

ridiculous props. But you try anyway and fight against how ridiculous it is. Everybody can see how artificial it is. But it's also a bit sad. Just like us. Just like life. At the end, when the stage is filled with dead bodies, that's not an empty metaphor: it's also an expression of despair at the world we live in.

But for people who aren't splatter fans you also offer points of reference to other traditions: for example there's a pact with the Devil like in Faust. And the auctorial on stage narrator — he's the only one who speaks — is a little reminiscent of Thomas Mann's *Spirit of Storytelling* with his irony and the way he interferes in what is happening from time to time.

Yes, the untrustworthy authorial narrator fits the story well. He's not outside the action, watching with indifference or even benign intent, but mixed up in it somehow. Not like a God-like omniscient, but more of a slippery, creative type.

You were always interested in putting performers (and yourselves) in situations they could not easily cope with. Even in your early pieces, for example, actors had to dance and dancers had to sing. In *No President* the cast consists of actors from New York and Düsseldorf, dancers and also semi-amateurs. What interests you in this mix?

What always interests us is people — and in this case their very particular relationship to dance and performance. Each one of the performers has — and for us this is more important than their level of skill — a different relationship to the physical material in the show. For some of them, dance is the centre of their life and work, for some it's modern dance, for others it's ballet. And then for some of them dance is an entirely new physical challenge — or possibly a passion that they have not yet had a chance to pursue. What matters is that for all of them, the relationship is not an indifferent but a substantial one. Many of them are working with us for the first time while others have been part of Nature Theater of Oklahoma for many years and we want them to bring themselves and their history onstage with them — and to share that with the audience.

One of the recurrent notes you give to the actors and the extras during rehearsals is: never forget the reality around you. Always stay in contact with the audience, even eye contact.

That is the key thing: the performers cannot let the audience see them without consequences. Without looking back. The actors are not objects, they are people too. The most important reality is always the primary one, which is that the performance is a gathering of people sharing space and time. Of course there are rules for this interaction — the performers sit on one side and the audience on the other — but I have always enjoyed the complexity of the actual situation more than that of the fictional one. The truth is that these guys on stage all have thoughts and feelings and questions — for themselves and for the audience. I want them to bring all that to the table along with whatever fiction we're enacting. And the truth is often in the eyes. So I want the audience to see their eyes — eyes that are looking back, as people do.

It's also important not only not to make it too easy for the actors but also not to make it too easy for the audience. This is another reason for the excessive violence: it prevents the audience just amusing themselves. At the same time this reminder of the reality outside of the fiction is rather Brechtian — a variation on the famous sign: "Don't gawp so romantically." Even though Brecht meant less the reality of the theatre space than the social reality outside of the theatre.

Exactly. For theatre to have social consequences, it cannot ignore the social dynamic of the space. Or of the rehearsal which comes with its own set of rules: the director is a kind of dictator, but I think it's important for performers not to abdicate completely. I like to see a performer execute a move perfectly, sure, but also with a little resistance. I don't want to see them lose themselves in the process. In the same way, we cultivate a little resistance from the audience too. You're not only going to have people in the audience who are enjoying themselves all the time. Hopefully there will also be people having all kinds of feelings about our show and expressing that in various ways. If we are any good we can use whatever energy that gives to go deeper into the work at hand.

***No President* is a piece about the life of a — failed — artist with all the doubts and hubris of artistic work. And it is full of references to theatre discourse, quoting choreographies by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, for example. But the main reference point is the Russian acting theorist Konstantin Stanislavsky — why do you pick on him?**

I think we take a punch at Stanislavsky here because he is just (sadly) the beginning and end of all actor training in America. It's always Stanislavsky, always looking inside you for some kind of childhood trauma ... focusing actors' work primarily on themselves. Whereas for me, as I've said, a very different kind is what's most important: actors' work with their fellow actors on stage and on the audience!

*Interview by Florian Malzacher with Kelly Copper (from the evening program of the world premiere of "No President: A Story Ballet of Enlightenment in Two Immoral Acts").
Production (creation): Ruhrtriennale & Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus.*

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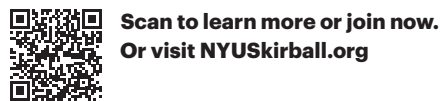
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NYU SKIRBALL
NATURE THEATER OF OKLAHOMA
NO PRESIDENT
DECEMBER 5-7
NORTH AMERICAN PREMIERE

NO PRESIDENT: A STORY BALLET OF ENLIGHTENMENT IN TWO IMMORAL ACTS

Conceived, Written, and Directed by **Pavol Liška** and **Kelly Copper**

Featuring: **Ilan Bachrach**, **Tale Dolven**, **Gabel Eiben**, **Robert M. Johanson**, and **Bence Mezei**

Corps de ballet: **Lisa Fagan**, **Ida Hellsten**, **Laron Janus**, **Raymond Liew Jin Pin**, **Joana Kern**, **Hannah Krebs**, **Marlena Meier**, **Kadence Neill**, and **Gustavo de Oliveira Leite**

Set Design **Ansgar Prüwer**

Costume Design **Jenny Theisen**

Light Design **Maarten Warmerdam**

Dramaturgy **Florian Malzacher**

Production Manager **Luka Curk**

Costume Technician **Gabi Bartles**

Light and Sound Technician **Leon Curk**

Set and Props Technician **Hanna Marlene Schnell**

Co-commission, co-producers, supporters, etc: *No President* is a production of Nature Theater of Oklahoma with Rhurtriennale and Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus and has received commissioning support from Fisher Center LAB, the Fisher Center at Bard’s residency and commissioning program.

Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s work on this project has also been made possible in part by the Doris Duke Performing Artist Awards program.

NATURE THEATER OF OKLAHOMA

“Personnel is being hired for the Theater in Oklahoma! The Great Nature Theater of Oklahoma is calling you! It’s calling you today only! If you miss this opportunity, there will never be another! Anyone thinking of his future, your place is with us! All welcome! Anyone who wants to be an artist, step forward! We are the theater that has a place for everyone, everyone in his place! If you decide to join us, we congratulate you here and now! But hurry, be sure not to miss the midnight deadline! We shut down at midnight, never to reopen! Accused be anyone who doesn’t believe us!” — Franz Kafka, *Amerika*

Nature Theater of Oklahoma is an award-winning art and performance group from New York under the direction of Pavol Liška and Kelly Copper. With each new project, they attempt to set an impossible challenge for themselves, the audience, and their collaborators — working from inside the codes and confines of established genres and exploding them. No two projects are formally the same, but the work is always full of humor, earnestness and rigor.

Using readymade material, found space, gifted properties, cosmic accident, extreme formal manipulation and plain hard work — Nature Theater of Oklahoma makes art to affect a shift in the perception of everyday reality that extends beyond the site of performance and into the world in which we live.

GLOSSARY

Kakistocracy: a system of government which is run by the worst, least qualified, or most unscrupulous citizens. The word was coined as early as the seventeenth century, but gained significant use in the first decades of the twenty-first century to criticize populist governments emerging in different democracies around the world. American poet James Russell Lowell used the term in 1876, in a letter to Joel Benton, writing, “What fills me with doubt and dismay is the degradation of the moral tone. Is it or is it not a result of Democracy? Is ours a ‘government of the people by the people for the people,’ or a Kakistocracy rather, for the benefit of knaves at the cost of fools?” The word returned to use during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, particularly by opponents and critics of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Legerdemain: 1. skilful use of one’s hands when performing conjuring tricks. 2. a display of skill or adroitness, 3. deception; trickery. Borrowed from French *léger de main* (literally “light (weight) of hand”).

Obsequious: obedient or attentive to an excessive or servile degree. Excessively eager and attentive to please or to obey instructions. The word comes from the Latin root *sequi*, meaning “to follow.”

Recalcitrant: having an obstinately uncooperative attitude towards authority or discipline. Not obedient or compliant; refractory. Mid-19th century: from Latin *recalcitrant* — “kicking out with the heels,” from the verb *recalcitrare*, based on *calx*, calc- “heel.”

Portentous: of or like a portent; of momentous significance, giving a sign or warning that something usually bad or unpleasant is going to happen. Or: done in a pompously or overly solemn manner so as to impress.

Myrmidon: a follower or subordinate of a powerful person, typically one who is unscrupulous or carries out orders unquestioningly. The Myrmidons were a legendary people of Greek mythology, native to the region of Thessaly. During the Trojan War, they were commanded by Achilles, as described in Homer’s Iliad. According to Greek legend, they were created by Zeus from a colony of ants and therefore took their name from the Greek word for ant, *myrmex*.

Absquatulate: leave quickly; abscond, decamp, skedaddle, vamoose; to leave abruptly, to make off with something or someone. Attested since the 1830s in American English, a jocular mock-Latin word. Blend of abscond + squat + perambulate, as ab- (“away (from),” as in abscond) + squat + -ulate (as in perambulate), hence meaning “get up (from a squat) and depart (quickly).”

Spank-bank: a memorable collection of mental images that one wishes to retain for masturbation purposes.

Acquiescent: ready to accept something without protest, or to do what someone else wants. Early 17th century: from Latin *acquiescent* — “remaining at rest,” from the verb *acquiescere*.

Pandemonium: coined by John Milton in Paradise Lost, Pandæmonium, from Ancient Greek πᾶν (pân, “all”) (equivalent to English pan-) + Late Latin *daemonium* (“evil spirit, demon”), from Ancient Greek δαίμων (daímōn, “deity”). 1. (archaic) a place where all demons live; Hell. 2. chaos; tumultuous or lawless violence. 3. an outburst; loud, riotous uproar, especially of a crowd.

Vociferous: expressing or characterized by vehement opinions; loud and forceful. Vociferous derives from the word Latin vox, which means “voice.” But other English words can be used to describe those who compel attention by being loud and insistent. “Vociferous” implies a vehement shouting or calling out, but to convey the insistency of a demand or protest.

Adulation: excessive admiration, praise, or flattery. From the Latin verb *adulari*, meaning “to fawn on” (a sense used specifically of the affectionate behavior of dogs) or “to flatter.”

Afflatus: a divine creative impulse or inspiration. Mid-17th century: from the Latin verb *afflare*, from ad- “to” + flare “to blow.” A term that was derived from Cicero in *De Natura Deorum* (“The Nature of the Gods”), it can be taken to mean “to be blown upon” by a divine wind, like its English equivalent inspiration, which comes from inspire, meaning “to breathe/blow onto.”

Poltroon: a spiritless coward. Early 16th century: from French *poltron*, from Italian *poltrone*, perhaps from *poltro*, meaning “sluggard.”

Mosh pit: punching, kicking, and generally being violent to live music. An area in front of a stage where very physical and rough dancing takes place. Moshing or slamdancing is a style of dance in which participants push or slam into each other, typically performed in “aggressive” live music. Moshing usually happens in the center of the crowd, generally closer to the stage, in an area called the “pit” (sometimes called a “mosh pit”). It is intended to be energetic and full of body contact.

Schadenfreude: a compound of *schaden* “damage, harm” and *freude* “joy.” “Harm-joy” is the experience of pleasure, joy, or self-satisfaction that comes from learning of or witnessing the troubles, failures, or humiliation of another. A pleasure derived by someone from another person’s misfortune.

Calisthenics: gymnastic exercises to achieve bodily fitness and grace of movement. Derives from the ancient Greek words *kallos* (καλλος), which means “perfect” or “good” (to emphasize the aesthetic pleasure that derives from the perfection of the human body), and *sthenos* (σθενος), meaning “strength” (great mental strength, courage, and determination). It is the art of using one’s bodyweight as resistance in order to develop physique. Examples of calisthenic exercises are push-ups, burpies, handstands, squats, leg raises, planks and shuttle runs.

Jurisdiction: the practical authority granted to a legal body to administer justice within a defined field of responsibility. From the Latin *ius*, *iuris* meaning “law” and *dicere* meaning “to speak.” Power or right of a legal or political agency to exercise its authority over a person, subject matter, or territory.

Sycophant: a servile self-seeking flatterer, a person who acts obsequiously towards someone important in order to gain advantage. From the mid-16th century (denoting an informer): from French *sycophante*, or via Latin from Greek *sukophantês*, “informer.”

Anthropomorphize: to attribute human form or personality to things not human.

Air quotes: a pair of quotation marks gestured by a speaker’s fingers in the air, to indicate that what is being said is ironic or mocking or is not a turn of phrase the speaker would typically employ.

LOOKING BACK

Nature Theater of Oklahoma — the name of your company is taken from Franz Kafka’s unfinished novel *Amerika*. Why did you choose it?

In Kafka’s novel, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma is a place of longing. The protagonist, Karl Rossmann, has been through a series of pretty lousy jobs in America when he sees a poster for the Nature Theater offering jobs for every-one. And he is hired straight away as a technician — with-out any experience — and soon afterwards is on a train to Oklahoma. The novel is unfinished, so we don’t know how things work out for him. But to us this theatre company was always an ideal. What’s more, Pavol [part of the directing partnership Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška] moved from Czechoslovakia to Oklahoma when he was just eighteen, like Karl Rossmann, and had a very tough year there. For him *America* was a sort of user’s manual for his life there. Because he didn’t find a Nature Theater of Oklahoma, we had to make it ourselves.

For many years you’ve lived in New York — a city that’s famous for avant-garde art. Is it sometimes difficult to work in a city with such a legacy?

When I first visited New York as a student in 1992, in one weekend I saw performances of the Wooster Group, Richard Foreman, Reza Abdoh — and a film by Jack Smith. I was blown away, and vowed to return as soon as possi-ble. That same year I met Pavol at university — and in 1993 we moved to New York. It’s a city where history, art and garbage collide. For a long time we lived across the street from the old Electric Circus where the Velvet Underground first played. And the apartment where Jack Smith created his performances was not far away. All of that has gradually disappeared The Electric Circus became a center for drug addicts and then later ... a delicatessen, but you can feel that underground art history wherever you go. It has a par-ticular kind of vitality, a feeling that everything is possible even if it’s not strictly permitted. We now live in Queens, where apparently 800 different languages are spoken. For two somehow homeless artists it’s the perfect home. We take from and are inspired by all that is around us. Even, or especially, the ugly bits. In New York — it’s quite small for a big city — so you come in contact with all of it eventually.

Jack Smith, who you just mentioned, had a very specific influence on your new work: *No President* was the title of his last film. Of course one automatically thinks of the political situation in the USA. But the subtitle also refers to the more European genre of the story ballet.

A lot of that is linked to our interest in narrative. In a classical story ballet — such as the *Nutcracker* for example — you need to know the plot in advance to be able to read it in the dance. The first piece our company ever did was a “dance” piece with no words. We determined all the entrances and exits, and in fact all of the movement, by chance or — to be more precise — by rolling dice. Nevertheless the audience still projected stories onto the events constantly. This time we’re starting at the opposite end: there is a highly complex story, a huge amount of

text and we’re trying to abstract movements out of the language. Narrative ballet as a genre is an important inspiration for this, which is also why we’re using the music of the *Nutcracker*. But there are also very different sources alongside that: fitness exercises, slapstick and documentaries about animal predators. So it’s a rather unorthodox mix — just as Jack Smith’s film is patched together, like Frankenstein’s monster, out of very different materials.

***No President* tells the story of a museum guard who works for a security firm that consists of former actors. And they are guarding a theatre curtain ...**

... yes, originally the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York invited us to make a new piece of work. In the end it didn’t work out, but at the time we did a lot of thinking about museums as containers for performance, the difference between a white cube and black box and the relationship between life and art. The fact that Pavol had spent several years working as a museum guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art also contributed. Very few people are aware that a great many of the guards in New York museums are themselves artists, painters, theatre makers and sculptors. Living (hunger) artists watch over breathtakingly expensive works by mostly dead artists. In *No President* we imagine a future in which all artists are employed as security guards. The curtain that they are guarding is kind of portal to the unknown — something that no one is allowed to see. This preoccupation with museums, money and art is one we share with Jack Smith. In many of his performances and writings he fought for the reality of art as Art and against art as private property. He was particularly critical of museums hiding art away from the public. You could say that this is exactly what *No President* is about. There’s a nice quote from Smith: “Museums give nothing. They claim to give you art and then they take it away again after two or three weeks. This is a disgusting performance when you think that art should be free. Everything should be free and it could begin with art.”

In the piece things soon get out of control — there’s a whole lot of love, sex and death — but also a lot of splat-ter and even excessive cannibalism. It’s reminiscent of the early films of Christoph Schlingensief, who was also a big Jack Smith fan.

For some years now there’s been more and more violence in our work. Somehow almost organically we’ve now ended up with cannibalism. In our last theatre piece, *Pursuit of Happiness*, there’s a section set in Iraq and that’s quite violent. Drawing on inspiration from grand guignol we really pushed that as far as we could go. We’re interested in the representation of violence because violence on stage always plays with the boundaries of what is possible in the theatre. At the end of *Pursuit of Happiness* for exam-ple all the actors are limping, one pretends to have limbs missing and holds a marble between his fingers claiming it’s his eye. We’re fascinated by the discrepancy between representation and reality. Representing violence on stage necessarily requires a great many theatrical devices — and we exaggerate that. As an actor you have no chance of presenting anything as being remotely real with these