

## CHORUS PODCAST – Episode 1 – Angelika Fink and Katja Kettner (Germany)

**TOM** Hello everyone, and welcome to the Chorus Project Podcast. I'm Tom, and I'm artistic director of Upstart Theatre in London, England. And over the next eighteen months I'll be hosting this podcast as we talk to artists, activists, change-makers and citizens across Europe.

We're making this podcast as part of the Chorus Project, an international theatre project about democracy and justice, which is taking place in Germany, Austria, the Republic of North Macedonia and the United Kingdom in 2019 and 2020. It's a collaboration between Pathos Theater in Munich, Theater am Lend in Graz, the MKC Youth Cultural Centre in Skopje and Upstart Theatre in London and Birmingham, and it's part-funded by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union.

So what are we doing? Well, we're teaming up to make four new pieces of theatre inspired by the *Oresteia*, the only surviving trilogy of tragedies from ancient Athens. These plays are among the foundation stones of European drama, and they tell a story about the birth of democracy out of the ashes of a world driven by violent revenge. Written in the year 458 BCE, as Athens emerged from a period of bloody political violence, the *Oresteia* still feels incredibly resonant to us in 2019. At a time when European democracy once again appears to be under massive threat, we want to use theatre to ask – what does democracy mean to all of us in Europe today? We're working with a citizen Chorus and professional performers in all four countries to answer that question, and you'll be able to see the new shows that we'll be making at a theatre near you very soon.

Meanwhile, at the same time as making these new theatre works, we're also making this podcast to share what we're learning while we're working on The Chorus Project. So to start us off, we'll be sharing conversations with some of the artists who are involved in the project, and then later on we'll be speaking with people at the sharp end of democracy and justice in Europe today.

For our first episode, I sat down with two of the directing team from Pathos Theater in Munich – Angelika Fink and Katja Kettner. We got together back in April 2019 at Shoreditch Town Hall in East London. We talked about how we got The Chorus Project started, about what it's like to read the three surviving plays of the *Oresteia* in four languages at the same time, and about what democracy means to us, both in the political context and in our work as artists. I hope you enjoy the interview!

**TOM** To start us off, Katja, Angelika, thank you so much for talking to us. Angelika -

**ANGELIKA** Thank you for inviting us.

**TOM** It's a pleasure to have you here. I was walking in this morning and thinking how great it is to have everybody here in London with us. And it feels so exciting because it's been such a long journey for all three of us to get, to get the project to this point. Would you like to maybe start both of you by telling us a little bit about how you came to be involved in the Chorus Project and how it all came about?

**ANGELIKA** So we worked together in a project that is called *Phone Home*, it was in the programme EU Creative Europe. And there was the strong impulse to work together, because I think that artistic work is also connected to personal relationship, or that is how I understand it. And so we had - together I think? We had the impulse to continue the work, and then we thought, okay, coming from this experience of the project *Phone Home* what would we like to do? And we said that we want to work with a strong text, and also a strong political and cultural text. And then I think it was you that suggested to work on the *Oresteia*. That's one of the oldest and important theatrical texts. Because we had the we had the uh the idea to work with a text that has three parts, so that we can work individually, artistically individually, and connect it together.

**TOM** Katja, the next stage really for us just in the lifecycle of it was putting together funding applications and all of the, sort of, logistical producing side of it. But of course, your role on this project is different to the one you did on *Phone Home*, so you were sort of overseeing all their production, what in the English-speaking world we'd call the production side, and then on this project you're working more as a dramaturg and on the creative element. Not to say that production can't of course be creative as well, but for you, why did you want to make that change, and how has your relationship with the Chorus Project changed since we started work together?

**KATJA** I think that's one of the differences between UK and Germany possibly, because most of the German producers are producing in an artistic way. They mostly studied philosophy or theatre or dance or literature, something like that. That means if you do an application, then we do it content-wise, we do it as an artistic text. And - I mean my profession is to be a dramaturg. I'm writing my own pieces. And it was very close in a way to say, 'Okay now I'm shifting in that process' because we did this application together, and it is something, we talked about content. And it's an artistic impact that we say 'OK, OK we go to this 100 pages, we will survive in this application process', and then to continue to work artistically.

**TOM** Do you guys want to tell us a little bit about how the first part is shaping together in Munich and in Germany. What's the current situation with the Chorus Project?

**ANGELIKA** So, it is in of course in artistic development. But what we know at the moment is that we want to have a chorus of elderly people that bring in their experience in kind of

storytelling. So what means democracy to them in this context of having a whole life passed. And we have young people, a group of young people, that interviews elderly people. And with this material we go into a kind of a video frame for the first part.

**KATJA**

Yes, and we all said in this application we are so interested to find a platform for non-heard voices, like the elder generation sometimes feels not heard, or the very young ones - they are not allowed to elect for instance. And we also said in the text it's also these non-written, non-heard voices too, like Iphigenia, like Electra. There are a lot of female voices, you hear a lot about these characters, but they have no own voice. And we are very interested to combine this, all these stories and perspectives normally non-heard.

**ANGELIKA**

So in detail, we see four different principles of women, women's side and women in this story. That is Iphigenia - she is a kind of a victim of a male society - and Electra, she's not appearing in the first part, but we consider bringing her on stage - and Clytemnestra as the woman who is going to act, personally and politically. And Cassandra she's the one that has the voice for the future. She talks, she sees, she has a utopian view, but she's not able to fulfill it. And so, on this different attitudes we want to work on.

**TOM**

It's really interesting hearing about Cassandra as a character who has a utopian view. We read the play together yesterday which was a really enjoyable and quite powerful experience, I found. But hearing the character of Cassandra speak, and reading along in English because it was Jasmina who was reading it in Macedonian -

**ANGELIKA**

Yeah yeah! I just want to add something that was very good for me to hear it again, especially when Jasmina talked the part of Cassandra in the Macedonian language. Because I learned out of it how deeply emotional this text is. And this was coming not to understand the language clearly and then also, I also liked it a lot that we that we read the part one, *Agamemnon*, in different languages. This really culture clash - that was this experience. Yeah. And what I really like not only in the first part but in these three parts, and connected to the satyr play, that it is a kind of *Lehrstück*, that it is something that Aeschylus created with a real cultural and political goal somehow for society. He wanted to develop theatre as an instrument to go into political reality, and to change something for it for the world he was living in.

**TOM**

Yeah. And again there's something about, there's a - because of course I've mostly been looking at the third part, which in lots of ways is a celebration of the democracy that for Aeschylus was - not as a radical and progressive tradition but almost as a conservative tradition, that we've hit this point in our political development and we want to celebrate that this is where we are and this is what we've achieved. So again, you know, one of one of the great joys of this project I think is that we're seeing the same thematics but from slightly different perspectives. Because I agree that he's, in the writing there is a

celebration of this idea of democracy and what we, what Aeschylus means by democracy in his period. But I guess then there are also challenges to, and limits to that democracy as well.

**KATJA** Democracy is such a big word.

**TOM** Yes.

**KATJA** I - that's so difficult because what you're thinking what is democracy, what I am thinking or you, or what Aeschylus said what is democracy for him. And I think that's very interesting. If you collaborate in the way, and we have young and elder people, performer and citizens, we can integrate in this questioning - what do you think about democracy, what is it? Because for me it's very difficult to have only one word. And there is a whole world behind this.

**TOM** Yeah, yeah, yeah!

**ANGELIKA** But this is very interesting because of this of this this principle and first thought of what could democracy be. This is what is really very, as an example shown in the *Oresteia*, because it was the decision that that not only one person is taking a decision, and says 'This is the way we are going, we are thinking, we are working in our community'. Because he really combines this diversity, these diverse opinions, to come to one conclusion, and that different opinions can exist together.

**KATJA** But then it's more - I mean I normally I would use justice as a word.

**ANGELIKA** Yeah, I agree.

**KATJA** I'd say it's a way to find justice and equality, and democracy is I think much bigger than this, yes?

**ANGELIKA** This is very important I think, yes.

**KATJA** Because we all know Aristotle, he wrote something about a utopian democracy, and we all know women were not allowed to be part of it.

**ANGELIKA** Mmm-hmm.

**KATJA** I mean if you go back, to 5,000 years back, and same time we tried to find utopian ideas to strengthen democracy, to request democracy, what it is, because in a way for me it's the most problematic thing that often we don't know what we mean if we talk about democracy. Mostly I feel people talk about politics, and it's only one part of democracy.

As we said the Furies, and female voices, and gender equality and all the questions, that are much more close to democracy than only political systems or anything else.

**TOM** So this might be too large a question to answer today, and almost if we could answer it then why would we spend three years making theatre about it, but let's challenge ourselves because it's a Sunday morning! For both of you, what does the word democracy mean?

**ANGELIKA** Democracy to me means that a society, or systems, or all the smaller institutions that stick to a society, that the decisions are made in these kinds of communities, that they stick to a value system. And one of the most important values to me is the freedom of personal and political speech, and also us stick to the values of the human rights that consider each person, of whatever nationality or whatever gender, that it has economic, social, and cultural rights. But it means also to see, and to believe in, the connection of democratic values and education. And this is the most important thing to me, that we have to recognize that to live in a democracy that it really has to give a very - how do you say - very much concentration on educational systems. Because democracy, the attitudes have to be learned and hosted in society. And what is another - what defines democracy is the lack of democracy. This lack of democracy we see in so many countries of the world at the moment. And this on the other hand makes it so much worth to think about and to ask the questions 'what is democracy'.

**TOM** And it sounds to me like you're almost saying that it's something that you can, it's much easier to determine an absence of democracy -

**ANGELIKA** Yes.

**TOM** - Than it is to see democracy in action. That's very compelling, thank you.

**KATJA** The interesting thing is yes, I think so, the absence. But if I would say 'we are the democracy', then it would mean it is an absence of *us* in democracy. That means, who's responsible for democratic principles? We are responsible. Because who is setting the values, who is saying what is it education, how is education, what is equality and all the big words? We should do it. That means we have a lack of debate, possibly a deep debate, to take time to talk. And I think we need a very, very long time like we do, I mean we are talking since more than two years about our project. And that's good. That's very good because we go deeper and deeper and deeper, and questioning what we are interested in, and how could be the structure to work in that part. And I think democracy needs time and that's a bit the question. And because we all seem, okay, the world is so global and it's so fast and I have to check my emails in the morning and later two hours later again and again. And where's the time to talk about democracy? And what does it mean to do, like to do it in the election and to, really to feel responsible? Like you have

this experience now, what does it mean if I decide or elect that I go out from the EU, what does it mean? I mean the question is how to learn these democratic principles, and that's the most interesting question for me because I'm not alone responsible. That's clear. That's too easy to say, okay, 'Yes we have climate change and possibly you shouldn't fly to London, possibly you should do it Skype. It's better for the climate.' The climate is very urgent, we have to take care of it. But what I mean is I'm not a single person and I can't say 'OK, I want to have democracy'. I can only start with democracy if I start to talk with you, and possibly with you. And that means we are self-responsible. Nobody will come and say 'OK we will do it more, a better democratic way', if you don't start with this I think.

**TOM** Yeah.

**KATJA** Because I think we are in the centre. The interesting thing is, so civil society is in the centre and decides the values, and all the other things I think are around. Because we have to push forward the politics. We have to push forward economic questions. We have to push forward climate questions, nobody will do it for us.

**TOM** Yeah I think it's really inspiring actually to hear that a time politically here in the UK, as you know we're going through this time of - what we thought would be a time of change, but actually seems to be a time of almost stasis and paralysis - that the political system feels very - almost it's not functioning. You know, it's marathon day and I was walking along the marathon route this morning and outside the station I got to come here there was a lady who was holding a sign to cheer on the runners and the sign said 'You are running better than the government.' I guess we feel - a lot of us I think here, or maybe it's just me - I should speak for myself really. But I sort of feel like politically, on the larger political scale there is almost it feels like there's nothing that we can do.

**ANGELIKA** I want to add something for what is the main, also, tool of democracy. I think it is to listen, and communication. Because for what the *Oresteia* is a real good *Lehrstück* - example or parable - that is, this dialogue between the protagonist, whatever the protagonist is, I mean it was only men in the in the original play, but they had the masks - the dialogue between the chorus and the protagonist. And so this dialogue, the chorus it stands for me not only for the voting, but also for the real finding an attitude. And the question is what is the chorus nowadays, and how can it come to a voice? I mean as you mentioned it's demonstrations or community talks, or smaller groups that try to find solutions. And I think this point of, this attitude of to listen to what the other person or the other group is really saying, or tries to communicate, this is a very important thing we have to learn again. And it's more complicated because we are in this multi global and digitally as in a *digitalisierten* world.

**KATJA** So there's a very nice, a very short sentence - 'debate, de- hate', and that's a combination. If I listen to you and we talk together and I try not to say 'no no no no, your

perspective your opinion is wrong, it's wrong' and it's not, I can't go any anyhow, anywhere, if I always think my opinion is the best one and I'm not really interested, but to come - I would really confirm that. That's a new way. In German it's *streitskultur*. There's a culture of a debate, we really need to step one step back to say, OK a debate is not 'I have an opinion you have an opinion, ciao.' It's more I have to listen to you, and you listen to me, and possibly we need more time and then something can change.

**TOM** How do you find that expresses itself in your creative and artistic practice.

**KATJA** I mean it's something like in the artistic field it's we are directing team, we don't have a director and then some actors. It's a directing team, and of course everyone has a special responsibility in the team, but we create together, and we talk together to find a main interest together. And it's also for the performer. If, as we say, the performer is not a character, the performer can jump in and out in different perspectives of all the characters we have - it's a performance. And that makes something shifting, because then you jump into Clytemnestra and you jump out and you go to Agamemnon, then something is shifting in your perspectives. And something in that is more collectively - to look together to a special, very old theatre piece, and to try to follow this story, or to rebuild, or to question the stories and not to know in the beginning how will finally look the performance like - I don't know! To open up process more than, 'I have an individual idea how to create and all the other ones have to follow'.

**TOM** It's less of a kind of linear structure isn't it. It sounds that, the idea develops and obviously you as the directing team start to build that idea up, then it's changed through dialogue with everybody involved in the project.

**ANGELIKA** I mean to me it's a deep trust, it's from the beginning of my theatre work that I have a deep trust in the artistic autonomy of human beings that work with art, and to keep this alive the autonomy, and also the expertise that people bring together. And I always believed that, to give the free space for this. That artists can work together and bring in their whole artistic complexity, and from this to develop a layer or form or content. And that, that this is more - of course there exists, we all know that in the past there exists this *meisterwerk*, that one person is that genius -

**KATJA** You mean the male genius?

**ANGELIKA** The male genius, I mean it yes of course. I also know that is -

**KATJA** I mean there is this quote 'theatre can't be democratic'. And that's, I mean, we all know that sentence because of... 'someone has to decide finally'. And who is someone? It's the male genius.

- ANGELIKA** It's the male genius, yes, that we worked with in the last two thousand years.
- KATJA** I really, I think we have more this idea to work in a, in a queer philosophy, that we don't, it's not that we say OK, we want to have the female team, that's not the thing. It's more that queer thinking means to integrate all different genders for instance all and, but queer is like - to integrate also all ways of thinking, all ways of experts. And that's a way.
- ANGELIKA** I mean, I don't know how it is in Great Britain but the German theatre systems that include of course, Austria, Switzerland and Germany, the institutions are very hierarchical. And it's very difficult to change the systems. And in many parts of the German theatre there is a development that tries to change the system because there is a big, a big group of people and theatre workers or art workers that want to have this changed.
- TOM** So what does the, sort of, the utopian dream of a German theatre system look like, do you think?
- ANGELIKA** This is a difficult question because it's there is not defined any answer. Because there are examples, for instance in Sweden, Denmark or in the northern parts, where there is a kind of, this try out to find hybrid institutions for institutional theatre and free production scene, and to find new forms, new production forms in the theatre. And I think there are there are lucky developments in some countries, but I actually I don't know it because in Germany it's a big process that's going on at the moment.
- TOM** I think we have the same here, where - my understanding is that the sense of hierarchy is a little different, which isn't to say those hierarchies don't exist, but more that historically I'd say that contemporary theatre in the UK has been considered very much like a sub-branch of literature, which maybe goes back to the cult of Shakespeare and everything else. So, you know, there's still very much the sense that theatre in general is: there is a playwright and the playwright writes the play and the director then autocratically serves the vision of the play and the actors are there to speak the lines. And a lot of that I think for us comes from time. That one of the big differences I think in the way that that we work, and one of the reasons I find processes like the one we're on with the Chorus Project so exciting, is that in general we give ourselves very little time to work. You rehearse a play in four weeks if you're lucky, then you're into a production week, and so before you even go into rehearsal the design has been set. You know what it's going to look like and there's a very real extent to which you have to just sort of deliver in rapid order. In that amount of time you almost don't have the chance to experiment and explore with the form of the work certainly; which I guess is one reason why – yeah, more time is sort of our biggest question.

**ANGELIKA** Yeah. This is one, and in Germany there is a movement is called Burning Issues, and that mostly deals with the circumstances of artwork for men and women. And just for instance to have equal payment for equal work for men and women, and in the German system it's – if they're a woman they earn a thousand euro less than men if they do the same work in a month

**TOM** In the theatre system?

**ANGELIKA** Yeah.

**KATJA** There's really a pay gap.

**ANGELIKA** There's really a super pay gap. And also, the how do you say, *verteilung*, the division of budget? Or for instance, how many directors, woman directors or men directors are in the theatre, and it is this is really incredible - an incredible gap - also authors. And it's the way of, that there is equality, also a gender equality of course.

**KATJA** But of course, I mean, what you say is you need more time I mean that's so - I mean the freedom of art includes to have the time to fail. And Beckett said, 'Fail again, fail better'. And we need this experience and that's - I mean in a way, just closing a circle this democracy question, it's not something to say 'OK yes democracy, yes it doesn't work and let's do something new'. No, we have to fail, and we fail and we have to do it again and possibly fail again but we can do it better only if we get the time to think about, to talk about, to start again, and it's in a way it's the same like art. You need time to try. And you need trust.

**ANGELIKA** Yeah and this is the, I mean there we come back to the ancient meaning of theatre. What is theatre? Is it a space where political discussions, it is a political space where discussions can take place? Or, it is a place where entertainment has to, where the audience has to be 'entertained' and where the curtain has to rise, and where you have this dynamic of movement and to 'bring joy to the masses'. This is the, how do you understand. Do you understand theatre as a political instrument? Which I would prefer.

**TOM** Yeah. And I would agree. And I also wonder why is it that we feel it can only be one or other of those things. But of course it's both. Moment minute by minute, moment by moment.

**ANGELIKA** Yeah but the question is at the moment, at the moment the situation we have now in Europe when really the democracy is in danger, what do we need more? What do we need the theatre more? To cover the fear, or to work with the fear of the people, to make it constructive. And this chance has theatre.

**TOM** To work with the fear of people, to make it constructive.

**ANGELIKA** Yeah, yeah.

**TOM** That feels like a nice way to close the circle. For now. And I think we're gonna continue, I hope, many of these conversations over the next 18 months. But Angelica, Katja, thank you both very much indeed.

**KATJA** Thank you.

**ANGELIKA** Thank you.

**TOM** Thank you for listening to the Chorus Project Podcast with Angelika Fink and Katja Kettner.  
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You can find out more about The Chorus Project at [www.upstart-theatre.co.uk](http://www.upstart-theatre.co.uk).