewish emigrant Norbert Glanzberg. While I am singing this song in Porto

Alegre, I am thinking of you, Eva Sopher, who may perhaps be seated down there in the audience.

(A capella)

Nachts in des Traumes sicherem Hafen  
haben sie alle hinübergeschlafen  
ich aber lieg und find keine Ruh  
Bilder bewegen sich auf mich zu  
Flügelspitzen berühren die Kissen  
Plötzlich wird jäh die Tür aufgerissen  
Licht fällt ins Auge und ringsumher  
rühren sich die Köpfe  
schläft keiner mehr  
Totenstille.  
kein Laut kein Wort  
plötzlich zerrei es die Stille  
TRANSPORT

At night, in the safe haven of a dream  
They all slept away  
But I lie and find no rest  
Images move towards me  
Wingtips touch the pillow  
Suddenly the door is torn open  
Light catches the eye and all round  
The heads stir  
None sleep anymore  
Deathly silence.  
No sound no word  
Suddenly it tears the silence  
TRANSPORT

Was Eva Sopher really in the audience and if so, what must she have felt? I do not know! I also do not know whether there really was a stairway there at the top of which she waited for me. But even if she really did not wait for me up there, one thing I do know: I looked up to her.

As again today I look up to this woman, who at the end of her acceptance speech for the Goethe Medal bows deeply in farewell ... not before us ... but to us. She bows before the life that finally closed the circle in a happy ending, the circle between herself and her fatherland and her mother tongue.

I return the bow, my lady!

Early August 2015  
Hanna Schygulla