

ANTIGONE IN THE AMAZON

MILO RAU & LANDLESS MOVEMENT MST /
NTGENT

“WHERE POLITICS FAILS,
ONLY ART CAN HELP”

DIE ZEIT ON THE WORK OF MILO RAU

NTGent



Antigone in the Amazon: campaign image.

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IMPORTANT DATES

- 17/04/2023: re-enactment in the Amazons (more info below)
- 13/05/2023: world premiere *Antigone in the Amazon* @ Ghent, NTGent (BE)
- 19-21/05/2023: *Antigone in the Amazon* @ Amsterdam, ITA (NL)
- 25-27/05/2023: *Antigone in the Amazon* @ Vienna, Wiener Festwochen (AUS)
- 1-4/06/2023: *Antigone in the Amazon* @ Frankfurt, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm (GER)
- 13 & 14/06/2023: *Antigone in the Amazon* @ Douai/Arras, Tandem Scène Nationale (FR)
- 17/06/2023: *Antigone in the Amazon* @ Rotterdam, Schouwburg (NL)
- 16-24/07/2023: *Antigone in the Amazon* @ Festival d'Avignon (FR) (!) selection under embargo

“THE INTELLECTUAL RENEWAL WILL NOT COME FROM THE GATED COMMUNITIES WHERE THE AUTHORITARIAN NEOLIBERALISM EMERGED. THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE COMING ERA WILL COME FROM THE FORESTS, FROM THE FAVELAS AND THE BANLIEUES, FROM OCCUPIED HOUSES AND MONOCULTURES.”

— MILO RAU ON HIS COLLABORATION
WITH THE LANDLESS MOVEMENT

CREDITS

CONCEPT & DIRECTION

[Milo Rau](#)

TEXT

Milo Rau & ensemble

IN COLLABORATION WITH

Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra
(MST)

WITH

[Frederico Araujo](#)

[Sara De Bosschere](#)

[Kay Sara](#)

[Arne De Tremerie](#)

ON VIDEO

Gracinha Donato

Celso Frateschi

Celia Maracaja

Zé Celso Martinez Corrêa

and many others

MUSICIAN

Pablo Casella Dos Santos

DRAMATURGY

Giacomo Bisordi, Martha Kiss Perrone, Douglas
Estevam da Silva

DRAMATURGY ASSISTANT

Kaatje De Geest

MUSIC COMPOSITION

Elia Rediger

Pablo Casella Dos Santos

MUSICIAN FOR THE MUSIC COMPOSITION

Elisabeth De Loore

SET DESIGN

Anton Lukas

COSTUME DESIGN

Anton Lukas, An De Mol

LIGHTING DESIGN

Dennis Diels

VIDEO DESIGN

Moritz von Dungern

MAKING OF & VIDEO CLIPS

Fernando Nogari

VIDEO EDITING

Joris Vertenten

DIRECTION ASSISTANT

Katelijne Laevens

INTERN (direction assistant)

Chara Kasaraki

CARETAKER

Carolina Bufolin

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT (Europe)

Klaas Lievens

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT (Brazil)

Gabriela Gonsalves

TECHNICAL PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT

Oliver Houttekiet

STAGE MANAGER

Marijn Vlaeminck

PRODUCTION

NTGent, International Institute of Political
Murder (IIPM)

COPRODUCTION

Romaeuropa Festival, Manchester International
Festival, La Vilette Paris, Tandem Arras Douai,
Künstlerhaus Mousonturm Frankfurt, Equinoxe
Scène Nationale Châteauroux, Wiener
Festwochen

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[WATCH THE TRAILER HERE](#)

LOGLINE

For *Antigone in the Amazon*, Milo Rau and his team travel to the Brazilian state of Pará, where the forests burn due to the expanding soy monocultures and nature gets devoured by capitalism. Together with indigenous people, activists and actors, Sophocles' *Antigone* is recreated on an occupied piece of land in the Brazilian Amazon. Recreated as a bloody clash of traditional wisdom and global turbo-capitalism; an epic of mankind's struggle against its self-inflicted downfall in greed and blindness and hubris.

For this experiment, the Global Ensemble of NTGent unites with Brazilian artists. For the first time in the history of theatre, an indigenous actress plays *Antigone*, the chorus of the tragedy consists of survivors of the Brazilian police's largest massacre of landless people to date. *Theiresias* is performed by South American actor and activist legend Zé Celso, while renowned Brazilian actor and director Celso Frateschi will portray *Creon* during the creation phase in Brazil.

Antigone in the Amazon will premiere on April 17, 2023 on an occupied federal highway through the Amazon, on the day and place of the massacre. European premiere is on May 13, 2023 at NTGent (Ghent, BE), led by artistic director Milo Rau.

Parallel to the play, a campaign to save the Amazon is being developed together with the Brazilian movement of landless farmers (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra) and many other NGOs.

For the first time in the history of theatre,
an indigenous actress plays *Antigone*



Preparation of photoshoot in March 2020 with actors Arne de Tremerie (on the left), Kay Sara (middle) and Celia Maracaja (on the right). © Armin Smailovic

BACKGROUND

"Many things are monstrous, but nothing is more monstrous than man," says the most famous and most adapted play in tragedy literature, Sophocles' *Antigone*. The play focuses on the conflict between Antigone and Creon, between traditional society and the modern, capitalist state. For 'reasons of state' Creon does not want to have Antigone's brother buried and violates the law of the gods - plunging his family and the entire city into disaster. Thus, in the 7th century, Antigone emerges as perhaps the most radical critique of what would later be called 'Western civilization' and conquer the entire world: a dark song about the limits of enlightenment and the dangers of exploiting nature.

If in the time of Sophocles the apocalypse sung about in *Antigone* was a sinister notion, in the age of the Anthropocene it has become a fact. Therefore in April 2023, Milo Rau and his team restage *Antigone* as a global endgame in Pará, the northernmost state of Brazil, on the edge of the Amazon. Because here the future of humanity is at stake and with it every form of life on earth.

During the covid pandemic, the attack of the Brazilian agribusiness and their European partners - from Ferrero to Nestlé - on the largest contiguous primeval forest of the earth, still intensified. Not only the green lung of the planet is threatened, but also the people living there and their millennia-old traditions.

ABOUT RAU'S TRILOGY OF ANCIENT MYTHS

After the globally debated production [Orestes in Mosul](#) in the former capital of the Islamic State and the Jesus film [The New Gospel](#) in the refugee camps of southern Italy, Rau and his team now travel to the Amazon Basin in Brazil for the conclusion of their Trilogy of Ancient Myths. Together with indigenous people, activists and actors from Europe and Brazil, Sophocles' *Antigone* is being recreated on an occupied piece of land as a bloody clash between traditional wisdom and global turbo-capitalism; an epic of humanity's struggle against its self-inflicted downfall in greed for profit, blindness and hubris. And not least as a question to art itself: What can committed art achieve? Can art help where politics fails?

After political projects like [The Congo Tribunal](#) and [General Assembly](#), and narrative and representational pieces like [The Europe Trilogy](#), [Compassion](#) and [La Reprise](#), Milo Rau has recently turned to the founding myths of Western civilization.

In Mosul, until 2017 the Iraqi capital of Islamic State, Rau and his team staged *Orestes in Mosul* (2019) based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* with Iraqi and European actors. In the middle of the war zone, the ensemble, together with the Mosul Academy of Fine Arts, asked perhaps the most pressing question of all civilizations: How can the tragic end, how is forgiveness and thus a new beginning possible? The theater project gave rise to [a film school](#) that Rau and NTGent founded together with the Mosul Academy of Fine Arts and UNESCO.

"Milo Rau's film class makes history," headlined art.tv. Arab News summarized: "Young Iraqi film students tell their own stories from Mosul". The short films of the first class of students are currently touring European film festivals, and a Mosul film festival (Mosul Biennale) is in preparation.

With *The New Gospel* (2019/20), which premiered at the 2020 Venice Film Festival and won among other awards the Swiss Film Prize, Rau and his team worked with refugees, laypeople and actors from Pasolini and Mel Gibson's Jesus films to adapt the social revolutionary message of the New Testament for the 21st century - sparking a revolt for the rights of migrants exploited by the mafia on tomato plantations in southern Italy. As part of the filming, distribution of the film and a fair tomato distribution system, over a thousand southern Italian refugees have been regularized. *The New Gospel* thus comes closest to what Milo Rau calls micro-ecologies in his book [Theatre is Democracy in Small](#): "unlikely collectives, alternative production and distribution systems of dignity" that use the capitalist system to humanize it".



Preparation of photoshoot in March 2020. © Armin Smailovic

And now, after the *Oresteia* in Mosul and the Bible in southern Italy, Sophocles' *Antigone*, is restaged together with the landless movement, indigenous activists and actors from Europe and Brazil. *Antigone in the Amazon*, which Rau and his team have been preparing since 2019 (see interview below), concludes Rau's engagement with the great myths and questions of humanity.

ABOUT 'ANTIGONE IN THE AMAZON'

As in the previous projects, Rau's question is: which actors, which political constellation allows this text about the clash between traditional and modern society to speak to us anew? How can theater create alternative narratives to the real-utopia of a more just and humane civilization after capitalism? How can we overcome tragic thinking together? For the staging of their *Antigone* for the 21st century, the director and his team therefore go to the Brazilian state of Pará, where soy monocultures are expanding into the burning forests of the Amazon and capitalism is - as it were - eating up nature. At the invitation of and in collaboration with MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra), the world's largest landless movement. They are creating an educational play about the violent devastation and displacement caused by the modern state, which places private property - and thus global trade and speculation - above the traditional right to land.

The speech duels between Antigone and Creon, as well as the choral passages that have been reinterpreted for 2.500 years, will be given new meaning in workshops together with MST activists and actors from Brazil and Europe. It is a clash of the liberal world order with the holistic cosmology of the indigenous peoples of Brazil, who in the age of impending climate collapse are cultivating a forward-looking approach to nature. But Sophocles' critique of human hubris, the ideology of exploitation and feasibility, the question of the justification of state violence and civil resistance, are also reflected in the cast itself, in the stories of the actors involved and in the debates that develop among them.



In 1996, Brazilian police created a bloodbath against landless people. © João Roberto Ripper

ABOUT THE CAST

As in *Orestes in Mosul* or *The New Gospel*, European and local actors, amateurs and professionals meet in *Antigone in the Amazon*. Here, too, those affected tell their own stories and subject the most famous tragedy in European literature to a completely new reading.

The role of Antigone is played by Kay Sara, an indigenous activist. The chorus is made up of survivors of a massacre by the military police in 1996. **The Brazilian performance will take place on the 17th of April 2023 at the symbolic sites of the Brazilian state's conflict against the landless and the indigenous population: on the closed road through the jungle where the massacre took place, on the plantation subsequently occupied by the survivors and inhabited to this day, and in the forests and the villages of the indigenous population.**

Haimon, Creon, Ismene and Eurydice are played alternately by the two Belgians Arne De Tremerie, Sara De Bosschere and the Brazilian Frederico Araujo, members of the Global Ensemble of the NTGent, and activists of the landless movement. Finally, in the role of the blind seer Teiresias, who predicts Creon's self-destruction, appears the myth of Latin American theater: 82-year-old Zé Celso, the inventor of Brazilian theater based on indigenous

traditions. Renowned Brazilian actor and director Celso Frateschi will portray Creon during the creation phase in Brazil.

ABOUT THE MAKING-OF AND THE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN

The public filming and world premiere of *Antigone in the Amazon* will be followed, as a theatrical video installation, by a tour of Europe carried out jointly with the Landless Movement. **The Brazilian director Fernando Nogari, known for his video clips for the singer Selena Gomez, is making a behind-the-scenes film about *Antigone in the Amazon*, documenting the political background, the rehearsal and production process, and in general the political situation in what is probably the decisive hotspot of our time.**

But all that is not enough: parallel to the theater project, **a political campaign is being developed that advocates sustainable agricultural production in the Amazon region.** Because where politics fails, only art can help!

INTERVIEW WITH MILO RAU

Jonas Mayeur: After the production of *Orestes in Mosul* in the former capital of the Islamic State and the Jesus film *The New Gospel* in the southern Italian refugee camps, now follows the third part of your *Trilogy of Ancient Myths*. Why Sophocles' *Antigone* and why in the Amazon of all places?

Milo Rau: "I studied ancient Greek for almost seven years, and as my final work I translated Euripides' *The Bacchae* anew. So the Greek tragedies have always fascinated me, and *Antigone* is undoubtedly the most famous of all tragedies. Goethe calls it the absolute pinnacle of Western poetry: crystalline and prophetic, insanely complex and yet almost grotesquely simple. From Brecht to Anouilh, from Judith Butler to Anne Carson, the play has been subjected to ever new interpretations. The plot, as I said, is very straightforward, actually a series of a few encounters and choral songs: When *Antigone* buries her brother Polyneikes, she thereby violates the burial commandment of King Creon, for Polyneikes is considered an enemy of the state. The philosopher Hegel saw the confrontation between *Antigone* and Creon as the confrontation between traditional, divine law and rational, modern state. For the philosopher Judith Butler, on the other hand, *Antigone* undermines the existing symbolic order even more radically: namely, from its utopian outside, from a fundamentally different design of human coexistence, of the living and the dead, of man and nature. And this is where the Amazon comes in: I think that the 'symbolic order' of the Occident really needs to be questioned and changed from its outside, the peripheries of the capitalist system."

The ancient Greek tragedies shape Western culture, have been interpreted and staged hundreds of times, and are an integral part of the repertoire of European theaters. However, this does not apply to Latin American countries, where the Greek tragedies are culturally less significant. Why this choice? Why this "appropriation", so to speak, of *Antigone* by Brazil, by the Amazon? Wouldn't there be, thought the other way around, many stories from the Amazon that deserve to be brought to Europe?

"What the Greeks did thousands of years ago, is using the myths and stories of the places they conquered, to form new myths. *Antigone*, *Medea*, even the allegorical figure of Europe itself: these are all figures and myths that the Greek city states appropriated and made into the first European imperial high culture. The stories of the colonized became the myths of the colonizers. In that sense, simply restaging *Antigone* or *Medea* in Berlin or Ghent is actually continuing this cultural appropriation of thousands of years ago. To me, it makes much more sense that these stories

are now being catapulted out of the - meanwhile globalized - European system again, that they are being re-appropriated by the peripheries, re-socialized. There's [a beautiful documentary](#) that was made about Kay Sara after our first rehearsal block in the spring of 2020 in which she says: 'I didn't know about the play *Antigone*, but I think the person fits me perfectly'."

How did this project begin?

"Like most of my projects, unplanned, from an encounter. When we met in 2019 - we were touring with a couple of my pieces in Brazil - they said they would like to do something with us. I showed them clips from the film I had just shot, *The New Gospel*, whereupon they showed me a book they use in their schools, *Occupying the Bible*. They immediately understood what *The New Gospel* was about: the reappropriation of a myth, the revolutionary Jesus myth, by the outcasts, the marginalized of today. We are now doing exactly the same with *Antigone*: we are not only criticizing and adapting Sophocles, we are occupying the play, as it were, just as the landless movement occupies land. With the actors, stories and wisdom of the Amazon."

What role does MST - Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra - the largest social and political movement of landless workers - play in the production? How do they interpret *Antigone* and what artistic as well as political potential do they see in this project as a political movement?

"I think it's no coincidence that the proposal for *Antigone* came from them - because of the land question and the fight against a dictatorial state, both of which are central to the play. When we started the project, Bolsonaro was still in power. Douglas Estebam, one of our two Brazilian dramaturges, worked with Augusto Boal, the inventor of the Theater of the Oppressed. So we are very close in terms of our overall conception of theater, working with amateurs, mixing staging and activism, and so on. The appropriation of myths is also very central to MST: the Bible, the lineage of the quilombos (runaway slaves), the labor movement, and recent Brazilian history, especially of course the massacres of state power, all play into our interpretation of *Antigone*. In addition, the gender and diversity issue that is very present in *Antigone* is absolutely central to MST. And finally, the use and training of choirs is part of MST's schools and political training. The idea of forming a choir from survivors of the 1996 massacre, but also bringing in activists from the quilombos and indigenous peoples, negotiating gender issues on an equal footing with land issues, all of this is completely logical for the MST. And of course, *Antigone* is completely rewritten in this appropriation: Amazonian rituals take the place of the rituals of Ancient Greece, the choirs sing something different, the music is recomposed. And the first time I read it, I was told: Why does everyone kill themselves at the end? The fight goes on, doesn't it? So we rewrote the ending."

As Kay Sara's speech says, which she was supposed to deliver in 2020 as the opening of the Wiener Festwochen - and then delivered online, as the first part of the [School of Resistance](#) - we as humanity are on the brink of the ecological apocalypse. The Amazon rainforest, called the 'Green Lung of the Planet', is threatened, the planet, and with it humanity, has reached a tipping point for which humans themselves are responsible. It seems that even the attempts to avert this catastrophe only accelerate it. For example, the regulatory attempts of European corporations often contribute to the fact that the destruction is not slowed down, but covered up with quality seals and other greenwashing - or that these seals are just deliberately distributed only to the big monopolists. How can the staging of a Greek tragedy which deals with precisely the tensions between nature and man, and traditional and modern law, contribute to overcoming the tragedy? How can theatre, as your [Ghent Manifesto](#) says, not only describe, but actually change the world?

"This question has been at the center of my work in recent years. As a result of *Orestes in Mosul*, we founded a film school with UNESCO in the former capital of the Islamic State. A quarter of the students are girls, and the films of the first class are now touring European film festivals - which is a small miracle. Or take the second part of my Trilogy of Ancient Myths, *The New Gospel*: we have established a distribution network for fairly produced tomatoes with meanwhile more than 200 supermarkets all over Europe. As a result, since 2019, we have been able to regularize over a thousand migrants with work contracts, turning slaves of the mafia into the future citizens of Europe who can live in dignity. It would have been absurd for me to make a Jesus film, and not take the message of the *New Gospel* quite literally: the last shall be first."

"Now, as far as the Amazon is concerned, the problem is at once very simple and multifaceted, as you rightly said. Because, of course, the big corporations have responded to the new consumer awareness. By putting seals on their products, producing fair palm oil without slash-and-burn, and not traditional diesel but biodiesel and so on. However, scientific studies show that behind these labels there is often the same devastation, human rights violations and displacement as before. The deforestation of the jungle has accelerated since capitalism has produced 'green', since soy and biodiesel have been fed into the global commodity cycle as 'good' raw materials. Take just one simple fact: the CO2 footprint of biodiesel is three times greater than the footprint of fossil diesel. And not a single seal accepted by the EU stands up to scrutiny. In the very state where we produce the *Antigone*, there are palm oil plantations of European producers like Ferrero or Unilever."

"Let's just take Ferrero: according to studies by Global Witness and Save the Rainforest, our 'fairly produced' chocolate bunnies, which were produced with 'green' palm oil, actually contain the blood of displaced small farmers and the burning smell of the devastated Amazon. But if you go to the websites of the companies concerned, the first thing you see are long articles about sustainability, fair production, reforestation. The face of destruction is a smiling one, which brings us back to *Antigone*. Creon is a very interesting, dazzling character. Not a mad dictator, but a thoroughly modern ruler who knows exactly how to transfigure exploitation and destruction in a zeitgeisty way. This is where we, together with the landless movement, intervene. We will tear the mask off the face of the corporations in a classic activist manner - and try to show real alternatives. Because "this madness must stop," as Kay Sara says in her speech."

READ THE COMPLETE SPEECH OF KAY SARA FOR THE WIENER FESTWOCHE [HERE](#) (English).
This speech was also published in [NRC](#) (NL), [De Morgen](#) (BE), [TAZ](#) (GER) and [La Repubblica](#) (IT).

PRESS ARTICLES ON 'ANTIGONE IN THE AMAZON'

- Opinion piece by Milo Rau written after the first rehearsal week of *Antigone in the Amazon* in Brazil
in March 2020:
 - [De Standaard](#) (BE)
 - [taz.de](#) (GER)
- Natasha Tripney, international editor of The Stage, chooses *Antigone in the Amazon* as one of her top picks of must-see theatre for 2023 for a [Monocle Podcast](#) – 23/01/2023
- "Aufruf zum Widerstand der Indigenen: Milo Raus Antigone im Amazonas" – 25/01/ 2023 – [Detusche Welle](#)
- "Beyond Britain: 2023's most exciting productions from across the globe" – 10/01/2023 - [The Stage](#)
- Interview with Milo Rau and Wolfgang Kaleck about the power of art and law in times of dystopian times – [Das Magazin](#) – 04/02/2023

PRESS ARTICLES ON PREVIOUS INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS OF MILO RAU:

- "Can a Greek tragedy help heal a scarred city?" – [The New York Times](#) on *Orestes in Mosul* – 17/04/2019
- "A Director asks: would Jesus stand with today's migrants?" – [The New York Times](#) on *The New Gospel* – 15/11/2019
- The most ambitious political theatre ever staged? – [The Guardian](#) on *Congo Tribunal* – 01/06/2015

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