

THEATRE

KASSANDRA

or Songs of the Canaries

MARTA GÓRNICKA



FREE
REPUBLIC OF
VIENNA
FESTIVAL

3–5 June
Akademietheater

Unwanted truths and warnings went unheard, but now societies look on in helpless silence at images of arid landscapes, razed cities and the multiple crises of the present. The ancient prophet Cassandra raised her voice against such images of horror and war. It was her fate to foresee disaster but not be heard with her warnings. Who are today's Cassandras? What answers do the marginalised, vulnerable, often unheard voices in society have for the most urgent questions of our time? What do they demand for the future? Polish director and author Marta Górnicka gained renown with her uniquely powerful chanting choruses. For her most recent work, she brings together a group of people that spans different generations, languages, backgrounds and abilities to make up a chorus of Cassandras: a chorus that speaks the unspeakable.

Languages
German, English
and others

Surtitles
English, German

Duration
75 mins


barrier-free access

Q & A
4 June, following
the performance

Workshop
6 June, *Silent Scream*
Workshop with
Marta Górnicka

‘With the CASSANDRA CHORUS,
I bring these voices to the stage
to sing a song of empowerment
together.’

MARTA GÓRNICKA

Concept, Direction Marta Górnicka **With** Aziza A., Niousha Akhshi, Debbie Arega, Gabriela Beltramino / Saskia Kollbach, Robin Francis Denner, Sofia Gubar, Abib Kilian Hempe, Helena Kauschke, Viktoriia Kosorukova, Flavia Lefèvre, Jay Mayhew, Karolina Nägele, Joanna Niemirska, Mathis Reinhardt, Marcela Römhild, Iga Rudnicka, Fifi Rutkowski, Sophia Slamani, Cintia Sofia De Pina Pires, Veza van der Sman, Maimouna Sow, Sonnhild Trujillo, Karyna Yağiz **Libretto** Marta Górnicka & Ensemble **Music** Marta Górnicka, Wojciech Frycz **Stage design** Mirek Kaczmarek **Costume design** Pola Kardum **Choreography** Evelin Facchini **Voice coaching** Joanna Piech-Sławecka **Video design** Christopher Bonte **Light design** Günter Berghaus, Artur Sienecki **Dramaturgy** Endre Malcolm Holéczy, Anja Nioduschewski **Dramaturgical collaboration** Olga Byrska, Janka Kenk, Maria Rössler **Artistic collaboration** Fifi Rutkowski **Head of stage** Hannes Trölsch **Sound** Daniel Körner & sound team **Video** Jesse Jonas Kracht & video team **Direction assistance** Alberto Afferni, Alicia Voigt **Assistance stage design** Anne-Kathrin Müller **Assistance costume design** Charlotte Schwärmer **Production management** Eylem Döndü Kılıç, Marta Stein **Stage management** Berit Lass **Agological assistance** Amber Bongard, Leonard Carow **Childcare** Luise Mudlaff, Romy Schwagmeier, Lotte Thierbach, Jonas Kriegsmann **Directing interns** Yolène Queyras, Marianna Wicha **Dramaturgy interns** Yael Ostermeier, Veronique Matheny-Plamondon **Props** Maxim Gorki Theater **Dressers** Jeanett Bogan, Babett Hagenow **Translation surtitles** Olaf Kühn (German), Vivian Ia (English) **Surtitles** Aga Fietz (setup), Finn Büttner (operation)

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World Premiere April 2026, Maxim Gorki Theater (Berlin)

AS LONG AS THEY SING WE STAY ALIVE

INTERVIEW WITH MARTA GÓRNICKA

Cassandra represents unheard prophecy – she sees the catastrophe coming and nobody listens to her. What drew you to her specifically, and what does she mean to you right now?

For me, Cassandra is one of the most powerful political figures of our time. These are all the individual and collective voices that perceive the most horrific aspects of our socio-political reality and are trying to intervene, speak out, scream. At the same time, these are voices without a lobby, exposed to attack, full of despair or anger. They are not only unheard but ignored.

Today, entire societies and nations are confronted with indifference and silencing when they signal injustice. Their vulnerable voices are like songs of canaries in a coal mine. These small birds were meant to warn, to signal whether the air we breathe is lethal. Ukrainians, Iranians, Palestinians... and many others. As long as they can sing their songs, we stay alive.

The voice of my play *CASSANDRA* is also made up of all the individual figures who report from geopolitical hotspots every day, as well as the Cassandras who

are experts in history, fascism, social polarisation and feminism. They include Gilda Sahebi in Germany, Timothy Snyder in the USA, Monika Bobako, a professor of political anthropology who specialises in the crises and burnout of contemporary societies. And there are many more, nameless Cassandras. Finally, there are the kids, the young rappers, the poets of resistance, Cassandras who possess the extraordinary ability to forge the voice into an intervention. All those voices from the outside, from the margins, who take risks to be silenced, to be cancelled. It is they who see the social patterns that are invisible to the naked eye. At the same time, they deliver the breath we so desperately lack today. They bring a true breath of freedom.

Cassandra is also (and perhaps above all) a powerful figure for that which we are unable to hear within ourselves. The violence that each of us carries within. What we do not see today is more dangerous than the horror that surrounds us. In the performance, I wanted to uncover this noisy polyphony of the Cassandras of our times. And to share her power, her breath, her strength with the audience.

Your CASSANDRA choir has a powerful voice. It is full of anger, full of irony.

Political reality is monstrous, so the voice that responds to it must be equally so. *CASSANDRA* is the collective power of the voices that I extract. Furious, punk, driven to rage, suspended between the most beautiful sounds of Aeschylus's songs and computer speech, grindcore, heavy metal. *Cassandra* screeches like Gollum or loses her voice, screaming mutely. Her scream remains frozen in her eyes, which see both the most brutal images of horror and the total lack of reaction to them. Indifference. The silence that meets the prophecy.

It is particularly moving to me that the most powerful Cassandras of all time stop believing in what they see. They are paralysed, burned out. They stop believing in the horror they have experienced. An example of such a Cassandra is Jan Karski, who after many years stops trusting his own testimony and himself as an eyewitness to the Holocaust. Or Spiegelman's father from the graphic novel *Maus*, who suddenly says he no longer remembers the Holocaust orchestra: the orchestra he heard every day in the concentration camp on his way to work, which he had spoken of so much. It is staggering to forget one's own prophecy. But this is also a vital part of the contemporary Cassandra's voice. The one that coexists with the one that screams. Mute, paralysed, burned out.

Cassandra as a figure of vocal protest has been fused with my theatre practice for years. The chorus of around twenty

people on the stage is always a metonymy of human plurality and embodies the political tensions and antagonisms that exist within it. As a collective figure, it has the potential to immediately discover the unconscious mechanisms that govern society; these are mechanisms which society doesn't confront in order to stay at peace with its privileges. It demonstrates and explodes social and political fantasies, fears, taboos.

For me, Cassandra is a political figure who opens up the possibility of confronting the situation we are in, and perhaps points the way to overcoming it. In the chorus as a theatrical community – composed of many individual Cassandras, built on the empathy and sensitivity of the performers – I also find a strength that is capable of responding to the Cassandra Syndrome.

You point to many crises of our time. We are mostly aware of the issues yet we don't act. Why?

We like to stop at the surface because it allows us to survive. Reality has become a hyper-object. It is too complex, too multifaceted. So many catastrophes are happening at the same time that we lack the cognitive capacity to embrace them, let alone understand them. We live in a massive landfill of data that overwhelms and paralyses us. That is why the voice of Cassandra is so unique amidst this wasteland.

For Ukrainians, the apocalypse is not happening in the future; it is happening every minute, here and now. Meanwhile,

in Germany and across Europe, we hear that reality is 'complicated', how difficult it is to judge. Not taking a stand is always a way of supporting the dominant force. Passivity is always complicity.

Cassandra is a figure from Greek mythology, but she also has a long afterlife. Christa Wolf, for instance, reclaimed her as a feminist figure. Where do you position yourself within that tradition?

I would like to create a new biography for Cassandra. To tear her away from the dominion of the male curse, of *fatum*. From all past literary and cultural incarnations. From an existence that is caught between clichés and the mythical story itself – created, produced and replicated as a misogynistic blueprint. I am looking for a voice of Cassandra that is unappropriated. I search for it at the edge of meaning, in a language that trembles, driven to madness by music.

In ancient theatre, the role of Cassandra was always performed by a man, the most eminent virtuoso singer. The chorus was merely an accompaniment to this individual voice. Cassandra's prophecy – trance-like, wild, *furioso*, written in the *dochmiac* rhythm – was one of the most technically complex rhythmic structures. Brutal. But also full of ecstasy, of inspiration.

The CASSANDRA choir begins the performance with a song. *Der Jockel* is a very old cumulative song that exists in many cultures and holds exceptional meaning for me. This song is an infinite

cycle of violence set to words. Of devouring one another. In Germany, it survived as a children's nursery rhyme, but there are also Austrian, Polish, Italian, French, Jewish versions among others. *Der Jockel* is something like a condensed prophecy of CASSANDRA.

How and when did you begin working with choirs – and what was the discovery that kept you there?

I have been obsessed with the chorus since my directing studies. In Polish theatre, it was the great 'absentee'. Any form of large groups of people on stage after WWII evoked associations with images of people being led to gas chambers. Choral, post-dramatic theatre did not exist. In Poland, the chorus was a corpse. Information about the chorus in ancient theatre is skeletal, so I had to create my own formula for a community on stage.

It was very important for me to start with women, with the source of the tragic. In early 2010, I started working at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw, in an experimental mode. I wanted to create a radically new, contemporary form of choral theatre; to refresh this old idea of the performance and to find a new shape for it. To find a new stage language, a new actor, a new kind of theatrical text (I call it libretto) as well as a new type of training – working with the body and voice. In my performances, the chorus is the main and only hero on the stage. I work with people from various professions, ages and life

paths, usually chosen through an open call; everybody is invited, regardless of age and experience in theatre or music.

After the first performances of *THE CHORUS OF WOMEN* in Poland, the idea of the chorus that I developed in the theatre turned into a more political practice. The CHORUS was regularly summoned in excluded communities, in public spaces. It began entering political hotspots. In Slovakia, it was in the middle of the largest Romani ghetto. In Israel, I was working with Israeli and Arab mothers and kids, and Israeli soldiers. I staged the Polish *CONSTITUTION* in Poland with 52 people from a diverse spectrum of society at the height of the political turmoil surrounding our constitution. In Germany, I staged the *GRUNDGESETZ* in front of the Brandenburg Gate. In *MOTHERS A SONG FOR WARTIME*, I worked with Ukrainian, Belarusian and Polish women, survivors, witnesses of violence and bombings in order to name what there can be no words for.

I see the chorus as a place where people can meet who they would have no chance of meeting otherwise in social reality. Who, from a geopolitical point of view, might be defined as 'antagonists' or 'enemies'. For me, theatre is a space of solidarity.

Is there a difference, for you, between singing and speaking? Between a voice that carries a note and one that carries an argument?

The difference exists only between language and voice. For me, all forms of speaking or singing language are an attempt to grapple with its political power, its limitations, its entanglement in non-transparent meanings. From this perspective, the chorus is a mixture of discourses; it operates at the boundary of meanings between the word and its musical 'interpretation', its 'intervention'. Between sentence and sentence, scene and scene. I strike language with music. The chorus is a multidimensional machine that plays with the meanings trapped in language in search of a space of sense. Playing until there opens a space of sense, which is simultaneously an encounter, an opening. When language peels away from meaning, when senses vibrate and resonate in the space between the chorus on stage and the chorus in the audience. These are the specific moments I seek in theatre.

SONGS IN DARK TIMES

“Cassandra syndrome, the experience of having one’s legitimate concerns disbelieved and rejected, leading to psychological distress and suffering, seems to me a shared experience and a condition of our time. Every day, entire communities are confronted with ignorance and silencing. To me, their vulnerable voices are like the song of canaries in a coal mine. With the CASSANDRA CHORUS, I bring these voices to the stage to sing a song of empowerment together. As long as the canaries continue to sing, we are alive.”

– Marta Górnicka

In ancient mythology, Cassandra was doomed to see the future, yet her prophecies were never believed. Her truth had no consequences – until disaster struck. To this day, this figure symbolises the experience of warnings being heard but not taken seriously. In this context, ignorance appears not merely as a failure, but as an act of violence. Through social media and an unprecedented abundance of information, we are confronted daily with possible futures and competing truths. Much is perceived yet ignored. Other things are distorted or placed in false contexts, while apocalypses are incessantly proclaimed online. Self-proclaimed Cassandras dominate the space. They proclaim doom and cast

themselves as saviors with real-world consequences by pitting people and societies against one another. In the process, marginalised, vulnerable, and reasonable voices fall out of sight: voices that point to injustices and humanity, identify geopolitical and ecological connections, and call for collective action. Their urgency is lost in the logic of algorithmic dissemination, which replicates content while simultaneously devaluing it.

THE KASSANDRA CHORUS AS ANTI-CHORUS

The CHORUS represents the polis. Yet it was precisely this polis that doubted Cassandra and refused to believe her. The polis that brands her as a threat to the community. Perhaps in order to become open to listening to Kassandras, one must first reexamine one’s construction of identity and belonging. It means a critical look at the implicit and explicit values that define us, their sources, and their history. In moments of crisis and breakdown we need to seek a redefinition of who we are and allow ourselves to doubt our narratives of identity. Kassandras shatter our sense of certainty and the provisional safety we build in our

lives. Instead, they call for new forms of community: those that can see through the banality of goodwill and expect from us more than just thoughts and prayers for those in need. Kassandras reinsert themselves bravely into public spaces and art galleries; they disrupt the morning traffic or just say the uncomfortable truth out loud. The KASSANDRA CHORUS mobilises this contradiction in itself, of being an »anti-polis polis.« Offering the possibility of thinking of a new polis, a new form of community that constitutes itself less from the certainty sure of who we are, but more convinced about our shared humanity.

A contribution by Endre Malcolm Holéczy,
Anja Nioduschewski and Janka Kenk.

BIOGRAPHY

Marta Górnicka, born in 1975 in Włocławek (Poland), is a theatre director, author and singer.

She is known for rediscovering the principle of the chorus in contemporary theatre. The chorus, the only main character in her plays, is always used as a critical instrument for examining mechanisms of control, exclusion and violence and is an expression of community. Górnicka's works give space to particularly marginalised voices and explore the relationship between the individual and society. In 2019, she founded the Political Voice Institute (PVI) as a laboratory for choir theatre at the Maxim Gorki Theater, a workshop centre for the use of the collective voice/body and language.

With her latest production, *KASSANDRA*, Górnicka is presenting a work for the first time at the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna and in Vienna in general. Her works include *MAGNIFICAT* (2011), in which she used biblical texts to stage a commentary on Catholic culture and the role of women, and *MOTHERS. A SONG FOR WARTIME* (2023) with a choir of refugee women from Ukraine, Belarus and Poland. Her production *M(OTHER) COURAGE* was nominated for the German theatre award DER FAUST in 2016 and in 2025 she received the ITI Prize from the International Theatre Institute.

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