

Matinee 2

ECKENROTH TALK via ZOOM

am 21. Februar 2021 um 11 Uhr

Gastredner: Motti Lerner, playwright and screenwriter, zugeschaltet aus Tel Aviv, Israel

Thema: In Memoriam Klaus Wagner

Moderation W. M. Lienhard

### **In Memory of Klaus Wagner**

By Motti Lerner

Klaus Wagner was a very dear friend, a wonderful teacher and colleague. Our collaboration started in 1988 when he produced my play KASTNER which dealt with the extermination of the Hungarian Jewish Community in 1944. I came to Heilbronn for the beginning of the rehearsals and was very touched by the honest commitment of Klaus and the actors to explore this horrible episode of the Holocaust. In 1996 Klaus himself directed my play AUTUMN which dealt with the immigration of European Jews to Palestine in the early 20's of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Klaus was a wonderful director. His soul connected to mine very deeply. Two years afterwards, in 1988, Klaus produced my play "The Murder of Isaac" – about the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in Tel Aviv in 1995. This was a world premiere. All the theatres in Israel refused to do this play. Klaus was courageous and sensitive and he was able to connect to the horrors in the collective sub-conscious of the Israeli society, which are the basis of this play, more than most Israelis. In 2001 we collaborated on one of the most significant theatrical journeys I've ever been part of. As you know, the second Palestinian Intifada began in September 2000. Israelis and Palestinians killed each other on daily basis. In May 2001 Klaus and Madeleine came to Israel to initiate a theater project about the bloody conflict. We created a group of 10 playwrights. 5 Palestinians and 5 Israelis, and started a series of meetings that took place in Jerusalem, in a hotel on the border between East and West Jerusalem. In these meetings we mostly talked about ourselves in the context of the conflict. Afterwards we went home and each of us wrote a scene. The artistic team of Heilbronn Theater combined these scenes into a play titled GEGENSEITEN. It was directed by Elmar Fulda and became a very powerful production. During the rehearsals Klaus was with us almost every day. The conflicts among the 10 playwrights and between them and the director were difficult and we needed him to create mutual understanding, so necessary for the project.

The most difficult moment was towards the end of the rehearsals. In one of the scenes, an actor presented a monologue of a bulldozer driver who participated in the destruction of the refugee camp in the West Bank town of Jenin. There's no doubt that this destruction was a war crime. All of us knew it, but at the end of this monologue another actor attached a Swastika to the back of the driver. It was clear that this symbolic action implied that the crimes of the Israeli army are similar to the crimes of the Wehrmacht and the S.S. in WW2. We, the 5 Israeli playwrights couldn't accept this implication. Yes, we agreed that the Israeli army has committed war crimes. We wrote about these crimes to the Israeli audience. We wanted the Israeli audience to be able to think about these crimes and to create a public discourse about them. But we knew that the moment we compare these crimes to the crimes committed against the Jews during WW2, nobody in Israel would listen to us.

After a long discussion, we asked Klaus to drop this moment from the play. Klaus supported the director's choice. He thought that he can't restrict his artistic freedom. On that day, we almost left the theatre and went back to Israel. The next day Klaus invited me to breakfast.

We talked about politics, about wars, about war crimes etc. And we realized that there's no real disagreement between us about the difference between the war crimes of the Israeli army and the war crimes of the Wehrmacht and the SS. We still disagreed about the artistic use of the swastika. Klaus insisted that the swastika is a warning signal for the Israelis that their war crimes can become worse and worse. I agreed that such a danger exist, but I insisted that if we want to have some influence on the Israeli audience, we have to be sensitive to the impact of the swastika on them. Otherwise, they won't listened to anything we say on the stage.

I think that Klaus was convinced, not so much by the argument, but he felt how painful was this moment on stage for the 5 Israeli playwrights and he realized that he can't hurt us so much, even for the truth of the dramatic moment – as he understood it.

This conversation was a great lesson for me about the collaboration between a playwright and a director. When the playwright is still alive, this relationship is very delicate, and because of the power of the director over the production, it might create an unbalanced process. Klaus showed us how important is the sensitivity in this dialectic collaboration. How we all benefit from creating a synthesis of the points of view of both playwright and director, and how they both grow by learning from each other. This subject comes up almost in every production I've been involved in, and I always use this example in order to create more sensitivity on both sides.

Another very important lesson was the understanding that the freedom of the artist must be limited by his need to be effective. In other words – we can take a play or a show only to that place where it still has the effect that we want on our audience. If it doesn't have the effect we want, then the play doesn't fulfill its purpose. I'm sure Klaus would agree to this, too. Klaus was a great artistic leader and a great teacher. He has been an important inspiration for me until today. I remember him with much love.