

# *The Atlantic*

## Why Isn't American Theater Like This?

Milo Rau's plays are tasteless, anarchic—and thrilling.

By Helen Lewis

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Jean-Francois Monier / AFP / Getty

“I WOULD NOT say that my art is dark,” Milo Rau tells me, and I burst out laughing. We are sitting in the office space of his theater in Ghent, Belgium, surrounded by posters of his work. In the past decade, Rau has directed plays about a homophobic murder (*La Reprise*), the unexplained suicide of two parents and their children (*Familie*), and the exploitation of the developing world (*The Congo Tribunal*). The Swiss-

born director's best-known work, 2018's *Lam Gods*, re-created events depicted on a celebrated 15th-century altarpiece that is on display at the cathedral across the square from the theater. Does the poster for that production show a silken apple, like the one held by Eve? Or a group of angels? Some prosperous Belgian burghers, perhaps? No, I am conducting this interview while under the gaze of a sheep's head bloodily severed from its body. Rau is still faintly annoyed that he wasn't allowed to slaughter the animal live onstage, thanks to animal-cruelty rules.

I had traveled to Ghent—a pleasant city of fewer than 300,000 people in the predominantly Flemish-speaking part of Belgium—to meet a man regularly described as “the most controversial director in theater.” This week, Rau is coming to the U.S. for an event dedicated to raising the profile of women composers.

That is a worthy—and unusually earnest—commitment from a director who is better known for his ability to shock and provoke. Rau's vision is difficult to adjust to if you are used to the polished, friction-free gloss of a Broadway musical, or the cerebral immersion of an Ibsen revival starring Jessica Chastain or Ian McKellen's version of Shakespeare. Think of experimental theater as an haute couture dress or an Impressionist painting: It might be uncommercial. It might even seem ugly at first glance, but it pushes the edges of the form and sets the fashion. (Haute couture serves only as a loss leader for handbag and shoe sales; at first, critics hated the work of Cézanne, Manet, and the rest.) What starts out as radical often ends up in the mainstream. But no one like Milo Rau exists in American theater, because commercial producers need to make money, and no government body is willing to match the generous artistic subsidies handed out by European governments. And yes, some of that subsidy will end up going to plays that disgust the audience, or (worse) bore them senseless. That's okay.

For the past five years, Rau, 47, has been the artistic director of a theater known by its Flemish abbreviation, NTGent. A public subsidy of 3.4 million euros (\$3.6 million) a year allows the theater to take risks and keep its ticket prices low. (In the U.S., the maximum grant for theater projects from the National Endowment for the Arts is \$100,000.) NTGent's best seats are about 28 euros, or \$30—less than a tenth of the cost of the top-price weekend tickets for *Hamilton* on Broadway. Those affordable prices turn a theater trip from an annual blowout—with all the risk aversion that entails—into a regular part of a city dweller's cultural life. That, in turn, helps sustain an artistic community. “We do have the playwrights,” Arthur Miller wrote in 1947, in a doomed argument for the U.S. to follow the European funding model.

What we don't have is a Theatre ... The difference between a Theatre and theatres is the difference between the factory buildings of the Ford Company and its personnel, pooled know-how and common production aims. If an automotive engineer worked in the plant only six weeks every two years and had to spend the rest of his time totally disconnected from the process of production; we would soon discover that “there are no engineers.”

When I visited in December, NTGent was full, even though that evening's performance was almost willfully avant-garde: a reenactment of the director Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 film *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* by actors with Down syndrome, performed in three languages with English supertitles. (More on this production later.)

Rau's career would be impossible in the United States. Ron DeSantis would have raised *millions* of dollars off Rau's *Five Easy Pieces*, a play about the Belgian pedophile Marc Dutroux, acted out by children ages 8 to 13. The young actors took on the roles of Dutroux's father, one of his victims, and one of the police officers involved in the investigation, which discovered that Dutroux had sexually abused, tortured, and killed multiple children. This being Europe, the play won rave reviews and multiple awards, with one jury praising “the reckless genius of Milo Rau, who never curbs the candor of the young actors but slips in powerful metaphors.” Rau insists that using child actors was not a gimmick, but an artistic statement. “If you would have adults

doing it, it would be a naturalistic drama somehow,” he told me, in a way that makes *naturalistic* sound like an insult. His art is lo-fi, unashamedly meta, and in many cases quite tasteless. The violent and sexual themes might upset the political right, but his plays’ refusal to provide neatly packaged morals and empowering stories of self-actualization also challenge theater’s prevailing left-wing values.

In addition, state funding allows NTGent to make work specifically about the city and country that surround it. While putting together *Lam Gods*—in which he likens religious extremism today to medieval peasants’ veneration of the Lamb of God, as depicted in the Ghent Altarpiece—Rau caused a scandal by placing a newspaper ad asking for a returned jihadist fighter to appear in the play. This summer, the director will stage all 32 extant ancient Greek plays in public spaces around the city, with a new play starting each morning at dawn. “I had always wanted to turn it around and to make [theater] in the beginning of the day, and then you go to work,” he said. “First art, then work.”

The timing allows the productions to use natural light—as Shakespeare’s Globe does in London, in tribute to the original performance conditions—and audiences to see the plays when they are freshest. Rau once stumbled across an amateur group doing Shakespeare in a park at 7 a.m., “and it was the first time in my life I really understood every line.” This might sound like heresy from a theater director, but Rau makes a point of iconoclasm. The fourth rule of his Ghent Manifesto, announced when he took over the city’s theater, declares: “The literal adaptation of classics on stage is forbidden.” The sixth rule, that two languages must be spoken onstage in each production, makes sense as a conciliatory gesture once you remember that multilingual Belgium is a fractured and sometimes dysfunctional country. Belgium’s Flemish north—where most people speak Dutch dialects—is richer and more heavily populated than Wallonia, the geographically larger, French-speaking south. After a 2019 parliamentary election, coalition talks to form a government took more than 500 days.

The Ghent Manifesto also mandates that every production should go on tour in other cities and should feature at least two amateur actors. (“Animals don’t count, but they are welcome,” Rau adds.) One production every season must be rehearsed or performed in a war zone.

The funniest thing about all this provocation is that, in person, Milo Rau is anything but brooding and tortured. He bounds around the office in an oversize sweater, with a puppyish enthusiasm that makes him seem younger than 47. In theater, he told me, “the darker the subject, the funnier the team.” His bearing defies the staid reputation of his native Switzerland, known for the precision of its watches and Roger Federer’s backhand. Rau quoted Graham Greene’s *The Third Man* to me: “In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace—and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.”

WHAT MOST EXCITES Rau as an artist is the discrepancy between appearance and reality. In *Familie*, the audience watches as the rhythms of an ordinary suburban evening unfurl—a scene of mundane domesticity enhanced by the casting of a real-life mother, father, and two teenage daughters. (The actors, along with Rau, are credited with writing the script.) Rau was determined to stage *Familie* with actors who were related to one another, he explains, “because I’ve seen the micro-gestures that show these people have known each other for 20 years.” Over two hours, in real time, the four characters talk about homework, eat dinner, bicker, try to control their dogs. And then, without any discussion, to the accompaniment of Leonard Cohen’s “Who by Fire,” all four of them hang themselves from the beams of the roof.

*Familie* was based on a real case from France in 2007, in which the only clue to what happened was a suicide note that read: “We messed up. We’re sorry.” Rau’s play also refused to provide any answers. I watched it a few years ago, in Amsterdam, and it was like being hit in

the face with a brick by a stranger; the shock was immediate, but what stayed with me was the absence of meaning. Rau specializes in dramatizing this kind of randomness, and the violence that lies beneath the surface. Europeans like to scoff at the United States, with its assault rifles and QAnon shamans and steroidal political scandals, but Rau's work suggests that the old continent is merely better at camouflaging its weirdness. The director likes to read internet comments about him, many of which are extreme in their dislike. The day we met, online strangers were accusing him in advance of ruining this summer's Vienna Festival, of which he had been appointed program director months before. The vitriol demonstrated to him that "in our society, we have a nice little salon of people having beautiful rhetoric, having an interesting time, blah, blah, blah. And underneath it's loneliness, hatred, nihilism." Give people the chance to express themselves anonymously, "and you open the door."

This gulf between polite manners and latent cruelty was also the inspiration for *The Last Generation, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, his version of the 1975 Pasolini film. Across the developed world, rates of Down syndrome, a chromosomal abnormality that can lead to a range of disabilities, have dropped sharply since the introduction of prenatal genetic testing. "We have a whole elitist philosophy of the beauty of handicapped people," Rau told me, "and they are so nice and so great. But of course, we let them in reality disappear."

To develop *The Last Generation*, Rau worked with Theater Stap, a Belgian ensemble established in 1984 for actors with learning disabilities. His pitch was simple: He wanted to restage scenes from *Salò*, a notoriously explicit film in which a group of aristocrats kidnap and tortures a group of teenagers in a castle. The victims are made to eat feces and have sex with each other, and are eventually killed in various gruesome ways.

Rau showed scenes from the film to the actors of Theater Stap, as well as their parents and guardians. "We always try to have faith in the directors when they ask us," Marc Bryssinck, the company's creative director, told me. "So we did go along with him. And many people

were crying. Many people said, ‘I don’t want to be in this play.’” Out of Theater Stap’s 28 members, eight declined to participate, and another handful were ruled out because of traumatic experiences in their past. Bryssinck said that for the actors who did take part, though, this was an exciting opportunity, far removed from the limited, “inspirational” roles they are sometimes offered. “Our actors want to *play*,” he told me. He acknowledged that some people would find the project unseemly, but said that the material reflected Theater Stap’s ambition to be a serious artistic enterprise. “It is not about therapy, because our actors cannot be cured,” he said. “They are fine as they are.”

Watching *The Last Generation*, I didn’t find it offensive or shocking, and the play did make me question the paternalism of my attitude toward the actors with Down syndrome. Why shouldn’t they dress up in dog collars and eat chocolate pudding onstage? Every other actor I know *loves* that sort of thing. By breaking the fourth wall, the production helps the audience get to know its actors, who introduce themselves and slip in and out of character.

Rau stepped down as artistic director of NTGent in January 2023, although he remains involved with the theater’s programming. He can work wherever he wants in Europe, but there has been something magical about his time in Ghent. The idea that a small city in a small country could sustain a world-class artist is made possible by \$3.6 million of annual funding and a broad tolerance for creative provocations. In return, Ghent gets the ultimate “third space,” one that is neither home nor office, Flemish nor French, professional nor amateur. “Professionalization is, of course, closure of an institution for a certain class,” Rau said. “We broke this in the city theater, because it’s a public institution.”

Rule No. 9 of the Ghent Manifesto—staging one production a year in a conflict or war zone, or somewhere without creative infrastructure—has allowed Rau to take his expertise (and his investment) around the world. He staged *Antigone in the Amazon* with Indigenous Brazilians, while *Orestes in Mosul* allowed his team to train Iraqi filmmakers. He

has also worked with artists from the Democratic Republic of Congo—the site of Belgium’s terrible 19th-century colonial adventure, which reduced the area’s population by as much as half and made King Leopold II more than \$1 billion in today’s money.

Of all the manifesto pledges, the ninth is the one that Rau thinks has been most transformative, and he wishes that the United States would copy it. “I found out that you can learn what I know in three months,” he said—reinforcing his belief that “white middle-class” gatekeepers of theater hoard their knowledge because they are scared of the competition. “If all theaters in New York would adopt this manifesto, and make only one project per year like this somewhere, you could imagine what this would mean.”

Well, it might mean something closer to Arthur Miller’s vision—of a thriving community of actors and technical staff able to make a full-time living from the theater, and able to share their knowledge with others. In 1947, Miller lamented that a purely commercial system prevented a writer from developing artistically: “It leaves him to compete with clowns hired by gamblers.” The shocking, strange, unpredictable work of Milo Rau shows that another way is possible.

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