



Interviews

Who owns Lauratibor? A protest opera about the sell-out of the city

Wem gehört Lauratibor? Eine Protest-Oper über den Ausverkauf der Stadt / Who owns Lauratibor? A protest opera about the sell-out of the city

By Karen Vedel and members of the research group The 1930s Today¹

A prologue and two interviews

Interview 1: Marieke Wikesjö, opera singer, dramatist and female lead role

Interview 2: Tina Müller (TM), librettist and project coordinator; Konstanze Schmitt (KS), director

Prologue

Wem gehört Lauratibor? is a site-specific protest opera created in response to the pressures of real estate speculation in Kreuzberg, Berlin. Aesthetically it has strong references to 19th century opera, but also to the workers' theatre and political protests of the 1920s and 1930s and the political street theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. At one and the same time an anti-gentrification demonstration and a large-scale theatre production, *Lauratibor* has a cast of around 120 people distributed between a choir, soloists and an orchestra. It has a three-act structure and is a little over two hours long.

Act I introduces the community *Lauratibor*, the life of which is threatened by villains who oppress the urban spaces and evict the tenants. The community is protected by Laura, the heroine, who sets out to confront Maximus Profitikus, but first needs the strength of an elixir that has been lost to Tibor, her ex-lover. In **Act II** the heroines and heroes in search of the potion meet various obstacles caused by capitalism. They also meet communities, like their own, who are fighting for their homes and workplaces. When Laura is lured by false promises and separated from Tibor and his followers, the group is split in two and loses power. In **Act III**, after being reunited with Laura, Tibor dies when the community once again fights a power stronger than themselves. All hope seems to have vanished when three druids appear who remember the recipe for the magic elixir which is still missing one ingredient. When Maximus Profitikus returns to claim the key to Laura's home and the secret ingredient has still not been found, the final battle is fought. At this point Laura is the outcast and the evicted come from all sides to finally defeat the evil.

Wem gehört Lauratibor? premiered on 12th June 2021. It was followed by a performance in Mariannenplatz on 20th June 2021 and by two performances in Denmark, the one in Farvergården, Odense on 21st August, the other in Blågård's Plads, Copenhagen on 22nd August 2021, where I saw it.²

Below are two interviews with local activists **Marieke Wikesjö**,³ opera singer and dramatist, Tina Müller, dramatist and librettist and Konstanze Schmitt, the stage director of *Lauratibor*.⁴

1) The 1930s Today is an interdisciplinary research group at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen. The members involved here are Laura Luise Schultz, Tania Ørum and Marianne Ølholm.

2) Monia Sander, dramatist and then artistic director of theatre Momentum, not only brought *Wem gehört Lauratibor?* to Denmark, she also facilitated the group's connection to the interviewees.

3) The interview with Marieke Wikesjö took place online on 17th December 2021.

4) The interview with Tina Müller and Konstanze Schmitt took place in Café Cutie Pie in Kreuzberg on 30th October 2021.

Interview I

Marieke Wikesjö

I am an opera singer living in Lause 10 in Lausitzer Strasse, Kreuzberg. Five years ago, when I had just moved there, the house was put on the market by the Danish owner Jørn Tækker. I had already lived in 14 cities, seven countries and tons of apartments. I loved my house and my flat mates – I was turning 40, and I was done moving! So, I got very involved with the protests in the organisation *Lause bleibt!* [Lause forever!] and the association *Lause Lebt!* We did cultural activities, street protests, petitions, networking - you name it. But after three and a half years, we were stuck, and the threat that the house would be sold at a very high price was again very real. Being an opera singer and a voice teacher, I work with drama every day – still, this was about the most dramatic experience I had ever had, and I realised that our struggle and the existential threat we were facing were good material for creating an opera.

A big problem with gentrification is the agony of never knowing whether I can really invest in my life here. There is the cliché of the artist: “She is resourceful, she can always move”, but at a certain point there comes a “No! We have human needs too and want to be able to settle”, and many of us in Lause had reached that point. If, like most people, you are not rich and do not own your place, gentrification is a big threat as you might have to leave the existence you have built for yourself. To let off steam with my flat mates I had been playing around with the idea of a woman from Lause and Jørn Tækker falling in love, singing dramatic scenes. When the Lause event team in the summer of 2018 organised an opera gala in a neighbourhood courtyard to draw attention to the house, it was a big success. This proved that opera as an art form was actually welcomed by a lot of neighbours and led me to the first serious investigations into creating an opera about our story. I talked to a composer and a year later I met Tina Müller at a demonstration. She writes for the theatre and is herself from Ratibor, a neighbouring project, consisting of a big group of people, a bit similar to ours, that also do cultural activities. Theirs was a fantastic demonstration and since we from Lause had been doing creative demonstrations as well, I thought we should join forces and do something along these lines. There is vast creative potential in this area, and we knew a lot of people and places along the street that were also in trouble.

Many of us had been feeling that we were a little bit like Asterix and Obelix. Like the last Galicians surrounded by Romans (the investors) we were fighting them off but also getting defensive and increasingly in a bad mood as accumulating news of useless politicians and tenant protection rules became clearer and clearer. In Lause we were lucky, because we are a very big group of people, and for most of the time we were able to keep the mood up with our creative activities. If you are going to protest for a long time, you've got to have fun! Tina had a similar feeling and this was the moment when it really clicked. However, for it to become a really strong project it needed to involve everyone - not just the cultural workers. When I approached the Kneipe Meuterei, a left-wing bar collective, I was relieved that they also reacted positively. It developed really, really fast and people were enthusiastic about the need to do something to create attention, something which would stand out. It is unfortunately part of the neoliberal logic – that you need to constantly do weirder things, to always “throw a bigger stone”. And I don't throw stones. However, in our neighbourhood, everybody understood what kind of “big stone” this form of opera protest would be, what kind of reach it could have, and that's why they wanted to join. After the first info-meeting we had a choir of over 100 people and lots of soloists; also, people who had never sung before wanted to

come along to sing. It was absolutely great! Then, when Covid came a month later, the choir was particularly reduced. But later the group grew again.

Researching the material – building the *Lauratibor* community

You started to talk about the work with Tina and now with the choir. How did the project proceed under the difficult conditions of the pandemic?

It started with “Let’s do an opera”, which is very much how activism works: “Let’s do this”. I should have known, and Tina should have known, because she had been writing opera libretti before, that it was going to be a lot of work. But sometimes, you shouldn’t think about getting pregnant, about how much work it will be to care for a child; if you want it, you should just do it and it was the same thing here: we just did it. Tina wrote an email to the people in Ratibor and I wrote to the people in Lause, in total almost 300 people, saying we wanted to start this project. We had the first meetings in my kitchen with a group of 10-12 people from the different projects, to discuss what was important. These were activist start-up meetings, just like any other self-organised groupwork. There were translators, handymen, musicians, all kinds of people, who decided on the basics, important things like wanting to find a language which allowed everyone to get on board. The foundations for Tina’s libretto were born out of these meetings. We then did research in the *Kiez* (neighbourhood) and Tina did in-depth interviews with tenants in the projects. We also knew that we wanted to do a procession that would start at Ratibor and end at Lause. Tina then had the task of joining everything and everyone into one long story. The only fiction in it is the love story between Laura and Tibor - and the elixir, which in the end was all that was left from the original idea of Asterix and Obelix. The rest of the stories are real dramas from the life of the tenants and every house, every project is described very precisely in the libretto. She did a wonderful job of listening to the tone of every character and putting it into the text – which is one of the reasons why the performers of this piece love it so much. Everyone has basically been playing themselves except of course for the villains, such as Maximilius Profitikus. I am myself in the double position being behind the scene and co-responsible for the creation of the work, and also being an activist singer, playing myself – or at least a general Lause person. So, like the other activists in the project, I needed to feel 100% comfortable with the text as well as the costume. The fact that there is a very strong identification between the performers and the piece makes it a powerful experience for everyone. But it also makes it difficult, because what happens the day someone is no longer able to play and sing his or her role anymore?

I am very impressed by how Tina succeeded to make a story that was clear and catchy enough to capture people who were not familiar with the details of the struggles in the *Kiez*, and yet so precise that the performers from the different projects felt absolutely at home with it. As for the composer, Anders Ehlin, he had an almost impossible task of working with singers across a huge spectrum: he would ask, “Marieke, how many tones does this singer have?” and I would say “Five comfortable ones”. And then he would write an aria with these five tones. But there were also experienced singers and professionals and Anders understood and worked with the possibilities and wishes of everyone to create a work that holds together. Both he and Tina let go of their artistic egos and really listened. I think this made the piece so special and why people in our not necessarily opera-loving neighbourhood love it.

Staging the opera – working with the singers

During the procession, the participants are constantly on the move. There are soloists on a platform with singers walking or dancing alongside and yet others running ahead of the procession. These many intertwining choreographic arrangements are quite an accomplishment with people who are not professionally trained. I wonder how you managed with the limited possibilities for rehearsals during the pandemic?

I admire Konstanze [Schmitt, the stage director] for keeping her nerve so well. The fact is that the choir could not meet until the middle of May 2021 and only had two sessions with her on how to move, so there was a lot of improvisation as well. In terms of the singers, we had a choir of about 20 altos, seven tenors (of which most were women), nine sopranos and one to two basses, which was also a challenge. I had planned to do vocal workshops with the choir and would have loved to work more with them, but with the interruptions from Corona, it was just impossible to meet. So in the end, they did a wonderful job by themselves.

Since one-on-one work was possible, however, I did a lot of work with the soloists. I listened thoroughly to their voices to identify expressional strengths and honeyed tones and I worked intensely with Anders on the composition and always double-checked if the part was doable for a specific singer. Because most soloists in *Lauratibor* are not professionals, they needed to have pieces written for them that they could sing even if they were woken up at two in the morning. It is important to feel completely comfortable and confident if you are to sing for thousands of people, especially if you have little performance experience. A lot of the work with the soloists was basically to give them confidence. One example is the three druids, who are house occupants from the '80s and have very strong opinions – real divas, in the good sense of the word. In activism they are mentors and have been teaching me a lot. Now I had to help them to sing solo, to keep the pace and constantly remind them to look at the conductor.

When the time came to rehearse the scenes and we needed to meet with several people at once, we could not meet inside, so we rehearsed in the snow with the pianist playing with his gloves on.

On the whole, it was a bit of a nightmare, because everything in the end was delayed until the last weeks before the performances. For example, Laura's aria, that I sing, it was written on Monday-Tuesday in the same week of the radio-show premiere in 2020. We fixed the last notes while recording it on Wednesday, it was mixed on Thursday, and I had to sing it off by heart on Saturday during the demonstration accompanying the radio show. So that's basically the amount of time I had for my "own song".

The power of the voice and the lack of protest songs

Some of the participants who are interviewed in the documentaries on Lauratibor state how important the work with the voice was to them. I would love to hear your professional thoughts on coming together as a choir – and on the power of using the voice?

I grew up in Sweden where, like in Denmark, singing is an important part of the social fabric and also of the interaction on festive occasions. For me, as for a lot of people who have been singing in choirs, to sing together with others is a very natural thing. When I moved to Lause I wanted to start a lunch choir in our house – just one of those things to keep the mood going, and I asked: "What should we sing? What shall be our repertoire? What are some of the protest songs?" When I learnt that in Germany the Left hardly sings, it shocked me. I was told that the Nazi dictatorship

had appropriated the musical traditions that came before them, including the workers' songs. The misuse of communal singing in the Nazi youth organisations meant that the many kids born after the war grew up without singing. This is infinitely sad because singing really binds us together – it is essentially human and can give us such strength, as individuals as well as a group. Of course, professional and amateur singing does take place in church and school choirs etc., but other than that there is not a lot of communal singing. It is only lately that this lid has been lifted and, for many people, *Lauratibor* opened a window to reclaim singing and also provided new songs. I am very happy that many of the songs from *Lauratibor* work so well. For example, the “Song of resistance” has been sung a lot. It has a great melody and rhythm and is easy to learn: you can join in after just hearing it once or twice.



Photo: Umbruch Bildarchiv

For a lot of the people in *Lauratibor*, the communal singing was a very strong experience. For example, Fabian – one of the musicians who plays percussion and is also an activist - was very emotionally moved by the *Trauermarsch*. This is the march of sorrow when we carry Tibor to his grave, mourning his death as well as the deaths of all the projects that were forcibly evicted in the last 30 years. The march takes about 10 minutes and is a very slow version of the *Chicken Song*, with two women who are yodelling and the choir humming. Fabian was very fond of this, because, as he said, the German Left has forgotten how to mourn. Instead of mourning there has been anger. As there is often sorrow underneath anger, the mourning march was to him an important, almost cathartic experience. In December 2021, Fabian and others did a version of the *Lauratibor Trauermarsch* in Friedrichshain that lasted a couple of hours. There were speeches as well and other music, but the *Trauermarsch* accompanied them as they walked through the area with the choir

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of mourners and a lot of other people paying tribute to all the places that have been torn down in the last couple of years.

What I love about opera is that it is larger than life. Anything can happen, people die and then they reappear; you don't have to censor any feelings, however big and bulky they may be. And everyone can join an opera production: you can sing, you can play, you can hand out things, do lights, hair, makeup, draw a set, you name it. The word *opera* comes from Italian 'opera' which means work. It's not necessarily musical drama, just the work of a lot of people. In Italian the full name is *opera lirica*, meaning 'lyrical work'. The word that has survived outside of Italy is just 'work'... which is what it is. It seemed important to reintegrate this emotional way of singing in a theatre project that talks about our everyday problems.



Photo: Umbruch Bildarchiv

To sing opera - you basically just have to open your mouth and let all those big feelings come out. Not everyone will sound like a trained opera singer, but anyone can find emotional ways of singing/sounding that can be just as touching. As small children we all sing opera. You either love or you hate opera, but unless you have a reason to close your heart – it touches you. It is the infant opening up and sounding to you without intelligible words. Only in opera, the sounding comes from an adult's voice and body, so it gets really, really loud and with a composed emotional message. Some even say that opera has "populist" potential. What I do know is that it is not hard to understand and that it is definitely not elitist.

Anti-gentrification operas – a trend?

Can you think of other protest operas that have been made in public spaces, or is yours the first?

In this specific form maybe *Lauratibor* is a first. However, if the pandemic had not happened, there would have been three opera projects in 2020 in Berlin on anti-gentrification or housing issues! The projects were initiated independently of each other yet they were happening at the same time: It's evident that the housing crisis is one of the big dramas of our time, and therefore not surprising that it becomes the subject of dramatic works. When we first reached out in 2019 about wanting to do an opera, a colleague told me about the pop singer Christiane Rösinger's musical *Stadt unter Einfluss* in the HAU theatre about the housing situation and the tenant movements in Berlin.⁵ Because of the pandemic it was unfortunately not taken up again after 2019. When I saw it, I thought "This is so brilliant, do we have to do all the work to create an opera?" But we badly needed attention for our struggle, which in addition to our homes also touches the problem of the many workspaces being gentrified. Moreover, we were determined that in order to show how the drama is happening HERE among us, every day, we were going to perform in the streets and not in the theatre. And, of course, we were going to do a full-blown opera, not a musical. So we went ahead. Then, in March 2020, we learned that the Neuköllner Oper, which does political chamber opera, was doing an opera on gentrification titled *Opera for sale*. Since it was ABOUT the Neuköllner Oper, and has a guided tour around the theatre, it was in a way site-specific. When the pandemic came, however, after only one performance, they had to do an online version. There was also the Quartiersmanagement Grunewald, a group of activists/artists with a sharp, ironic approach who did a potpourri of different opera fragments pointing to the fact that there is too much space and wealth in Grunewald and that this causes social problems. I think their idea was "Let's give the rich people what they already know". Some of the people who were responsible for the Grunewald event later joined *Lauratibor*.

Lauratibor on tour in Denmark

How was the experience of bringing Lauratibor to Denmark?

It was a wonderful experience to get in contact with activists in Denmark. Working with Almen Modstand, I learned a lot about what was happening. In Odense, where we had a small audience, we met Ibrahim El-Hassan, who gave a powerful speech during *Lauratibor* about the struggle in Vollsmose. He told us about the group Act Now 5240 and I can really recommend going to see a performance by them: it is site-specific, highly political and definitely comes from below. They are people who have been playing forum theatre together for, I think, eight years and do it superbly – at the same time as they are being thrown out of their apartments. I was very moved by that performance.

In Copenhagen, where for obvious reasons there were a lot more people, we were lucky to have Fatma Tounsi give a speech during our performance. I heard reactions from people who came from Christiania and were hesitant about going to an opera but afterwards said, "This makes sense!" And I smile when I think that we came to Copenhagen Opera Festival with 90 Kreuzberg "anarchists"! It was also important for the group to see what impact they could have. We realised that when you

5) Berlin bleibt! #2 Christiane Rösinger – Videoclip to "Stadt unter Einfluss" #HAUonline: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIOYekroHJg>

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bring a big heterogenous group like ours, performing such a complex project as an opera, it shows the audience - who might have similar (or other) struggles - that you can do just about anything, even if you are not professionals. I hope *Lauratibor* can inspire people to do their own projects.

In the very first meeting with Tina, we agreed that we wanted to take the time and space to tell our story – to not be interpreted and not be interrupted. For this, musical theatre is a perfect medium. We also agreed that the story would be told in our space, which is where it belongs. In the end the pieces have all been created for the march along our street, the songs and arias are about our houses and about us, who live and work there. Because it is site-specific, we did not know if it would work in another place. But it did, even in Denmark, which also shows the strength of Tina's libretto and Anders' music.

What's next?

Lauratibor created a community and started a process. Something like that can't be stopped, so what's next?

After Denmark, after working on this non-stop for two years and often 12 hours a day, I was close to burnout, and took the rest of the year off. Following what has been happening in Berlin in the meantime, however, it is clear that this project is so much more than just a performance. The choir wanted to continue to sing together, which shows that for many of them *Lauratibor* had boosted their confidence about singing. The orchestra also wanted to continue, which is fantastic because even if some of them had not played their instruments since they were 12, they put a lot of effort into making it happen. A group has been working to make a recording happen so that the new protest songs can be spread more easily, and another group has been applying for funding.

For a long time during the pandemic, Tina, Konstanze and I had almost all the responsibility and the workload was enormous. Now, once every few weeks there is a plenum. Most of those involved are familiar with Kiez's work, they know how a plenum works, and how to listen to each other and the idea of being an inclusive circle. Let's talk again in a year or two, and we will see what has happened! It started out as just a wild idea – but then it grew into something, which taught us all so much.

My secret wish is that we could have a returning Opern-Festspiele in Kreuzberg. Given the political and housing situation, it should take place every year. But knowing the workload, and even if now we know how to do it, which steps to take, how long it takes, and what sound equipment we need... every two years is more realistic. As we speak, the sale of Lause to the city of Berlin is being finalised and the house will hopefully be off the market, but many other houses on the street are still struggling and as for Maximus Profitikus, there are tons of his kind out there. *Lauratibor* is a site-specific performance, but the bakery on our corner might just as well be a bakery on a corner in Copenhagen or somewhere else.

Interview 2

Tina Müller (TM) and Konstanze Schmitt (KS)

You were both a part of the core group who created this opera. How did your different ideas come together?

TM: Marieke wanted to do this huge opera and was always talking about Puccini. I am a playwright writing for theatre, not really musical theatre, and was always talking about Brecht and the *Dreigroschenoper* (*the Threepenny Opera*) There were other people involved, who do not have artistic training, but work, for example, as craftsmen – and they also had strong ideas. Their inspiration was more from the cultural movements in Berlin in the 90s with a lot of street activities and community art. They might have been talking about Tom Waits. All this you can hear in the music. The composer Anders Ehlin wanted to make all of us happy, so he wrote some Puccini songs, some Kurt Weill-songs and was open to all our ideas. This is also how each of the different groups in the piece came to have a different musical language. Every house has its own atmosphere and its own way of showing it. I was not sure that people would like the classical opera stuff, but in the end, I found it super strong, because it is such a clash. Some people even said: “This was punk rock”. It was definitely something super pathetic and with big passions. Now I know what Marieke dreamt of, and I understand it. But I also like the other parts of the opera, the other influences, which came together in a mosaic of styles and voices.

The project was much smaller in our heads... in fact, it was our plan to do it in four months. Shortly after I started to write the libretto, however, the pandemic came, and we had to postpone for three months. And then: “Oh, we can’t do it anymore, so we will do it next spring”. In the meantime, Anders was writing more and more music, and we discussed for whom the music should be written. I always said: “For the musicians, because many of them are not professionals”, and the conductor would say: “No, don’t think about their limits ... just write good music”. And then Anders wrote difficult music that challenged the orchestra. But it was also empowering because they realised that they could perform this super-difficult music. It was possible.

The participants and the process

Coming together as committed activists to work on a theatre production of this scale must have been quite a process?

KS: 99% of the people of *Lauratibor* are activists committed to the struggle to reclaim the city, the anti-gentrification movement or the Umweltbewegung, Climate Activists etc.⁶ They are well connected in the neighbourhood as well as in their own spaces. For instance, the Meuterei Collective [a.k.a. the Chicken]⁷ is a place of coming together in the Kiez, for left, alternative people who do not fit into the more gentrified areas. They themselves were very well organised. Being already a group of 10 people, they became part of the bigger group. And this was typical: rather than individuals joining the project, many were already a part of a group, which became a part of

6) Activist groups mentioned on *Lauratibor*’s website as contributors to the protest opera are: Kollektiv Lauratibor; Kiezchor; Protest-Orchester; Ratibor14; LauseBleibt; Kneipenkollektiv Meuterei; Esels Alptraum; Kampfsportschule Yayla; Die GloReichen

7) The Chicken refers to a scene of 10 performers from the Meuterei dressed up as chickens singing about the threat to collective living while creating rhythms by rattling beer crates.

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the bigger organisation. As Tina said, many had professional backgrounds AND a lot of talent in art – either music, theatre or other forms of art.

The conductor worked with the choir every Tuesday. Because of the ongoing problem of adapting to the pandemic, it was in the open air in the summer and then during winter 2020/21 it was on Youtube livestream. I think most of the members of the choir knew each other a little beforehand, because of the live rehearsals. There were many discussions in the group. With the different backgrounds and ideas about the role of art in society, there were different approaches to the project.

TM: It was maybe the hardest thing – to come together on this point. People were so engaged. There was so much power coming from the participants that you never had to push. They came, they were there, they were present. This was very different from when I work with young people in the theatre, which I do a lot. Here the participants were super awake all the time and ready; they had learned the text and were motivated. Therefore, in the end, organisation was easy. The hard process was in the inner circle, where we were a group of, I think 10 people, who were discussing everything.

Superheroes meet agitprop and *Lord of the Rings*

Tina, can you tell us about your process when writing the libretto?

TM: I am really a collective writer, I never write alone. We were 10 people sitting around the table who found the plot together. We wanted to make a hero plot like from the movies. To fight for a city and for justice is heroic and it made us happy to work with heroes – even if we did not take it super seriously. What is important is the story of the city – not of the heroes. Yet, they bring the music to the people, they are the holders of hope. We had this idea that each of the projects that were part of the opera were a tribe, each with their own patron, their own hero. And in the end, when all the tribes come together, we are superpowerful.

When I talked to people in the neighbourhood. I already knew the storyline. What I wanted was to get inspired by details from the conversations, some beautiful words and whatever. The first version of the libretto was written in only two weeks. It was written directly for this spot, this spot, and this spot [KV: a total of five locations between Ratibor and Lause, all of which are buildings where the tenants are in a struggle with the owners of the houses]. It was really like I did not have to find it – it was already there and therefore I could be so quick. Afterwards, when the words were adapted to the music, it was a really long and super-hard process with the composer.

I always thought of *the Lord of the Rings* in the last scene when the tribes come from everywhere to fight with huge power. To me, one of the strongest moments is when Tibor, the narrator, says: “Now you know why capitalism is over”. And this is the story we wanted to tell from a point in the future that looks back on these dark, historic times.

I never had strong ideas about *how* the opera should be, I was only sure that it would happen. I think also for you, Konstanze, the job was to bring the ideas together rather than to work entirely freely?

KS: Are you not always adapting your ideas to what is possible and what is desired for people to feel comfortable, when you work with others? We had the idea to bring the opera to the streets and we had the idea of the wagon, which were central to us. To me the workers’ theatre and Russian constructivism of the 1920s and 30s are important inspirations. There were many groups all over

Europe and the ideas of the workers' theatre were close to the ideas of the communist party. In this project, I was lucky to work with a professional stage designer, Jan Brokof, who also shared the idea of a constructivist stage – and with stage workers who were happy to realise this idea with a huge mechanism that is moved by hand. In *Lauratibor* there is both the saga and the big drama, which makes it into the interesting hybrid of an agitprop opera. Although we had different approaches, it came together in the end.



Photo: Umbruch Bildarchiv

The choir's red overalls say something about the characters and their positions. We worked with three professional costume designers, Marei Löllmann, Bergit Faßl and Marie Perglerova. They created costumes that were site-specific, so for instance the gang around Laura had the logo of Lause, which is a flower growing out of a house. Some had it on the hip, others had it on the back. Their slogan was '*Lause lebt!*' However, if the participants did not want what the costume designer suggested, she would come to me, and I would say: "What can we do. They are not actors, and they want to feel comfortable". When a person, like the costume designer, is professional, she will find a good solution.

In terms of directing, the character work on this production was limited to working with the four main roles. But on the whole, there were many things that had to do with rhythm and transitions, for instance when one scene changes into another. I have never worked with so many people before and being a long piece, I feared that the audience would lose interest. But they were super thrilled.

The final route of the performance and the support of the Kiez

KS: The original idea was to do the first act in the yard of Ratibor and then the end would be at Lause, Lausitzer Strasse 10. We had a lawyer who was like a consultant in terms of the restrictions during the pandemic. He would tell us, you can maybe be this many people on the street with distance, but you cannot go into the yard, because this is private and then you cannot go in with a demonstration of so many people, and someone must be at the entrance to control the numbers, etc. So, in the end we decided to do the whole thing from A-Z on the street. Even if there was still no guarantee, it was the only way we could do it. And in the end, it was happening, and everyone was really overwhelmed with the first show, because we had around 2000 spectators, who were walking with us in the street. It was a really big demonstration!

The second show took place on Mariannenplatz, which is like an open-air amphitheatre. Being the site of the famous occupied Rauch Haus, it is also a historical place in Berlin, which is now a community house and an arts centre. It was a hot summer Sunday of 35 degrees just one week after the first show, and we were really exhausted. Still, we were there from the early morning putting it all up, rehearsing, sound checking. Before the show, members of one of the biggest and most important anti-gentrification movements, Deutsche Wohnen und Co. enteignen, asked if they could join us for the very last song and stand behind the stage.⁸ So they came with their flags and everyone thought it was part of the show. It was wonderful!

Again, there was an audience of around 2000 people, who were shouting and crying. We never thought so many would come. At one point, there is a really strong monologue by Tibor the storyteller that is full of anger about the real estate lobby. In this monologue, he names a lot of concrete projects in Berlin, at which point the onlookers rose to their feet applauding and shouting like crazy.

TM: We always thought there might be different groups who would join us. It was even written in the text that there would be flags, but we did not know there would be so many and that it would be so strong.

On the importance of hope in moving forward

TM: In the future we want to share the responsibility and the discussions with everyone involved. Therefore, we are in the process of founding a large collective. Our hope is that it will be a structure that can handle new projects.

KS: We have also applied for funding to take the opera on tour. We believe that the opera can motivate, agitate and educate people in other places as well. If we get the funding, before going to other cities, we want to do it first in other neighbourhoods in Berlin, where the same thing is happening. For me, this project is part of my life as an artist and as such it is a process of discussion and fighting rather than something clear and easy that happens by talking. It is something that happens by constantly trying it out. So yes, at the moment, we hope that we can take *Lauratibor* on tour!

8) Deutsche Wohnen und Co. enteignen made a *Volksentscheid* [people's referendum] to suggest that every company that has more than 3000 apartments could be socialised by the state, which is theoretically possible in German law. At the election in Berlin in September 2021, 68 % voted in support of the petition, which is more than a million votes, and more than any other party in the election had in itself. This is a big, big hope for the anti-gentrification movement and a big fear for all the companies and for the neoliberal government who are doing their deals with them.

TM: I really think that one of the strongest things about this work is it has inspired people to do their own creative protests. There are many in our group who used to be activists and who no longer could find their voice. They were lonely and therefore happy to find this community and contribute to its output. I can speak for myself: I used to squat houses in Zurich, but here in Berlin it does not really work. I don't want to fight with the police and was looking for a way that was mine, that was strong and would give new hope. Some activists who have been in Berlin's anti-gentrification movement for years even thanked us for having given them a gift that felt like a huge party and a big thank you to their years of struggle. This was precisely, what we had wanted to do!

KS: Deutsche Wohnen und Co. enteignen are using one of our songs in their online campaigns and in their demonstrations as well. In this sense, art is used as a tool for social change. These great texts that Tina wrote and the great music that Anders did, yes, they have the power to travel on!

We never thought about this impact when we made the piece. While I would say exactly the same as Tina – I would use the words 'agitate, educate, organise' from the workers' movement, which are super important on the inside as well as the outside of the project. This is the power of art and it gives hope.

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