



David Roesner, Katharina Rost & Nicolas Stemann: The Dirty Noise of Theatre

[00:00:23] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello and welcome.

In the Salon today David Roesner hosts Katharina Rost and Nicolas Stemann for a rich conversation that takes as its starting point Stemann's theatrical productions, and ventures into a whole range of reflections on how dramaturgies of speech, sound and music function on the German stage and beyond.

David Roesner is Professor of Theatre and Music-Theatre at the LMU Munich. His research interests span experimental music-theatre, the musicality of theatrical performance and the creative processes in contemporary theatre music.

Katharina Rost wrote her PhD on sound perception and sonic participation, and is currently working as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bayreuth. Her interests move across Theatre and Performance, Sound and Gender Studies.

Nicolas Stemann started out playing in bands and is now amongst the most critically acclaimed theatre directors of the German-speaking world. He has presented works at the Festival d'Avignon, Berliner Theatertreffen, and at the Ruhrtriennale, amongst others.

This conversation was recorded on 10th July 2020.

[00:01:41] SALON

David Roesner: Welcome. Welcome Nicolas Stemann, welcome Katharina Rost. I'm very excited to have this conversation. We three have never been in the room together and we're not now because we're on Zoom, but at least we're in the Zoom where it happens. I just wanted to ask both of you, and I will add my bit, to speak a little bit about how that connection between theatre and music, and theatre and sound has brought you to where you are now – so a little bit of a biography by means of how has that connection in particular had an influence on your work and life so far. Shall we start with maybe Katharina actually, and then go to Nicolas.

Katharina Rost: Okay. Yes. I've written a dissertation on the subject of sounds and theatre, and on listening modes. And because I observed, or I heard, that there are several listening modes in theatre, in contemporary theatre, and I was very interested in how this affected a kind of critique on the linear listening in theatre that might be evoked by speaking an important text following a certain dramaturgy of a sense that you want to bring across. And some theatre companies and some theatre directors followed a different way that I found very interesting in that they tried to break with this linearity of it. They created spaces, they created diffusion, confusion, different kinds of aesthetics that I found interesting. And so it brought me to think about critical moments of it, a critique of the senses, or of the order of the senses, by bringing them to a disorder and I found that very interesting, but from the perspective of a theatre scholar and from the perspective of a theatre recipient.

DR: Thank you. Nicolas, on your web page your first sentence is that you started off by making music and you played in a lot of bands and have never given up music entirely, but then you've studied philosophy and directing. How's the music accompanied your journey to become a director and the artistic director of the Zürich Schauspielhaus?

Nicolas Stemann: Well I somehow couldn't get rid of this musical aspect, right, of my interest and also of my talent and my work and my focus. As you mentioned, I started somehow in music and my first experience with stage also, with being on a stage but also with staging if you want, was in bands and being as a singer and guitarist and keyboarder on stages and in clubs and so on. Then many things came together somehow and I still try to understand: why did I leave this path of just being a musician somehow? Or why not this space and instead shifted to this theatre space and tried to shift that always back into music. But I don't really have an answer, though maybe I also had an interest in language a



lot and in words and in writing and in thoughts and so on. And I was always looking for the mixture of the two and the tension between the two. And being married – not married, but my partner is a musician, she's an opera singer, I know this other world also a bit. And I see musicians when I'm working in opera and I'm working with orchestras and so on. So I see what it means just doing music and I think I wouldn't be satisfied there either. But just doing theatre of spoken words, also somehow doesn't satisfy me. So I'm always trying to find the mixture of the two.

DR: There are some overlaps with me, although I have not achieved the level of fame as you do, but I started in opera as well actually as a ten year old, I was in the children's choir in the opera in Stuttgart. So in some ways singing, making music and being onstage was also a natural companionship in my upbringing as it were. And then I seem to have never been able to decide between, you know: 'I'm focusing on theatre' or 'I'm focusing on music'. Studying in Hildesheim, which I did, was doing both, and lots of projects I was doing there I was doing both. And then my PhD was also – it was called 'Theatre as Music'. So it was literally trying to offer a perspective on how certain directors, I spoke about [Christophe] Marthaler at the time and Einar Schleef and – this is where the English-speaking audience will come in – Robert Wilson because he's obviously the most internationally famous of the three. But in all those cases I was interested in musical qualities in how they shaped their productions and their directions. So that's been a continuum for me and continues to this day. But I wanted to pick up on this question – you've spoken about your journey from being a musician on stage and being in bands, and now bringing the bands back into the theatre, and one example – I mean there's many, there's a band in many of your productions – an early-ish example, which I wanted to talk to you about, is *Die Räuber* [*The Robbers*], which was very well received as well, and did it go to the Theatertreffen? I'm pretty sure it did.

NS: Ah, yes. Yes.

DR: Yeah. So it's one of the – the Theatertreffen in Berlin is one of the sort of platforms on which each year ten of what they call the most remarkable productions in the year in German-speaking theatres are being presented in Berlin, and it's a hallmark, as it were, or it's a way of recognising outstanding work. I think you combine two things – I mean, you combine many more – but one of the striking things was the choric nature of it because you made the robbers into a chorus, so it was no longer just a dialogue between the good and the bad son as it were. And also there was an extended section where there was a band on stage, in which the actors transform into band members et cetera. We can play a little, quick clip at this point so that people can get just a sense, a little bit of that moment.

[00:07:51 to 00:08:40] Excerpt from *Die Räuber* (2008) by Friedrich Schiller, dir. Nicolas Stemann

DR: So tell us a bit about how that sensitivity or that sensibility for rock enters into your work and how you use it.

NS: In this work it's maybe not too astonishing because it is an early work of Schiller, it is one of the plays of the 'Sturm und Drang', how do you call that in English?

DR: I think they actually call it Sturm und Drang as well. Yeah.

NS: So that was like the rock'n'roll period of German literature, in the late 18th century. So I think I'm not the first person to combine that with rock music, but what was new in this production was that the actors, even when they talked and when they talked without music, acted a bit like a rock band. And you mentioned that I somehow left the dialogue and I used dialogues as texts, as monologues and maybe also monologues for voices. So there were four men in the centre of it who played all kinds of characters, many characters at the same time, and in the beginning we weren't really sure if this would work because we also wanted to somehow tell the story and we wanted to talk about the psychology of the characters and so on. And the astonishing thing was that it did work, that all of these things happened in the heads of the spectators, and you didn't need a room or a chair or a table to have a naturalist scene and scenery. I wanted to somehow trust the words. I wanted to use the words to create all these things and give the words back the energy that they might have had in the time when it was written. And this somehow led to a rock'n'roll manner of talking and to a very energetic way of talking, very energetic way of performing as well. And so at a certain point we couldn't avoid the actors becoming a real band, a real rock band, because that's another thing that's special – these instruments were played by the actors. I had two musicians that I worked with a lot, Thomas Kürstner and Sebastian



Vogel, that you also, I think, did research about and made a book with and so on, and they always in my productions are onstage as live musicians. And in this case I really had very gifted actors – Felix Knopp, who is like me and like you maybe, someone who couldn't decide between becoming a musician and becoming an actor, and so he somehow is both, and he's a very good guitar player and as you could hear he is also a good singer. And Alexander Simon is on drums and he's really a very good drummer. So these four made a very good band. The other two actors who couldn't play instruments you could hear them scream in the background. So they were continuing performing the text in this energetic and direct and rock'n'roll-like way. So it was more than just turning Schiller text into rock'n'roll song. Somehow this came out of the work.

KR: Can I just jump in and I would like to ask you if there's a difference for you between speaking and singing, or if there's maybe not such a strict boundary, or what you think are the effects of it?

NS: Yeah. I like the idea that there's not such a strict boundary. I don't know that if in practice it always works because singing is definitely another way of expressing yourself than just talking without melody and without music, but I like the idea and also like to state in my work that even spoken text for me is like music and I like to treat them like music. And this way of thinking helps a lot whilst creating because I always can come back to musical systematics, or musical measures, when I have to make decisions because I am considered to be a political director and someone who likes to think, and maybe not intellectual but likes to deal with intellectual topics, and with very complicated texts, with texts that nobody else dares to stage and so on. And that is true but I don't want to do it in an intellectual way. And what really helps me is to think of spoken text as music because then you can be more of a composer or a songwriter than a thinker, you know, or someone who just has to do things in a rational way.

KR: Yeah, yeah. I asked not because the actors are also singing but because of what you just said. I had the impression that the actors in your works often are talking in a way that is very musical, that is musically transformed or informed. And I think it's very interesting that often the texts are quite political or have a strong message, but also then because they are being said in a certain way they get a certain strong aesthetics too, strong artistic way of being said, and they have affective impacts, that might compete a little bit, maybe enhance, maybe also disturb, the intellectual message that is given in the text. There's a field of tension for me between the affect of what is being said, 'affektion', and the content, or the message, and that's very interesting I think when you use this.

KR: That's great. I very much like the way that you describe it because it's pretty much what I'm aiming at, having this tension between very a rational system, which is language and a very irrational system, which is music. And both have a systematic and both have rules and to mix these rules makes it possible, for instance, to think things that are not thinkable and to feel things that are maybe more than just feeling in a sentimental way. And so this overlapping of these two systems I experience as being very enriching. So I very much like that you seem to have received it in exactly that way.

DR: I wonder how that translates into the rehearsal room because – it's a few years now but I've written another book about musicality in theatre and I've looked a lot of different aspects but one was that the notion of the director should be like a conductor. That idea that – I think Meyerhold actually says, you know: 'If you want to direct then you have to study music.' His programme for educating people to become actors or directors would have been training them in the violin and things like that. So because there was a very strong notion that it needs all that musical sense of form. And he rehearsed, as far as I could find out, with a pianist in the room who would basically suggest, like a sonic subtext to actors and saying, you know: 'You should walk like this thing in Chopin', or: 'You should...', you know, so to incorporate certain musical qualities in their speech, in their movement, et cetera. I just would be interested for you to elaborate a little bit on, you know, with those two hats, the more: 'This is a heavy text, we need to really understand what it means, we have to get to the bottom of what the politics of this text are, what it means to us today.' You're very much a director who when you do the classics as it were, which you also do as well as doing new work, world premieres of work, you always tease them into this century and really make them speak to us now. So there's that level, and you were hinting at that, saying that you bring a sort of musical sensibility in the room where certain decisions are made probably not on a psychological basis or a narrative basis, but on a basis – I think Thomas and Sebastian, your musicians, used a lovely term – 'the energy logic', you know. There's a certain logic of



energy.

NS: Yeah. And that's an important term that we often use while rehearsing. Nobody really knows what it means but somehow everybody does. Yes.

DR: Which is always a good term when everybody agrees without having to define it. But I mean on a practical level some directors, if you learn directing, if you learn the craft of directing, there's a lot of creating characters and psychologies and motivations and subtexts and so forth, and here you ask people to make music and how does that impact your rehearsal room?

NS: I always have a piano there and next to my place where I'm sitting and where I'm directing, and I'm pretty much directing with making music, with the piano, with a keyboard, with whatever is there. And then often I have live musicians onstage responding to me so we easily can switch into a session and then the actors with their skills and their means of language and of psychology and characters, and all these things somehow are forced to become musicians, or to be part of a musical process. Of course this Meyerhold quotation that you gave of being a conductor, I like it because it treats theatre in a musical way. What I would oppose to is this conducting thing because I would consider myself more of being a band leader and also with this experience of what does it mean to make band music? Especially when you also songwriting you come with a song, you have a very strong imagination of the song, but still if you share the song with the other musicians, especially if you're in a band together where everyone knows each other well, always things are added and you never have complete control. And the song goes through a process of being rehearsed by a band that will change the song and I like this very much about the work in theatre. I like this aspect of creating together and of real collectiveness of the creative process. This also for me works through music and a lot with improvisation and a lot with also musical improvisation. But of course in the end it really depends on the text. And in the end, of course, the text really has a strong dominance and the meaning of the text, and at a certain point we ask ourselves the question: 'Well, what does it all mean?' And then this question is very strong in my work and I need answers for this and sometimes you don't have the answer and you can come back to music. But in a way I wouldn't like stop at a point where it's just the form and where it's just art for art's sake, 'l'art pour l'art'. And I think this maybe the difference between me and some fine artists who also do theatre, like maybe Bob Wilson and so on, but also to musicians who are doing theatre, like Heiner Goebbels or you mentioned Marthaler. Maybe they are a bit also in between, between meaning and non-meaning. I'm really in between and I'm thrown back from one pole to the other, and maybe this movement somehow creates the artistic work and also the production.

KR: I would like to deepen this subject for a second and a little bit more because I would like to know a little bit more about – you said that you strive for work in a collective sense, or in a collective way, and you like it to be considered more a band or [yourself] a band leader. And how does music really affect the working process? Does music have a democratising effect, could you say that? And what do you strive for? What do you think? What do you strive for in rehearsal if it's not to build up the perfect scene in the sense of transmitting the text and the sense of the text and to be true to the text in a traditional way? What do you strive for? What is the goal? It would be interesting for me to know.

NS: As I like the tension between music and words, I also like the tension between written text and performing, of performance. And these are really two very strong poles who are not the same and they never fall together entirely in my work. And I think that this is the difference, or something that makes my work different from others, where many people are searching this, right? That the performance and the performing in the moment goes 100% together with the text and you forget that it's written text and you think: 'Wow, this comes out of the mouth of the actor as if he thought it in this moment', and so on. And I always keep up this difference because I like the tension between it. And very often in my productions people come on stage with the script in their hands, or the book in their hands, and they read the text out of this script and by reading the text out of this script something happens to them. And we see what's happening to them but we don't really see them being the script or them being the scripted character and so on. It's always a 'Verhältnis', it's always a relation, between what's going on onstage and what's written on paper or in the book. So I think it's about this. It's about creating the tension between these two poles and making it visible and making it possible to experience this tension. And yeah, creating some kind of musicality with this. And so often as a spectator you are not given a result. So we don't say: 'Okay, we've thought about this for three months, now we have an answer, we



put this answer onstage and now please applaud', or you know: 'Do anything with it', or: 'Learn your lesson', whatever is intended but I like to invite the spectator to be part of a process. And so often even if somehow our artistic process is finished by the premiere, the form tells a story of a process that is still going on. I like this idea of the production not being finished at the premiere and not ever bring finished, not until the last performance and still being in process. this has to do with that. I like to invite the spectators to be part of something that is still in movement. And there are shows of mine that dealt with it a lot, like *Die Kontrakte des Kaufmanns*, which was a show that really wasn't finished because in the final rehearsals I noticed I cannot finish this play. It was a play by Elfriede Jelinek written in 2008 right before the crash of Lehmann Brothers bank and it dealt pretty much with this topic. It was about an Austrian scandal, financial scandal, where many politicians and important businessmen were involved. And so she somehow wrote the play about the crash that happened after she wrote the play but we were doing it while all these things were very much in process. And I decided not to give an answer, not to have a finished solution because there was none. Things were still going on and each week someone killed himself or other institutions collapsed and you couldn't really tell where this crisis was going to lead to. And so we created a four-hour happening. Maybe the first half hour was staged and the last half hour and in between we had about three hours of improvising but with given structures because during the rehearsal process we found a lot of modules and a lot of games, if you want, that the actors could do with a certain bit of text. But each night different actors had different bits of texts, nothing was fixed. So each night really was different and this only was possible because I left my director's seat and went on stage to the musician's position. I was on stage, kind of a show master leading through the show and explaining what this all is and sometimes also performing some text, but most of the time I was directing while the show was going on from on stage as a musician. So this really was an invitation into a process that was both very musical, very political, and it was very much appreciated by the people at that time because there was not really a space like that, where you had an open process and which it was possible to talk about all these things. Of course there were newspapers and there were books written about it and so on but they always had to have conclusions. And we could really be open and just ask questions or just create energies: 'What is going on with this crisis? What is this system? What is this neoliberal mantra that we're trapped in? How can we maybe de-programme everybody, you know, from this programming that we had from the last 20 twenty years and so on?' That for me was maybe the production where I was the closest to what I'm looking for in theatre. But everything came together, the openness of the process, the music and the meaning.

DR: Structurally that was almost like a jam session. Structurally you start together, you know: 'Okay, we're playing this theme, we're playing 'All of Me', or whatever', and then there's a period of pretty extended improvisations with a lot of freedom and then at the end you kind of find some kind of ending but it is by no means the conclusive answer to that piece, or no one claims it is the ultimate rendition of that song or something, and even to the point of – I just wanted to add to your vivid description – I've seen it in Hamburg at the time, actually, and I still carry that memory. Also not being able to decide when to visit the restroom because you said, basically–

NS: Oh yeah, people weren't allowed to leave, / for four hours everyone wasn't allowed to leave.

DR: We were allowed to leave / but we didn't want to! But also Jelinek kept writing text so not just your production wasn't finished by also her writing wasn't finished, wasn't it?

NS: Yeah, that's true.

DR: So she kept providing more pages – but what I just /want to pick up on–

NS: The amount of text that she wrote after the premiere was bigger than what she wrote before the premiere and that was already, like, five hours if you just read it.

DR: She's not known for restriction, or for restraining herself!

NS: No.

DR: But what I wanted to pick up on is that musicality is happening on so many levels, in terms of it's not just an aesthetic for performance or something that you feel is present as music, musicians, instruments on stage, but it really is a structural aspect of rehearsing, a shift in how do we approach theatre and you mentioned not seeing yourself as a conductor but as a band leader and I think that's a really important decision, that it's not so much about one person's single vision that asks 80 or a 100



people to play to his – usually his – baton quite literally, but to enter into a process where you suggest ideas, you're bringing material, but the band song will always be an emergent thing, you know, it comes out of everyone's input. And it would never sound that way if you rehearsed it with other musicians and so forth and it's really a sort of collaborative process. But I just wanted to stay on that notion of sound I think because I keeping thinking about that term – we've talked about music, musicality, but I think also theatre has a sound, theatres, the buildings have a sound, and certain ensembles have a certain sound. And I'm not even quite sure what I mean by that, but I just feel like it's something that's important in your work – how to make the whole evening sound. And that includes voice I think but it also includes the use of music, how it's played back, how the instruments sound, when you use microphones, what you do with them. So it's that how do you – beyond the question of what they say, what they play, that idea of like a band would have a sound that it doesn't matter too much whether they play that chord or that chord, but it's coming through that instrument and those speakers and that technique. Is that something you think about consciously or does that just come out in a certain way, this sort of 'Stemann sound of theatre' if you want to call it that?

NS: I guess I'm pretty much focused on sound while working. I don't really do it consciously but I know that I'm struggling a lot with sound and also – you know the typical theatre sound is very difficult for me and very annoying and I can't avoid it. I also have this. I mean this way of loud talking, you know, if you talk without microphones, or this way of screaming when actors express anger and so on. It's often horrible, right? It's not beautiful, it's not a nice sound and I guess maybe even in German theatre it's worse than in other theatre cultures, where people are a bit more tender and actors, you know, they are a bit more precise psychologically-wise and not so, you know. German actors often are tanks or trucks and this gives them a great force also, and a great courage, but often it sounds horrible and it's rude or – and I suffer a lot from that but still I can't avoid it in my work because I also look for a certain kind of intensity and I think I can't – this is also decision. I've never decided to work against the medium and against the medium of theatre. And also I very much understand why people want to have control – Bob Wilson or Andrea Breth – I very much understand it because you want to make things lighter or you want to make things more perfect or more beautiful and so on. And my experience as a viewer is this always fails. I very much liked Bob Wilson's work when I was young and when I was a teenager, when I was a student in high school and I had my first theatre shows, and there was *[The] Black Rider*, the musical with Tom Waits in Thalia Theatre in Hamburg. And this was one of my first conscious theatre experiences as a becoming artist if you want. I very much liked it but I always noticed that this aiming for perfection never worked. There was always like a fly flying into the lightbulbs or some mistakes happened. You always heard the sound of the stamping of the feet of the actors and this was not staged, you know. There was no director who decided 'I want these sounds' in the piece of art that, you know, had the 'Anspruch' or had the–

DR: Was claiming, or was claiming to–

NS: Yeah, aiming for perfection. And so there always was the imperfection and that has to do with the medium. And I think especially my generation started to be very much aware of that because we grew up with so many other media and for us making theatre really was a decision, you know? 'Why do you make theatre? Why don't you make rock music or why don't you make movies, or why don't you do television or write books?' These are all very good options at that time and making theatre was not so popular at that time. And I think I did it because of that, because of this possibility of failure at each moment, and this live moment and how do you call it? This 'Eigenschaft', this–

KR: Attribute.

NS: Attribute or this–

KR: Quality?

NS: Or this essence of this artform – it can't be perfect and you have to deal with it. And so I started, especially in my first productions – I always started to stage the imperfect. I always staged mistakes and scenes where people didn't know: 'Is it a mistake or is it staged? Or is it an accident or is it part of the show?' And I always liked it when maybe half an hour or so you could understand: 'Oh no, it wasn't the actor getting hurt, it was the character!', but in that moment it looked as if the actor was getting hurt, or if the production was being hurt, and not the story and so on. I liked to use that as a means of storytelling, as a means of theatre, because for me it was so essential for the medium. Trying to



overcome the imperfection, that's what all theatre directors somehow work on. And I also do that, especially if you're a musician you need a certain perfection, you need a certain structure of things. I don't like things if they are unstructured but I'm not heading for a surface that has no holes in it and it's like a balloon and shiny.

DR: Absolutely. It reminds me a lot of a colleague of Duška's, Ross Brown, who's also at Central. I think he's coined the term 'theatre noise' and the idea of theatre as a noisy medium. I mean I get that you are talking about perfection not just in a sonic way but also in other respects. But even on that level the idea of that you can create a sort of – and obviously theatre buildings have been built that way as a soundproof box where nothing can come in but, as you say, then there's a light that flickers as it goes down, or cools down, and in a sense–

NS: Yes. And there are theatre buildings that don't work that way. For instance if you go to Schauspielhaus Zürich, the theatre that I run at the moment, it's very noisy. You hear all the street cars and all the cars and all the helicopters flying over it. It wasn't initially made as a theatre.

DR: But it's precisely embracing that and using that. I have noticed in the conversation with Thomas and Sebastian, your two musicians that you work with a lot – they told me this anecdote that they had built this little recording studio for themselves and it was all nice and pristine and good machinery and was lovely, and then they just went back to the kitchen and did it there because you had a birdsong and a car passing by. It just got a bit, sort of, a bit noisy and a bit, sort of, not so pristine and not so perfect and it added a sort of mundanity and warmth and they just liked that a lot better and they said that so far none of their directors had complained about the noisy dirt of it.

NS: And it's very theatrical.

DR: Yeah. Exactly.

NS: I mean I think this is what I like about making theatre. You don't have the control, the full control, and that also means that you don't have the full responsibility for everything. I don't want to – I want to do my best to guide the spectators in a certain way. I like being guided as spectator. I like to somehow tell the spectator what to feel. Music helps a lot in doing so but I don't want to have the complete responsibility for that. I also want to leave the rest of responsibility for coincidence, for instance, or for the uncontrollable, the unknown, the unforeseen, the live moment. That goes, of course, very much for the artistic collaborators that I have. So there's always, in each performance, space for the actors to do the unforeseen, and to do little, you know, things that surprise their partners, that surprise themselves. Nothing will be ruined when a cellphone goes on in a scene. And when I'm tending in the rehearsal process to be too focused on the perfect and the perfection I always think about this: 'What will we do if now a cellphone goes on?' Would everything be destroyed? The whole illusion and so on? Or will we fall back to a point we like to be because we know on this level the whole show takes place. It's where we are, you know, we don't completely lose ourselves in the show. We don't lose our neighbours sitting next to us – or used to sit next to us before Corona hit theatres, I don't know what will happen in the next season when no one's sitting next to us! And I think without this, one really shouldn't be doing theatre. Or no, not so much, but I would go crazy, you know? I think the responsibility to get out all these things out of this stubborn media, it would be too much work for me. And also too much shouting and too much anger and too much tantrums. You know, the things you normally think directors are doing.

KT: I think to me it appears like if you go for perfection you go for something whole that is also closed, and that's the problem then if you want to integrate stuff that happens coincidentally you cannot do it because you have created a whole thing, like a closed whole thing. And if you let it be open you can integrate these things without a problem. So that's a different approach. And when I talked to Thomas and Sebastian they said something great about it. I think they said something like: 'Liveliness by failure. Liveliness through failure.' It connects to what you said before. And they also mentioned another word – in German, 'zerfasern' or 'zerfransen'. They said: 'We are the "Zerfranser"', and I think it might be well translated as to 'fray out' or 'fraying out,' something, and the piece or the work or the performance through music and through sound and through their presence on stage. By being present on stage and not having a concrete role that they play and act out. They are somebody on stage that me as a spectator I cannot really, I don't know: 'Who are they? What position do they have?' And they already make a difference on stage.



NS: That's true. That's true. Whereas on the other hand their music often holds things together, right? That's the opposite. Things that were 'verfranst', frayed out or whatever, before – because this goes for many levels. Also the visual level, like the semantic levels, I don't have control about my semantics. I don't know with a lot of signs that are happening on stage: 'What do they mean? Where do they come from? Do they belong to each other? Do they have a consistence?' No they don't, you know? It's a very heterogenic and often it's the sound and the music that holds it together. But maybe it's true – seeing the people creating the sound on stage again gives the sound something more materialist or less holy or so.

KR: And on the other side, maybe to add to that, the actors who are acting out roles or characters, also as you said before, are not perfect in their characters or are not fully in their characters. They are somebody else and I find it very fascinating, who are they? They are some kind – they are also not the actor themselves – they are some kind persona. What kind of persona are they? Fragmentary characters but, yeah, I don't know? The actors acting the role, something between, or so, there's also a tension.

NS: When David mentioned earlier when I stage classical texts I like to make them like contemporary texts. I don't do it by modernising them. Often I really leave the texts as they are and this modern aspect comes from modern people who deal with this text or who create a relation between themselves and the text. And of course I mean the last couple of years became a very political topic, right? Who is talking, from which perspective, from which position, and so on. And this also I think changes and also in the future will continue to change my work because this somehow was a blind spot. I was talking from my position, from my perspective, assuming that it was the perspective of everybody somehow. And turning older, turning more established and being marked by a political discourse and debate, which I really welcome a lot and which I really support a lot about privileges, you know – who has which position and who is allowed to make which observations – that also changes this theme. It changes the naivety of this perspective. So the question of who is talking will become much more diverse.

DR: That completely resonates with something I found that the discussion recently has been a lot about visibility and about who's being seen on stage and why there are not more people of colour, and why are there not more women, and why are there no disabled people et cetera, et cetera. So the discussion about inclusivity has been on a visual level to a point. I'm not denying that at all. I'm saying that's an important part of the discussion. But I think the audibility as it were, whose voice is being heard and how do these voices sound... I think ten-fifteen years ago, it would have been unthinkable at the Kammerspiele in Munich, and if you've worked there you know the theatre and the city and the kinds of discourses they have about their theatre, because it's 'their' theatre – to have people who don't have perfect diction, who have an accent, who, you know, don't have a trained voice and articulation of a drama school, or something. To have that would have been impossible and still – and it raised quite a few eyebrows Lilienthal bringing that in, and you bringing it in in your productions frequently – I'm thinking of someone like Jelena Kuljić who's a jazz singer and with, I think, a Serbian background if I'm not mistaken – brings a kind of voice, a kind of accent, a kind of presence on stage which I always enjoyed a lot, but which is very unusual and I think is great to have and is great addition to the kind of sonic sphere on stage.

NS: I mean, München was late. The Münchner Kammerspiele were late and I was really shocked by these things raising discussions. Seriously, I mean, it was like five years ago, four years ago, that we did this and it really raised discussions about how they can't talk. And I've done that I think 20 years ago. I have had Sachiko Hara in the Wiener Burgtheater and she was hardly understandable when she talked German and it was great for texts that were difficult to understand, like Elfriede Jelinek it was great to have a Japanese actress who had just arrived at that time in the German-speaking world and was really struggling with language, to see her struggle with such a complicated text. And in the end it was sometimes much easier and better to understand her than to understand many trained German actors. And so Kammerspiele was way behind when they created debates about this I think.

DR: But still early for Munich I think. With a view to the passing time I wanted to pick up on two recent productions of yours just so we don't lose talking about them.

NS: We should play some more sound samples or?

DR: Yes. Precisely. We've lost track of that because it got too interesting but we can do that now. So



maybe first can we talk a bit a recent production you did in Zürich based on a very – I mean I wasn't aware of this novel before, I've recently heard about it, and I think in America it's almost like the second Bible, this book *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. And you decided – it's very much a Bible for the capitalist and the egotistical – you'll describe it better in a minute but what I found very interesting in it is that you deliberately used the form, or the forms of, the musical as it were. Because we've talked a lot about rock bands and that, sort of, rebellious and rougher nature, and here you embraced a very different style.

[00:44:43 to 00:46:07] 'Our Common Interest' from *Der Streik* (2020) by Nicolas Stemmann after Ayn Rand

DR: Tell us a bit about how you encountered this novel and how you made the decision to transform it in that particular way.

NS: To make this novel it had a bit to do me starting as an artistic director here in Zürich and Zürich being a city of money and Switzerland being a country of money and a country also of rich people. And thus a couple of debates about libertarianism, libertarian thinking. And somehow they are a thing here, like in the United States, I think also like in the UK, that the state is something bad and that it's private entrepreneurship that will create the good things in the world and for this it's important to be completely selfish and egotist and not having any social thoughts at all. Having social thoughts is evil, being selfish is morally good, that's somehow the morality, or the philosophy of Ayn Rand. And actually, yeah, this was the basis for the decision we made upon this novel. Maybe it was a bit naive because I underestimated a bit the evil energy of this novel and also the level of writing and thinking and philosophy that's really very low, it's not really a good piece of art. And this is what offended me more than that it was a political point of view that wasn't mine. I wanted to do that. I wanted to confront myself with this political point of view and I wanted to somehow re-read this attempt of creating a moral philosophy for capitalism and doing that in this country at that time, and I underestimated a bit how annoying it would be to do deal with this kind of literature. It was really – I suffered a lot. And this idea of turning it into a musical came very late. It came after I had started to rehearse. It was, I think, five or six weeks before the premiere that I noticed this will save our lives. This will somehow save our arses in dealing with this thing because you can't just create a show based on a piece of literature, or I can't do that based on a piece of literature only to criticise this piece of literature

DR: Only to expose how bad that literature is.

NS: It has to have some value in it and I have to construct something before I can de-construct it. And with normal theatre means and the normal theatre means that I had, this was not possible. And then I noticed it can be good, or it would be a beautiful idea to have a Broadway musical, or an Off-Broadway musical based on this novel and something like this doesn't exist. Actually I don't know why, I think some American musical producer should do that because – maybe they don't because it's so somehow poisoned in the United States, you know? No liberal left-wing person will ever touch this novel because they know there are loads of people would take it seriously and who live by that novel and who don't do good to the world, and who are really the enemies. But here somehow we could use it as a thing to play with and to give it a re-read through this perspective. And when I had the idea this would be a great subject for a musical I could start to create and to create something. So I created a propaganda musical for capitalism in the sense of Ayn Rand. And having this means of musical allowed me to have the second layer that was satiric or ironic without being shallow, or without being cheesy or cheap or too clever. Because many musicals which were really successful in recent time were very satirical, like *The Book of Mormon*, or like *Urinetown*, that was a big Off-Broadway hit, *Spamalot*. So the musical genre is used to being ridiculed from inside or from within. That helped me a lot to create this novel and to criticise it in the same way and to be both serious and non-serious in the same moment. To create feelings for characters that we don't really like and at the same time show that the feelings that we create at the moment are not one to one or meant to tell something else. And there we were very close to something maybe like *The Threepenny Opera* or Brecht/Weill terms of theatre, where it always was about sending a message, but also to create a genre first or serve the genre, if you want.

DR: We could talk about this a lot longer but we're heading towards the end, I think.

NS: We're running out of time.



DR: Running out of time like Hamilton in *Hamilton*. Because we're in the middle of this pandemic and you responded to this pandemic as many theatres have in different ways. Some just dug out their old recordings and streamed them. You've created something which you call the *Corona Passion Plays*, or [*Corona-*]*Passionsspiele* as it were. I wanted to reflect on that because, again, [it was created] for the online format. So this is genuinely created during lockdown under these conditions for an online audience, and again you chose a musical vehicle or the format of songs and a song-cycle, essentially to do that, other people have done very differently – although actually Christopher Rüping also did a wonderful series of online performances in Zürich that were created for that medium rather than for theatre and then filmed. Do you want to talk about that and how you felt that again through writing and music and songs you could almost keep the theatre going better than through theatre in a conventional sense.

NS: Yeah. I mean it really came out of the situation. It started with the thought or the feeling that these days need theatre and that all the things that are going on, also the things that we don't talk about during these times of lockdown because we are dealing with ourselves and what is going on with our kids and the homeschooling and the home office and so on, I thought this time would need theatre and this brought me back to the classical *Passionsspiele*, which I think is a Central European, often German-based, thing. In Germany it came of the late medieval time, often dealing with plagues or diseases where people were starting to make the *Passionsspiele* of the passion of Jesus, and so they made the vow: 'Once this is over we'll do the best theatre plays ever.' And being in lockdown where there was no theatre, the theatre was closed, and we were not supposed to go out and to see each other and to rehearse with each other – and to really know theatre is touching and theatre is contact and theatre is being close together and theatre is bodies in the same space, so all these things that we're not supposed to do – I could understand why the thought of 'we have to do theatre' comes out of a time like this. And so in the beginning there was just this title, *Corona-Passionsspiele*, and it was really annoying to be artistic director of a theatre at this time because it was so much work – it's so much more work to run a theatre that is not playing than to run a theatre that actually is playing. I wouldn't have thought this before. And to escape that a little, I started with this artistic project and this was a big relief. Artistically it was fine to be without theatre for a while because I could turn back to music, and I could turn back to songwriting, and I put out all my instruments again and my recording devices and I did a home recording at a home office. I created these songs and then these songs went out to a friend and video artist and to actors of our ensemble and they did something with the songs, and we made video clips of this and we put them online. And in the end – I mean, we were very lucky because Switzerland is quite liberal at the moment, or in the last couple of weeks. I mean at the moment now the numbers are going up again so I wonder whether this was too early or not, but in the last couple of weeks they were allowing theatres to play again with certain restrictions. And so we were able to create a theatre piece out of these songs. So we have done this onstage already. We have this huge hall where normally, I think, maybe six, seven, eight hundred people can fit in, depending on how you seat them and we had this for 100 people. So we had a lot of distance between the spectators and we created little islands like living rooms in this huge hall and held a concert, but also there were texts involved. There were texts of Elfriede Jelinek who wrote a play during this lockdown. So somehow she has already reacted to Corona and I wrote a column for the newspaper, for the *NZZ* in Zürich, so we also had some text that could be said and so in the end, we didn't really have a lot of time to rehearse and we rehearsed under the safety restrictions with Corona, so no touching, no screaming in your face, and if you sing, you know, sing in front of you, and there's six metres nobody else can be there and so on. So it wasn't really a strong and intense rehearsal process and we just had less than two weeks. This thing was not planned. This thing was with no budget and just using the means that the theatre has. And this was such a great experience actually to be spontaneous in an institution like this. And even though I lead this institution, I struggle a lot with the institution's will for planning and for planning long term ahead. And being not really flexible and I am looking for flexibility in my work and I'm looking for openness and for the unknown to happen. This institution doesn't – this institution wants to know everything three years in advance. And so it was really good to somehow use this special time to do a special production. And actually we were talking about what happened. In the end it was 14 songs coming out and we related these songs to the 14 weeks since the lockdown, between the lockdown and the show there were 14 weeks and each week had a show. So we really had a chronicle of what



had happened. And the last word of this chronicle was a quotation by an activist of Black Lives Matter that was just a sound file. I didn't make a song for that because I thought I can't, you know, I can't make satirical songs about the Black Lives Matter movement at this time. It would strongly be misunderstood but I wanted to support it and since it was part of this time of lockdown I wanted to have it involved in the show. And so this was the last word. And I wonder if we can repeat it? We'll decide after summer whether this is now dated or maybe it's a good document of this time because it really, with all means, with the form, with what the songs are talking about, even with, you know, my whole family was involved because it was a lockdown project. My daughter is singing in it, my wife is singing in it, so it was a bit, like the videos you could see from people in their living rooms singing with their families. This was also visible in the show. So I pretty much like what came out of it but it started with me being somehow – yeah, there's no theatre because you always say: 'Ah, if there's no theatre we all die.' I think so. I think maybe that goes for society in a city. I think we really need theatre and I also can give reasons for this. Me personally as an artist I can also do some time without theatre. It's also a good thing to know.

KR: But it seems like music has helped you through this process.

NS: Definitely. Yes. Definitely.

KR: And it makes me think about did your relationship to music change? Or let me say music in theatre, or music for theatre, did it change over the course of your work life so far? Or were there essential changes in your relationship or is it still very central, the same as in the beginning?

NS: How many minutes do I have for the answer? I'll try to make it quick. No. I think it's constantly changing. In the beginning I almost started to avoid – not really music but to avoid myself as a musician being part of my shows. I had other musicians. I lent the composition over to them and I took myself back. I didn't want to intervene, I didn't want to dominate them as I don't want to do with actors. I don't tell actors how to act, I'm not an acting teacher. So I give them a frame in which they can act, and I wanted to give a frame in which music could happen. So it took some time until my coming back as a musician, coming back as a musician onstage, to step onstage was to step as a musician onstage. And then I noticed: 'No, it's not vanity or so.' I was afraid of being vain and spoiling or damaging my work. And I thought: 'No, it's not vanity, it's really an essence of my work that I'm also a part of it, that I can be onstage, that I can be onstage as a musician, it helps the work.' And this experience brought me back in as a musician much more and at the moment – I mean at the moment I'm doing this experience of writing because I've written a play now and in the last season, I've written this musical, it's maybe 10 or 20% of Ayn Rand, or 10%. The dialogues, the songs, also the storyline, is pretty new based on the fable, or on the thoughts of Ayn Rand and on the basic story of Ayn Rand, but I invented quite a lot. And so this is something I discovered at the moment. And discovering me again as a songwriter – that's the step that I was at now during this time of lockdown. Now when it gets back to work, should it get back to work, really in the rehearsal space, the question would be: 'How does this relate with actors?', for instance. If I really go back into a rehearsal process and a working process with actors, they can't just sing my songs. It's not really enough and it's better if I sing my songs. And so what will happen when actors come with their needs, their skills, with their specifications, and so how will this affect the work again? So it's a constant shift and change, it always centres around music. Always.

DR: We can, I think, as an outro then listen to a track from *Corona Passion Plays*.

[01:01:51 to 01:02:55] 'Plexiglas Plexiglas' from Corona-Passionsspiel (2020) by Nicolas Stemann

DR: Thank you very much, Nicolas, for sharing your thoughts and your ideas around theatre music and sound and aurality, and thank you Katharina for sharing yours, and for asking very good questions as well.

NS: Thank you David, thank you Katharina.

DR: You're very welcome.

KR: Bye.

DR: Bye Nicolas. Thank you so much.



Clips Summary

[00:07:51 to 00:08:40] *Die Räuber* (2008) by Friedrich Schiller, dir. Nicolas Stemann

[00:44:43 to 00:46:07] 'Our Common Interest' from *Der Streik* (2020) by Nicolas Stemann after Ayn Rand

[01:01:51 to 01:02:55] 'Plexiglas Plexiglas' from *Corona-Passionsspiel* (2020) by Nicolas Stemann

Works Cited

Brown, Ross (2011) 'Towards Theatre Noise' in L. Kendrick and D. Roesner (eds.) *Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.

Roesner, David (2019) *Theatermusik. Analysen und Gespräche*, Berlin: Theater der Zeit.

Rost, Katharina (2017) *Sounds That Matter – Dynamiken des Hörens in Theater und Performance*, Bielefeld: transcript.

Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/salon4-davidroesner-katharinarost-nicolasstemann/>.

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Bano, Tim; Roesner, David; Rost, Katharina; Stemann, Nicolas (2021) LMYE Salon #4: Roesner, Rost & Stemann – The Dirty Noise of Theatre, *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.14028248.v1>.

