

**ROUTES AWARD WINNER 2009: STEFAN KAEGI**

**International theatre-maker Stefan Kaegi prefers to make speeches for call centre workers and truck drivers than for kings and queens.**



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Have you ever met an Egyptian muezzin? In Cairo alone there are 30 000 of these mosque caretakers, who call the faithful to prayer six times a day. But in 2010, they are all likely to lose their jobs to technology as Cairo begins using a centralised system. Have you ever travelled with Bulgarian truckers and seen what they have seen on the highways of today's borderless Europe? Or have you ever had a personal conversation with a call-centre agent in India who can remote-control objects in the office space you are sitting in?

These are just a few of the scenarios formulated by the acclaimed international theatre-maker Stefan Kaegi (1972, Switzerland) who in January was awarded the Routes Award for Cultural Diversity 2009 for consistently managing to get his audiences to directly -- and happily -- engage with "the other".

In his work, both as an individual and with the German collective Rimini Protocoll, Kaegi approaches his subjects using whatever styles or techniques best enhance

the story his subjects have to tell. His works take place in streets, parks, backs of trucks, tops of high-rise buildings, on the internet and, yes, even in theatres. He seeks to expose the social reality of these odd places by making these different settings a space of encounter between the audience and the different people who contribute to urban life.

While he always uses real people who play themselves, he does not regard them as “amateurs”. They are in fact “experts”, or rather co-authors of their own stories, with whom Kaegi works with over a period of months to help sculpt their presentation. He sees himself more as a ghost-writer but “instead of doing it for politicians, I do it for non-politicians”.

Steve Korver skyped with Kaegi in Vancouver while he prepares for the premier of his latest piece.

### **What are you busy with now?**

It's called *Best Before* and is an experiment. It seeks to take the multiplayer video game out of the purely virtual. Two hundred spectators are each remote controlling an avatar and asked to make decisions. Everyone is represented like a tiny little jellybean. They are born, can go to school, get married, have children, get divorced, change gender, make money, take drugs, be soldiers or politicians or whatever... They can even commit suicide. And in the end, they all die. So far that is nothing new -- just a videogame. But usually you play videogames alone in a room. Now here you can see and hear each other in the same space. We just had a run-through last week and it proved to be VERY LOUD. It's amazing to see how they all interact: “No please! Stop taking so many drugs!” They even sent a president into exile! It's a big party where you can witness social transformation.

Traditionally in theatre you are usually watching someone who, for example, hears that his father has been killed and then he has to go and kill his uncle, etcetera. But this is in the first person: *I* lost my job at 18, *I* found another one, *I* lost all my money gambling, *I* turned to heroin and *I* ended up in jail... It's more ego-driven. Plus it's a real-time democracy. People really care! Some actually expressed “I don't want to die!”

### **But then of course we all die...**

Yes, and the time of our death depends on how many risks we have taken. In this piece, many start dying at age 55, around 80 minutes into the performance, and others die at 100 about a half hour later... [laughter]

### **You also did a piece about the “death of an average European” (*Deadline*). What did you learn about their average lives?**

It's funny how in traditional theatre, death always comes as a murder or a tragic traffic accident, while in reality 96% of Europeans just quietly die in their homes of a stroke or something. They just “pass away”. But for the people around them,

the survivors, it's of course a real struggle. And we brought together all these death professionals -- dissectors of bodies, people who hold the hands of the dying, gravestone engravers -- which made it apparent how things are truly measured in this industry: not by empathy but by money and production...

**You began your career as a journalist for a very local paper covering very local stories. What inspired you to hop from that medium to embracing all possible mediums in your theatre work?**

I actually met a woman here in Canada who expressed it very well why she left journalism. She said she felt like she was just *driving* these stories and not *transforming* them. Myself, I felt like I was never given enough time to get really engaged and that the format was just wrong since there are many other ways to invite people into a story. Like putting them directly into a truck like *Cargo Sofia* or to get them on a phone to a call centre in India as with *Call Cutta in a Box*. While theatre was always this empty space to create fictional worlds, I also wanted to open a window to the world and go *please look in this direction!*

**In *Cargo Sofia* the audience is presented with another way of seeing Europe. What other different "views" of Europe do you believe are under-represented?**

I am constantly looking for these kinds of stories. I'm now starting to research the story around the millions of Germans living in the deep East around Kaliningrad who were relocated by Stalin to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and such places. With the fall of the Wall, repatriation schemes saw tens of thousands of them returning to Germany several generations later and speaking a different language. And out of this nationalist idea, some very specific biographies have arisen which I would really like to explore...

**Many of your works break down the border between audience member and the "other". While most of the audience is obviously welcoming to the experience, are there those that fight it?**

Actually it never happens. In the 1980s and 90s, there was this theatrical tradition where artists really wanted to confront their audiences with shocking taboo-breaking actions. But we are not striving to be high art or cryptic. I am just trying to seduce the audience to a certain story.

**Do you consider what you do as activism?**

Well certainly in a way. A work like *Security Conference* where we recreated a NATO conference or *Annual Shareholders Meeting* where we arranged the buying of stocks so we could bring 250 people into a Daimler shareholders' meeting to use as readymade theatre can be seen as literally activist works. But actually instead of "activism", we prefer to call our guerrilla strategies "theatre".

**You have been living as a nomad for the last decade making new contacts for new projects in different places every few months. But, um, how about more long-term relationships?**

[Laughs] Well actually for the last year I have a slightly more fixed address in

Berlin and am trying to set up more of a base. I'm working with not only Rimini Protokoll but also other people I have worked together well with over the years at the HAU-theatre << <http://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/>>>. But we are not creating a large infrastructure -- if it gets too fixed it becomes too much of a burden. Just look at all those state theatres in Germany who have their huge locations that they have to keep running. It knocks out the creativity.

**While in Canada, are you getting a sense of how their take on "multiculturalism" is different than that of Europe?**

I've only really spent time in Vancouver and some in Montreal but I do sense some larger general consciousness for tolerance and acceptance and an awareness that a country is always built up by immigrants. It's more officially protected here. Although selective, the government is actively looking for new immigrants and are aware how good it is for the economy. And if you look at the demographics of Germany, for example, this should be a wake-up call to the German government that they need to open up their borders more.

**What does getting the Routes Award mean for you?**

Of course it's a big honour. And I find it interesting that it awards diversity because it is not always the easiest path. Theatre has often been about groups of actors coming together to stick together over the years and travel -- which is more a celebration of the actors themselves. That kind of theatre is not about diversity but more about those "wild and crazy" actors. But I want to put the binoculars onto society and reframe how we see the people who are part of the production chain -- like outsourcing, like truck drivers. And this takes a lot of work since you must invent new structures for every new situation.

**For more information:**

[www.rimini-protokoll.de](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de)

**Future dates:**

*Call Cutta in a Box*, 08.01.2010-31.01.2010, Minneapolis Walker Art Center

*Sicherheitskonferenz*, 19.01.2010, 25.01.2010, 03.02.2010, 05.02.2010-07.02.2010, München Kammerspiele

*Radio Muezzin*, 15.02.2010-21.02.2010 Paris Parc de la Villette; 24.02.2010-27.02.2010 Antwerpen DeSingel-Festival; 04.03.2010-05.03.2010 Brüssel Les Halles des Schaerbeek

*Heuschrecken*, 28.03.2010-10.04.2010, Berlin HAU

*100% Wien*, end May, Wiener Festwochen, Vienna