

**FREIE
REPUBLIK
WIENER
FEST
WOCHEN**

📅 5-8 June
📍 Odeon

COPRODUCTION

inspired by *Philoktet* by Sophokles

DIE SEHERIN THE SEER

Milo Rau

WORLD PREMIERE

In *The Seer*, Ursina Lardi plays a war photographer who travels to conflict areas around the world seeking images of dread. She seems always one step ahead of the suffering, and at the same time untouchable. Until she has first-hand experience of what it means to be subjected to violence herself. The celebrated war photographer becomes a jaundiced Cassandra who seeks to battle the blindness of our times. Milo Rau's new play is based on the life stories of war photographers, Iraqi citizens and own experiences such as an encounter with the teacher Azad Hassan in Mosul, whose hand was severed as punishment during the Islamic State occupation. Inspired by Sophocles' figure Philoctetes, who loses everything due to an injury and is banished from society, Rau explores the fragility of our certainties. Why is violence so tempting? What remains when war and terror destroy the world as we know it? Can art soothe suffering?



German, English



German and English surtitles



85 mins.



barrier-free access

Q&A

6 June, following the performance

**THERE IS AN UNKNOWN
A COMPLETE STRANGER
TO WHO YOU HAVE NO CONNECTION
HE'S BEEN TRAVELLING TOWARDS YOU
SINCE THE BEGINNING OF TIME
DAY AND NIGHT
THROUGH DESERT, HEAT AND RAIN
HOW DID HE KNOW WHERE TO FIND YOU?
HOW DID HE RECOGNISE YOU WHEN HE SAW YOU?
HOW COULD HE GIVE YOU WHAT HE HAD FOR YOU?**

- The Seer

Text, Direction Milo Rau **Collaboration text** Ursina Lardi **With** Ursina Lardi, Azad Hassan (live)
Stage design, Costumes Anton Lukas **Sound design** Elia Rediger **Video design** Moritz von
Dungern **Light design** Stefan Ebelsberger **Dramaturgy** Bettina Ehrlich, Carmen Hornbostel
Translation, language coach (Arabic) Susana Abdul Majid **Advice, coordination (Iraq)** Sardar
Abdullah **Stage management** Roman Balko **Direction assistance** Christina Dithmar **Costumes**
assistance Anna Wiebelitz **Stage design assistance** Gaetan Langlois-Meurinne **Stage design**
intern Alma Thiele **English translation** David Perrin **Surtitles** Eliane Masry

Production Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz (Berlin) **Coproduction** Vienna Festival (Wiener
Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna, La Biennale di Venezia **Supported by** Goethe-Institute
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executed by the team of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna

World premiere June 2025, Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna

PRELIMINARY NOTE

BY MILO RAU ON *THE SEER*

PUBLISHED IN *WIDERSTAND HAT KEINE FORM, WIDERSTAND IST DIE FORM* [RESISTANCE HAS NO FORM, RESISTANCE IS THE FORM] (VERBRECHER VERLAG, 2025)

In summer 2016, Kurdish actor Ramo Ali and I travelled to Qamishli in Rojava (Northern Syria). At the time, Mosul – where most of *The Seer* is set – was still occupied by the Islamic State. We travelled from Erbil along the Peshmerga front lines to Sinjar, the Yazidi city extinguished by the Jihaidsts, and from there on to Syria. I remember lying in the trenches with a Peshmerga unit, returning to the barracks through the utterly destroyed city of Sindjar in the evenings. It was like being inside an image from TV and in Antiquity at the same time – the ancients' Antiquity: Mosul, Nineveh, Sinjar are the very sites of the ancient advanced civilisations.

My first lengthier visit to Mosul after its liberation was in 2018, together with actor Johan Leysen and war journalist Daniel Demoustier, who was my cameraman at the time. He and another acquaintance, photo journalist Julia Leeb, were my inspiration for *The Seer*. Then, in the spring of 2019, we staged *Orestes in Mosul* together with students at the Academy of Fine Arts Mosul. Two years later, we and UNESCO established a film school in what had been the self-proclaimed Islamic State's Iraqi capital.

Yet there are other reasons to write *The Seer* that run deeper. The question of suffering and its depictions is a theme that I have been carrying around with me for several decades. Before I became a theatre maker, I travelled as a sociologist and war reporter. When I was 19, I first travelled to Chiapas, where the Zapatista revolution had erupted, and in the subsequent years I visited other Latin American states, the Middle East, Central Africa. And at the same time there is a background to this in my biography that goes back even further: One of my core subjects in grammar school was Ancient Greek. Seven hours per week for seven years, I learnt Greek, read the ancient tragedians, philosophers and poets.

This play is therefore autobiographical in the true sense of the word, it rests on bearing witness and where influences overlap. Everything that occurs in the play has happened to me or has been told to me by people I am close to. The pictures that are mentioned were really taken, the conversations took place, the encounters – the tragic ones and the companionable ones – happened like this. Some things are metaphors, so a picture or a story is told as it happened but represents something else in *The Seer*. It's important for me to stress that many things that are

addressed in the play are a mystery to me, even if they are taken from my own life. For example, why would I have been staring at that terrible picture from the Sino-Japanese war as a child? What did I want to understand, what did I want to learn?

There is yet another reason I wrote *The Seer*: I wanted to elaborate on something that comes out of our daily lives – to render visible what might be called ‘mythical time’. May I still read every conflict against the pattern of the tragedies, the epic poems of Antiquity because of this almost childlike occupation with the classics that has stayed with me. My study of Greek culminated in a theoretical treatise on Pindar and a translation of *The Trojan Women* – I was eighteen years old at the time. There is a childlike emotion that is still triggered within me by this language which is, after all, very close to the theological, to the divine: a childish sensation that there is something ‘of significance’ within us, in the tragic sense, that cannot be extinguished. And even now, as I am writing this, I am convinced that the passing of time is nothing but a mathematical fallacy that we fall for because our time is limited. And that is in fact why we make pictures of our slow death, almost desperately so: for something to remain.

When I returned to Mosul with Ursina Lardi, when we met Azad Hassan whose hand had been severed by IS, when the shape of the play gradually began to emerge and at the same time began splitting into a three parallel strands (*Philoctetes*, the life of Azad and the fictional person who is embodied by Lardi), there arose a question about dramaturgy or staging: Did the things described in *The Seer* happen in historical or mythical times? Will the piece take the shape of a memory or a narrative? Where does Lardi’s dream come from? Why did we come across Azad when we returned to Mosul together for *The Seer*? What are coincidences, what is determination? And connected to that: Was there ever, as some philosophers believe, a ‘fulfilled’ time? Is it possible that art, theatre constitute the search for such a time in which allegory and biographical coincidence come together?

I don’t know. I only know what happened and what I have seen. Or in other words: I know my feeling, the intensity of my gaze. But I will never get to know it in its entirety nor understand where this gaze falls. Because when we live, when we travel, and when we go to the theatre to tell of that, we leave historical time to enter mythical time.

SHORT SUMMARY OF SOPHOCLES' *PHILOCTETES*

The tragedy *Philoctetes* is set during the Trojan war. The hero Philoctetes is abandoned on the island of Lemnos by his army because of his insufferably foul-smelling and disfiguring wound from a snakebite. Years later, an oracle recognises that the Greeks cannot conquer Troy without Philoctetes' bow, a gift from the divine Heracles.

Odysseus therefore returns to Lemnos together with young Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles, in order to bring Philoctetes back – with a trick. It falls to Neoptolemos to dupe Philoctetes, gain his trust and elicit the bow from him. However, Neoptolemos becomes conflicted between his loyalty for Odysseus and his own sense of honour. Once he has won Philoctetes' trust, he cannot bring himself to betray him, so he confesses to the subterfuge and returns the bow.

Eventually, the divine Heracles appears as *deus ex machina* and convinces Philoctetes to go to Troy – not by compulsion but in awareness of his honour and role in the war.

The themes of treason, suffering and isolation are at the core of the tragedy. Philoctetes is a tragic figure; his physical and emotional suffering are intrinsically linked. His wound, which will not heal, causes insufferable pain. He is deeply hurt and feels betrayed by the fact that his comrades abandon him on a deserted island because of this wound.

Philoctetes has been living alone on the island for a decade, bereft of any human company and only with pain and hatred for those who abandoned him. His physical suffering therefore becomes a symbol for his isolation and dehumanisation: he is no longer a warrior or comrade, but reduced to being 'the invalid' who was sacrificed.

His emotional suffering is at least as great: he is separated from his community, harbours a sense of injustice and has been abandoned. In combination, this triggers his great mistrust of others, especially Odysseus. When Neoptolemos first wants to deceive him, Philoctetes suffers again because he believes that he will once more be disappointed and used.

Philoctetes does not start to open up again until Neoptolemos is honest to him and shows him compassion. However, for a long time, he remains torn between his ire and the opportunity to become part of a community again.

BIOGRAPHY

Milo Rau was born in Bern (Switzerland) in 1977, and is particularly renowned for his political theatre works in which he deliberately blurs the traditional boundaries between stage, reality and activism. He considers his role as an author and director to go far beyond the narration of stories: to him, the theatre is a place of social action. He has received international acclaim among others for his plays *Antigone in the Amazon* (2023) about resistance in the face of (environmental) destruction and suppression, *La Reprise* (2018) about the real-life murder of a homosexual man and the ways in which it is possible to depict violence, and *Orestes in Mosul* (2019). For the latter, Rau brought Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to Mosul, a city deeply marked by the war with IS. Together with local artists, inhabitants and actors from Western Europe, he staged the tragedy about guilt, revenge, justice and the emergence of democracy. Rau's plays have toured in over 30 countries across the globe. Critics have selected his pieces as the best of the year in over ten countries. From 2018 to 2024, Rau was the artistic director of NTGent (Belgium). He has been the artistic director of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna since 2024.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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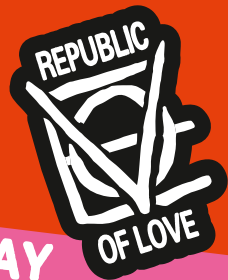
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