A towering figure in European theatre

**Christoph Marthaler, recipient of the International Ibsen Award 2018, gives us musical theatre of and for our times.**

Musician, composer and director Christoph Marthaler, born in Erlenbach, Switzerland, in 1951, is known for his unique stage language in the intersection between musical theatre and stylised, physical theatre. Absurd-ironic naturalism, burlesque realism, snobby Dadaism, melancholic decadence: many a word combination has been created in an attempt to define the stage language of this year's award recipient. In the end, the wordsmiths with a penchant for the dramatic threw in the towel and now use the phrase 'a Marthaler' to describe his performances.

**'A Marthaler'**

What is 'a Marthaler'? It is a collage of scenes in which singing and music create stage images and drive the action forward. In other words, it is the music - and not the dramatic text - that carries the narrative. A story that is easy to follow, characters in the traditional sense and a plot that is set aside to make way for the episodic dramaturgy that honours the auditive - and the auditive entails everything from Wham's *Last Christmas* and the Bee Gees' *Staying Alive* to Mozart's *Magic Flute*.

Even though singing and music are the leitmotiv, Marthaler can both support and undermine the main element. Beautiful singing may be challenged by slapstick humour and melancholic tones confronted by absurd elements. The actors may be lying on top of one another in a huddle or doing gymnastic exercises - while singing. By setting the visual up against the auditive, Marthaler often does the opposite of what is customary in musical theatre.

The apparently random manifestation leaves the audience with an association-rich sense of wonderment - and with no clear answers. Marthaler's performances testify to an uncompromising director who does not tailor his performances to a particular audience, but lets the audience come to him. And they do just that - in increasing numbers, since he began as a theatre musician 40 years ago until today, where he is considered a towering figure in the history European theatre.

**Cult director**

Christoph Marthaler did not always dream of making theatre in a traditional theatre, but preferred to create performances in existing venues. This was before 1988, when he became acquainted with scenographer and costume designer Anna Viebrock. Since forging a friendship, they have worked together on more than 80 theatre and opera productions, including Franz Schubert's song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*, George Büchner's *Dantons Tod*, William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and, last but not least, the production of *Murx den Europäer*! *Murx ihn!* *Murx ihn!* *Murx ihn!* *Murx ihn ab!* The last-mentioned performance premiered at the Volksbühne in Berlin in 1993, turning Marthaler into a cult director overnight. With a painful and absurd retrospective glance at the DDR, a Swiss director succeeded in articulating emotions tied to a chapter in German history that was making its way into the history books. After 14 years, the production was eventually removed from the placards - but only because the actors had become too old.

Visually, the farewell song was set in a gigantic venue - 25 metres deep and 8 metres high - that was reminiscent of a factory cafeteria or conference room. This is typical for Viebrock, a world-class scenographer inspired by public, cold, isolated institutional spaces. The actors appear to be trapped in these sterile hideouts where time has become unhinged, a fact that arouses sympathy in the audience. The models used by the scenographers have been exhibited at museums on several occasions. Viebrock also works as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna.

**The many awards of the award-winner**

Marthaler is a socially active director who, through his work over the past few decades, has staged a wide spectrum of themes, ranging from Germany's more recent history in *Murx den Europäer!* to the uncertain climate future of Greenland. During the Bergen International Festival in 2011, he visited Norway for the first time, bringing with him his production of +-0. The title refers to the point in the temperature scale where water melts or freezes.

Marthaler has received numerous awards for his work and his productions have been invited to the prestigious theatre festival Theatertreffen in Berlin no fewer than 14 times. In 2017, he also won an award for Best Director in the musical theatre category for *Lulu*, performed at the Hamburg State Opera, and the Zurich Art Prize. Marthaler was not actually born in Zurich, but the city still considers him a native. From 2000-2004, he was the theatre manager of the Schauspielhaus in Zurich, which won the Theatre of the Year award under his direction. Viebrock and Marthaler's dramatic adviser, Stefanie Carp, was also part of the Schauspielhaus management at this time.

Christoph Marthaler's unique artistic expression - whether staging an opera, theatre classic or his own work - is imbued with a European sensibility and dimension. He creates musical theatre of and for our times, whether it entails a critical look at the spirit of an age, historical events, questions about identity and culture, the relationship between the individual and the state or the individual's sense of time. Song, music fragments, silent scenes, dance, gesticulation and repetition together merge into a greater whole and are expressed in a bizarre combination of gravity and humour. As a critic once wrote: *It's like the urge to laugh - during a funeral.*

**Written by Ilene Sørbøe, Norwegian theatre critic**