

THE SATURDAY PROFILE SIR HENRY

# Using a Radical Theater to Challenge Notions of What Berlin Could Be

By A.J. GOLDMANN

BERLIN — Not long ago, Sir Henry stood on the main stage of the Volksbühne theater in what was once East Berlin and conducted the cosmos.

In “Quarantine, For Solo Human,” Sir Henry, whose given name is John Henry Nijenhuis, did so as part of an interactive musical installation that sent a planet spiraling through a computer-animated universe using motion-sensor technology.

As he gracefully waved his arms, a delicate celestial choreography emerged. Earth hurtled through a galaxy that expanded and shrank at his command. His gestures also controlled the cosmic soundscape, adjusting the pitch and volume of a “space choir” that harmonized to a Bach prelude playing from a MIDI sequencer.

“Quarantine,” which streamed on the Volksbühne’s website during the pandemic-related summer lockdown, was the musician’s first solo work on the main stage of the theater where he has worked as music director for nearly a quarter century.

“The first six months of Covid were a blessing because I could just hole up in my apartment and conceive,” the 56-year-old Canadian said. His interactive installations fuse his passion for music with his interest in computer programming, a lifelong pursuit since his studies in the 1980s at The University of King’s College in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

On a stormy spring evening, I met Mr. Nijenhuis at the back entrance of the shuttered Volksbühne. Wearing an elegant brown herringbone overcoat, he ushered me through a labyrinth of backstage stairways to the theater’s Red Salon, a nightclub-like venue that has been off limits since the pandemic began.

Balancing himself precariously on a stool, he filled two glasses with water from the sink of the long-disused bar. He wore a black dress shirt unbuttoned at the top; his shoulder-length gray hair was pulled tightly back in a high ponytail.

Seeing him so comfortable and at home in the empty theater should hardly have come as a surprise. Few people at the Volksbühne have been here longer than he has.

For at least a decade after the Cold War ended, the Volksbühne was arguably the most radical and artistically daring theater in Europe. As music director, composer and occasional actor at the playhouse since 1997, Mr. Nijenhuis has contributed to Berlin’s



LENA MUCHA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

*“At the Volksbühne, you could always smell if the director wanted to change the world. And if they didn’t want to change the world, you’d say to yourself, ‘You might as well be in the West End.’”*

artistic flowering while living through dynamic changes that have redefined the city — and not for the better, in his opinion.

He savors his memories of post-Cold War Berlin, a wild, bohemian outpost of artistic experimentation spiced with a vibrant clash between East and West.

Mr. Nijenhuis unabashedly embraced the East German revolutionary spirit at the theater. “We had a job to explain socialism to the encroaching West in Berlin,” he said.

“At the Volksbühne, you could always smell if the director wanted to change the world,” he added. “And if they didn’t want to change the world, you’d say to yourself, ‘You might as well be in the West End.’”

The theater “was a bulwark against unthinking, invasive forms of capitalism,” he said.

To his regret, that atmosphere evaporated over the years. “Nowadays, the reputation of Berlin is as a party place,” he said.

Nevertheless, few, if any, other North Americans have so decisively left their mark on Berlin’s cultural scene in the heady years that followed reunification. Mr. Nijenhuis has worked on more than 50 productions in his nearly 25 years at the Volksbühne.

“John is a mastermind of music,” said the director David Marton, who has worked with Mr. Nijenhuis since an acclaimed chamber version of “Wozzeck” in 2007. In an email, he suggested that Mr. Nijenhuis is “perhaps not recognized enough because he works mainly in the theater and ‘theater music’ doesn’t get much credit.”

Mr. Nijenhuis was born in 1964 in Newmarket, Ontario, to Dutch parents and grew up in Montreal and Halifax, Nova Scotia, where his father worked for British Airways. After college, he spent a decade in Toronto, developing a style of piano he described as “two-handed mash-ups of, for instance, ‘Stairway to Heaven’ with ‘Putting on the Ritz,’ or Ravel’s ‘Boléro’ with ‘Take

Five.’”

But professional opportunities for musicians in Toronto were limited.

In 1996, he was invited to perform at an arts festival in Berlin. The venue in Prenzlauer Berg, in the former East, didn’t have a piano, so he had to make do with a living room organ. The curious experience gave rise to his nickname, which is a tongue-in-cheek homage to a ’60s lounge organist, Sir Julian.

Although his festival appearance did not go to plan, Mr. Nijenhuis soon began working at the nearby Prater, a smaller venue run by the Volksbühne. His all-around musical profile, his knowledge of Kurt Weill and Prokofiev, but also Fats Waller and pop and rock, made him sought-after in the culturally omnivorous and experimental milieu of ’90s Berlin.

“You could just about walk out the door and find yourself at a happening,” he said of the moment. “There were many of those ruined houses, bomb-wrecked

houses that were housing experimental music goings-on.”

That summer he traded the skyscrapers of Toronto for the coal-heated tenements of Prenzlauer Berg. If Berlin offered him a new home, the Volksbühne became his new creative family.

Back then, the theater was firmly under the direction of Frank Castorf, a provocateur who served as artistic director from 1992 until 2017. Mr. Castorf had a fondness for making mincemeat out of the classics in long, demanding evenings that were designed to shock theatergoers out of complacency.

But as the city gradually evolved into the national capital and headquarters to many of Germany’s biggest corporations, the milieu inevitably shifted.

By the early 2000s, the Volksbühne was struggling with its ideological focus, and as its productions became increasingly self-referential its audience began to drift away. And while the actors and directors were hurling Marxist provocations into the

audience, the city was quickly succumbing to the capitalist forces their theater was meant to defend against.

“I was ensconced in a magnificent family,” Mr. Nijenhuis said. “We were all on the same page. I had a job to do, there were fiercely creative people and I lost track a little bit of what was outside this building.”

He added: “It was very easy to fall into a peaceful slumber and wake up when the city was gone.”

While Berlin continues to enjoy a freewheeling reputation, Mr. Nijenhuis believes the city has lost much of its creative soul. “The change has been from an adventuresome, very daring town with adventuresome and daring artworks into an irretrievably bourgeois pleasure palace,” he said.

As Berlin settled down, so did Mr. Nijenhuis. In 2015, he bought an apartment in Prenzlauer Berg and married the American poet Donna Stonecipher.

Increasingly, Mr. Nijenhuis has found creative fulfillment away from traditional productions, through programming and performing interactive musical installations like “Quarantine.” For the past 15 years, he has also collaborated with the German author and filmmaker Alexander Kluge, for whom he has scored movies and accompanied in live performances.

In one recent appearance, he tinkers around on a grand piano singing arias by Monteverdi and Purcell as Mr. Kluge, a towering figure in German culture, and the American poet and novelist Ben Lerner read their works.

Mr. Nijenhuis is one of only two ensemble members at the Volksbühne with tenure (it is rare for performers in Berlin to stay at the same theater for the qualifying 15 years and was rarer under Mr. Castorf, who had a penchant for firing people). Nevertheless, the recent era of managerial and artistic upheavals at the theater has been trying; by his own admission, he was “put in the broom closet” for two years by an artistic director who did not value his contributions.

Mr. Nijenhuis’s most recent appearance onstage, in a production of “The Oresteia” in October, showed what can happen when his talents and eclectic tastes are given free rein. The inspired musical selections ranged from Richard Strauss to Tom Lehrer.

“Had I stayed in Toronto,” Mr. Nijenhuis leaned in to tell me, “I would have probably become a bus driver.”

## Taiwan Scrambles to Save Water and Prays for Rain

By AMY CHANG CHIEN and MIKE IVES

TAICHUNG, Taiwan — Lin Wei-Yi once gave little thought to the water sluicing through her shower nozzle, kitchen faucet and garden hose.

But as Taiwan’s worst drought in more than half a century has deepened in recent weeks, Ms. Lin, 55, has begun keeping buckets by the taps. She adopted a neighbor’s tip to flush the toilet five times with a single bucket of water by opening the tank and directly pouring it in. She stopped washing her car, which became so filthy that her children contort themselves to avoid rubbing against it.

The monthslong drought has nearly drained Taiwan’s major reservoirs, contributed to two severe electricity blackouts and forced officials to restrict the water supply. It has brought dramatic changes to the island’s landscape: The bottoms of several reservoirs and lakes have been warped into cracked, dusty expanses that resemble desert floors. And it has transformed how many of Taiwan’s 23.5 million residents use and think about water.

“We used too much water before,” Ms. Lin said this week in the central city of Taichung. “Now we have to adapt to a new normal.”

No typhoons made landfall in Taiwan last year, the first time since 1964. Tropical cyclones are a prime source of precipitation for the island’s reservoirs. Some scientists say the recent lack of typhoons is part of a decades-long pattern linked to global warming, in which the intensity of storms hitting Taiwan has increased but their annual frequency has decreased.

Ordinary rainfall has also been drastically lower than normal this year, particularly in the central region that includes Taichung, a city of 2.8 million people and the second-largest on the island. The water shortage could begin to ease this weekend if heavy rains arrive on Saturday, as some forecasters

Amy Chang Chien reported from Taichung, Taiwan, and Mike Ives from Hong Kong.

predict. But as of Friday, the water levels at two main reservoirs that supply Taichung and other central cities were hovering between 1 percent and 2 percent of normal capacity.

In a few cases, the usual residents of the island’s lakes and reservoirs — fish — were replaced by other species: tourists and social media influencers taking pictures of the visually startling terrain for Instagram posts. In one of the most photogenic locations, Sun Moon Lake, a reservoir in central Taiwan, the receding waterline has revealed tombstones that historians say may date to the Qing dynasty.

“It’s been meltingly hot in Taichung for a while now,” said Huang Ting-Hsiang, 27, a chef who works out of his home and stopped cooking last month for lack of water. “The images of the dangerously low levels at those reservoirs are scary, but there’s nothing we can do.”

To fight the drought, the government has been drawing water from wells and seawater desalination plants, flying planes and burning chemicals to seed clouds above reservoirs, and halting irrigation over an area of farmland nearly the size of New York City.

It has also severely restricted residential water deliveries. In Taichung and other hard-hit cities, the taps have been cut off for two days a week since early April. Some residents have low water pressure even on the other days. Officials have said the curbs will become more severe, starting on Tuesday, if the heavy rainfall that is expected over the weekend does not materialize.

Lo Shang-Lien, a professor at the Graduate Institute of Environmental Engineering at National Taiwan University, said that the current restrictions were necessary in part because people on the island tend to use a lot of water.

In Taichung, the daily rate of domestic consumption per person is 283 liters, or nearly 75 gallons, according to government data from 2019. In Taipei, the capital, it is 332 liters per day. By contrast, average residential water consumption in Europe is about 144 liters per person per day and 310 liters



BILLY H.C. KWOK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sun Moon Lake, a reservoir in central Taiwan, has become a photogenic landscape for influencers. The receding waterline has also revealed tombstones that historians date to the Qing dynasty.

in the United States, according to official estimates.

Professor Lo said that Taiwan’s water usage was relatively high in part because its water prices — some of the lowest in Asia, according to Fitch Ratings — incentivize excess consumption. “Given all the extreme climatic events of re-

### Modifying showers and dishwashing in a severe drought.

cent years, water policies have become something that we need to reconsider and replan,” he said.

Raising those prices would be politically sensitive, though, and a spokesperson for the Water Resources Agency said that the government had no immediate plans to do so.

For now, many people in Taiwan are watching the skies and praying for rain.

In one sign of the public mood, more than 8,000 social media users tuned in to a recent government livestream of an hourlong afternoon thunderstorm at a reservoir in northern Taiwan. A bubble

tea shop in the northern city of Taoyuan said that it would stop serving ice with drinks until the water restrictions were lifted. And in Taichung, irrigation officials held a rain-worshipping ceremony at a temple — the first such event there since 1963 and only the fourth since the temple was built, in 1730.

Ms. Lin, who stopped washing her car, cleans dishes in an assembly line of metal pots with dishwasher that she arranges from dirtiest to cleanest.

“I still need to wash whatever I need to wash,” she said, “but now every drop needs to be used twice.”

For the first few weeks of the rationing, some people looked for ways to escape life without running water. Ms. Lin went sightseeing in the eastern city of Hualien and visited one of her daughters in Taipei. Others went bathing in hot springs.

Lin Ching-tan, who owns the Kylin Peak Hot Spring resort in Taichung, said that he had lowered the admission price by half, to about \$5, as a humanitarian gesture. He also started bathing at work before going home in the evenings.

“If you don’t have water to take a shower, it can be torture,” he said.

But as the government restricts movement in an effort to fight Taiwan’s most severe coronavirus outbreak since the start of the pandemic, more of the island’s residents are stuck at home, looking for creative ways to make scarce water supplies last longer. On Facebook and other social media platforms, people have been sharing water-saving tips, including how to flush toilets more efficiently or install a second rooftop water tank.

Mr. Huang, the chef, said that he and his family have a system for storing water in buckets, pots and tanks before their taps run dry every Tuesday and Wednesday. They also try to order takeout so that they won’t have to use water for cooking, he added, although their favorite restaurants and food stalls sometimes close for the same reason.

Ms. Lin’s system includes placing a plastic container under her feet while showering, then flushing the toilet with it.

This week, on her balcony, she poured used kitchen water over some flowers but left others to wilt. “There’s no turning back from extreme weather,” she said. “Developing good habits for saving water is probably just a rehearsal for frequent droughts of the future.”

## Postal Service In Spain Flubs Diversity Effort

By RAPHAEL MINDER

MADRID — A new campaign by Spain’s postal service that was intended to condemn racism has backfired and ended up offending many people with a series of stamps in skin tones — the lighter the shade, the more valuable the stamp.

The “Equality Stamps” were issued this week to coincide with the anniversary of the murder of George Floyd, the Black man whose killing by a police officer in Minneapolis fueled outrage on American streets and led to broad calls for fighting racism in the United States and beyond. The release of the stamps also coincided with European Diversity Month.

Moha Gerehou, the author of a new book about racism in Spain, said on Twitter that he understood that the postal service meant well — but said that it had misfired badly.

It is “an enormous contradiction,” he wrote — “a campaign that launches stamps with a different value depending on the color in order to show the equal value of our lives. The message is an absolute disaster.”

The cost of the stamps starts at €0.70 (85 cents) for the darkest color, and as the shade grows progressively lighter, the value steadily goes up to €1.60 for the palest.

The postal service said on Twitter that the pricing reflected “an unfair and painful reality that should not exist,” and that it had hoped the campaign would “give voice to a generation devoted to equal rights and diversity.”

Mr. Gerehou, the author and a Spanish native of Gambian descent, said the postal service was joining a corporate antiracism push that had spread to Spain from the United States. But he said that such efforts needed to be “accompanied by profound changes.”

The campaign was designed with the help of SOS Racismo, an antiracism organization, and promoted in a video by El Chojin, a rap artist.

SOS Racismo defended the stamps as “a very visual way to denounce the racism that thousands of people suffer in the Spanish state.”