

# Workshopping the Refugee Condition: Interview with Anina Jendreyko

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by **Katerina Delikonstantinidou\***

Anina Jendreyko is a theatre artist, actress and director from Basel, Switzerland. After completing her actor's training at the Max Reinhardt School in Berlin, she performed at renowned theatres in several European metropolises. She lived in Greece and Turkey, as well as in countries of the Middle East for many years, working as an actress and a director, and building collaborative theatre projects.

Her experiences as a theatre artist and activist in these countries had a profound impact on her and, of course, on her work for the theatre. She has stated with regard to this part of her career:



Anina Jendreyko. All photos from Jendreyko's personal archive

*I shared living spaces with other people. The dreams, language, images induced by what I saw, what I lived, left strong impressions. In each character I search for their desires—what makes them burst—burst out—where liberty and the abyss find themselves side by side. It is always one's own choice, one's own responsibility—circumstances are always only a factor for friction, for resistance.*

Since her return to Basel in 2006, Jendreyko has been working as a freelance actress and director, but she has also set up the transcultural theatre project "fremd?!" ("other?!"). Four to six productions are mounted every year under the auspices of the project and under Jendreyko's artistic direction. In 2012, she co-founded together with other pioneering artists—theatre artists, musicians and dancers—the Volksbühne Basel, a "Theatre for Everybody," as Jendreyko calls it.

This year Jendreyko will spend some time in Thessaloniki, Greece, directing a project that combines work on trauma with theatre tools and techniques. Both refugees and Greeks, adults and children will participate in the project. I met her during a preparatory visit to Thessaloniki for the purposes of the project.

*Anina, one of your previous visits to Thessaloniki was conducted within the context of the work Brief an Orestes, based on "Letter to Orestes" by the famous Greek playwright Iakovos Kambanellis, is that correct? This time, you are in Greece for the purposes of another project, equally political in character; a project on the migrant experience as it has unfolded in Europe in the past few years. What is the organizing idea behind this endeavour? Do you find any points of connection between this idea and the idea behind Brief an Orestes in terms of the political import of the two works?*

I met Iakovos Kambanellis in Athens many years ago. He was the one who actually offered me the monologue *Brief an Orestes*. Out of this monologue we developed a piece directed by Axel Nitz and, in 2008, we presented the German version (translated by Dimitris Depountis) as a first performance, in Basel. After this, we were invited by the Goethe Institute of Thessaloniki.

Kambanellis' talent, being able to see deeply into humans' souls and draw from important life issues, made me feel close to him. Like him, I am interested in people's stories; in their need to search for identity and liberty —“liberty” in the sense of taking responsibility for oneself and for society. My pieces are about important life questions like this. The way I see it, in art, and in theatre art in particular, the performers should be connected to their own personality and be authentic, so that the audience can discern parts and pieces of themselves in the characters. This is the way I am working artistically. My goal is for the stories to be touching and moving, and to carry the audience along. In both projects, *Brief an Orestes* and the current one, the human being in its entirety is at the centre. For me, cultural work is primarily about peace within and without.

*The upcoming work of yours explores particular aspects of the so-called migrant experience, or “crisis,” focusing on the interface of trauma and theatre. How do you, and, by extension, this work, conceive “trauma” in relation to the realities faced by the immigrants and refugees?*

I am not doing a “theatre project” per se; I am only using tools drawn from theatre work I (and others) have done. As for “trauma,” many refugees have faced very difficult experiences. That is why we are supported by a trauma therapist, precisely in order to be able to deal with various reactions from the participants, some of whom may have been traumatized by and during the migration experience.

*Could you, please, comment on the main ways in which theatre tools are applied to the treatment of trauma within the context of this work and, perhaps, on the issue of the ethics involved in the process?*



Anina Jendreyko with Iakovos Kambanellis in Athens

We—that is, organizers and participants—will meet on the same level, everybody is equal; this is a given in my work. The whole thing is conceived as an exchange. A fertile process is only possible if I open up as much on a personal level as I wish the participants to do. A lot of awareness (raising) will be necessary. Using the tools of the theatre, people will go through traumatic situations they have experienced in the past again, but, this time, without danger and in a different, supportive context. In this way, they will have the possibility to obtain a new experience where they can take responsibility actively and become the acting subject.

Playing, in a guided group, sets of social processes may deactivate traumatic memories, prevent new negative experiences and give back meaning to one's own existence. A work of art can, in principle, enable “free” creative capacities and offer new experiences of self competence. The theatre, especially, offers a complex challenge by different means of expression. Employing movement, voice, style, body and facial gestures, rhythm, dance and word helps strengthen the imagination and activates creative sources of life. Theatre is bound to action. With all the different possibilities of expression and with bodily activities, numbness, lethargy, and feelings of powerlessness and paralysis can be overcome. Doing theatre in a group reinvigorates the individual and their

own sense of initiative, and allows them to take up responsibility for others. The creative impulse for changing the world and one's own life can come back.

*Why have you chosen to employ mixed, heterogeneous groups—one of which will be composed, as far as I know, of adult immigrants and Greeks, and the other of immigrant children? What do you expect to be the benefits and challenges of this choice, especially in the case of the children's group?*

People deserve the same respect regardless of age, religion, sex and origin. Also, children's rights, nature and the environment get our full attention. Some or all of the immigrant participants of the workshop will stay permanently in Greece, so it is important for them to build a connection to the urban community.

The refugee influx can challenge a society in many respects and on many levels because the receiving society gets completely recomposed. So, in my view, the more heterogeneous a group is, the more challenging and enriching the process. But for this to bring positive results, curiosity and focus on individual talents are needed. In the future, the groups of children should also become mixed, but this won't be possible this time; for that to materialize we would need the participation of schools.

*What are the desired outcomes of this initiative, given that you are not interested in a sort of end product?*

I wish I could change the European migrant policy! Yet, the less far-reaching goal of my work is to enable people so that they can connect themselves to their personal life source and rebuild individual inspiration; I also want to enable them so that they can take the initiative and take responsibility.

Even if the circumstances are horrible, it is important to become the acting subject, and not to maintain the role of the victim; to receive and celebrate life as an enormous, beautiful gift.

I hope that this process will go on after the workshops are over!



From the performance of *Brief an Orestes*, 2011.  
Anina Jendreyko in the role of Klytemnestra

*Anina, this is not the first time your work has revolved around and involved migrant and refugee realities and the realities of people in the countries of the Middle East. In fact, you have spent many years in the region. What is it about this part of your activist "background," so to speak, that*

| directed you towards addressing these issues in your theatre work?

I have always paid attention to the cause of inequalities in our world. The end of the military Junta in Greece influenced me as much as the execution of President Salvador Allende in Chile, even though I was only a child. In the 1980s, many Turkish and Kurdish refugees came to Switzerland. I wanted to understand their stories and



*Selam Habibi*, based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, by a guest performance in Kurdistan/ Dohuk

their languages. Learning about people and their stories always enriched me and my work.

As long as war, exploitation and poverty exist, there will be refugees. We have no choice but to open our doors, bake the bread together and think about the things we want to teach our children, so that war and poverty will be brought to an end.

In Erbil, Iraq, this kind of project started almost a year ago. Soon, the fourth workshop will materialize there. Watching the children in their amazing development is such a big joy for me!

| Would you place your theatre work under the rubric of political and/or social theatre, set in broad terms?

Yes, definitely.

| Why is that?

For many years the Volksbühne Basel has engaged in issues of connections between different cultures. It has tried to understand the many different backgrounds and origins which nowadays define the urban community and which give a peculiar richness to our lives. We want to invent a new people's theatre and fill it with exciting

and contentious issues.

Cultural connections are today living with all of us in symbiosis. If we want to understand the dynamics and the cross-border transmissions between cultures, we need the knowledge of the migrants' lives and of the life of the camp residents, the settled-ins—people whose homeland has inevitably come into motion as well. The Volksbühne Basel tries to find new possibilities to discuss critically the meaning of being a member in a dynamic community today.

We all carry different cultures within us. Behind questions of origin and home we find a room full of personal stories. We will try to talk about those stories and make them visible and understandable on the stage.

*From your standpoint, what kind of change can such political/social theatre effect in view of the worrisome sociopolitical developments that take place all around us at dizzying speed? Given our current predicament, can anyone talk about real change occurring as a result of cultural/artistic projects?*

I have never felt as powerless as in this dark current situation in our world. However, I do not let this feeling of powerlessness take over any part of me. I prefer to be angry—anger can be sort of a motor. If I am able to create stories and perform them on stage, so that people from across society can identify with them, then, I think, I have achieved something.



From a performance of *Söhne* written by Anina Jendreyko

Culture and education are the foundation of a democratic society. Without culture there is no education and without education our society gets more and more stupid and violent. This is what is happening in the US right now, and not only there. But to be creative, means to be aware, to think about questions of life and to find very personal ways of expression. Creativity is self-empowerment, of which we are in dire need. That is why I call my work political/social theatre. Our piece *Salam Habibi*, (an adaptation of the story of “Romeo and Juliette”), for

example, speaks about the richness of today's society, despite everything that is going on; it triggered many and very productive discussions, whether we presented it in Berlin, Basel or northern Iraq.

*Finally, Anina, how does a theatre artist resist this offshoot of the messiah complex, so to speak, that sometimes goes along with working on and with "otherness"; that makes some people*



Working with a children's group. Workshop in Erbil, Iraq, 2015

*indulge in and/or exploit the plights of others (with and without quotation marks) artistically? This is a phenomenon not unknown to the world of the theatre. . . .*

This project is not about rescuing or even helping people, but about providing support in order that people will be able to help themselves. The participants of the workshop will be taught while teaching theatre tasks themselves, to groups of children or adolescents. It is about people finding themselves as a subject and about feeling joy so that worries disappear for a moment and energy and the joy of life can rise. That is what I would like to share. The project is about giving the refugees tools, not about producing something.

As an actress I would like to be very authentic and have a direct communication with the audience. As a director, I am glad if I can give powerful, aesthetically pleasing and understandable expression to existential questions of life. I am a theatre creator because theatre is always about human beings and it's a shared process, full of life. It takes place in the present and gives me the possibility to give positivity and beauty to the world. And that's what we need.



Working on *Selam Habibi*



Working on *Selam Habibi*



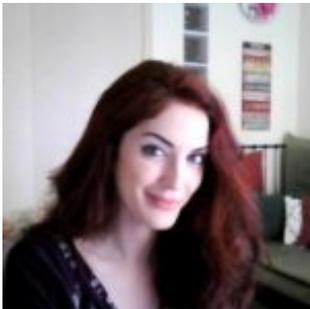
Working on *Selam Habibi*



From the performance of *Salam Habibi*



From the performance of *Selam Habibi*



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