

Stage » Ever Given and the Suez Canal: A global trade crisis reimagined on stage



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Interview

Ever Given and the Suez Canal: A global trade crisis reimagined on stage

Helgard Haug's new show, 'Ever Given: A Tipping Point Revue', uses the 2021 Suez Canal shipping debacle to investigate the tipping points of modern life.



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The innovative theatre collective Rimini Protokoll is constantly searching for metaphors or images that make graspable reality's complexity. Founded by Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi and Daniel Wetzel in 2002, the label has recently produced explorations of social media's mimesis through neuroscience (Kaegi's *Mirror Neurons*), conceived of Amazon as a "fulfillment circus" (Wetzel's *La danse d'Amazon*), and explored dementia through the mystery of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 (Haug's *All right. Good night.*), the latter of which earned Haug an invitation to Theatertreffen in 2022.

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For her newest work, *Ever Given: A Tipping Point Revue*, Haug has seized upon the Ever Given container ship that blocked the Suez Canal in 2021 to consider world trade, migration and what happens when a system breaks down. Reuniting with her composer collaborator Barbara Morgenstern, Haug has designed a looping musical performance that can begin at any of five points in the story and brings together an ice skater, a singer, an artist with a stutter and a Syrian refugee to reckon with the multiplicities of a world in the midst of capsizing.

Haug spoke with *The Berliner* from Myanmar, where she was leading a workshop with artists confronting theatremaking under repressive military rule.

How did you first alight upon this idea, this metaphor, of the container ship in the Suez Canal?

Perhaps I can build a bridge in this way: it has something to do with a mirror of reality. From the first, the case interested me: these images in the press that went around the world of this enormous container ship that had gotten jammed between the canal's banks, and the little digger, which desperately attempted to [free] this ship somehow.

I find these to be really powerful images for something that had to do with world trade – not only because it's always on the clock and a sphere where there's no time to lose, but above all that it's constantly becoming bigger. These ships are becoming bigger and bigger and the amount of stuff that needs to be transported is also increasing. And with this obstructive ship, a moment conveniently arrived where somehow nothing was moving. A clogged canal, a bottleneck. And the consequences? You can actually measure them in relation to the timing of how world trade functions, as well as the resulting costs, because up to 408 other ships were prevented from going through the canal and had to wait and eventually a portion of them turned around and found other trade routes.

“How does art, and above all theatre, function outside of the context in which it was first conceived?”

I thought it was an unbelievably cool image, wrapped up with the question of what happens, actually, in a stoppage? Or if a rhythm accumulates, intensifies so heavily, that afterwards only

actually, in a stoppage. Or if a rhythm accumulates, intensifies so heavily, that afterwards only quiet can follow? That is to say, we began with this image – and it's often the case that I begin with an image or a concept or a question and a state and then we get going. We began to speak with people to get closer to it and to think about who should be on stage or in which constellation we wanted to work.

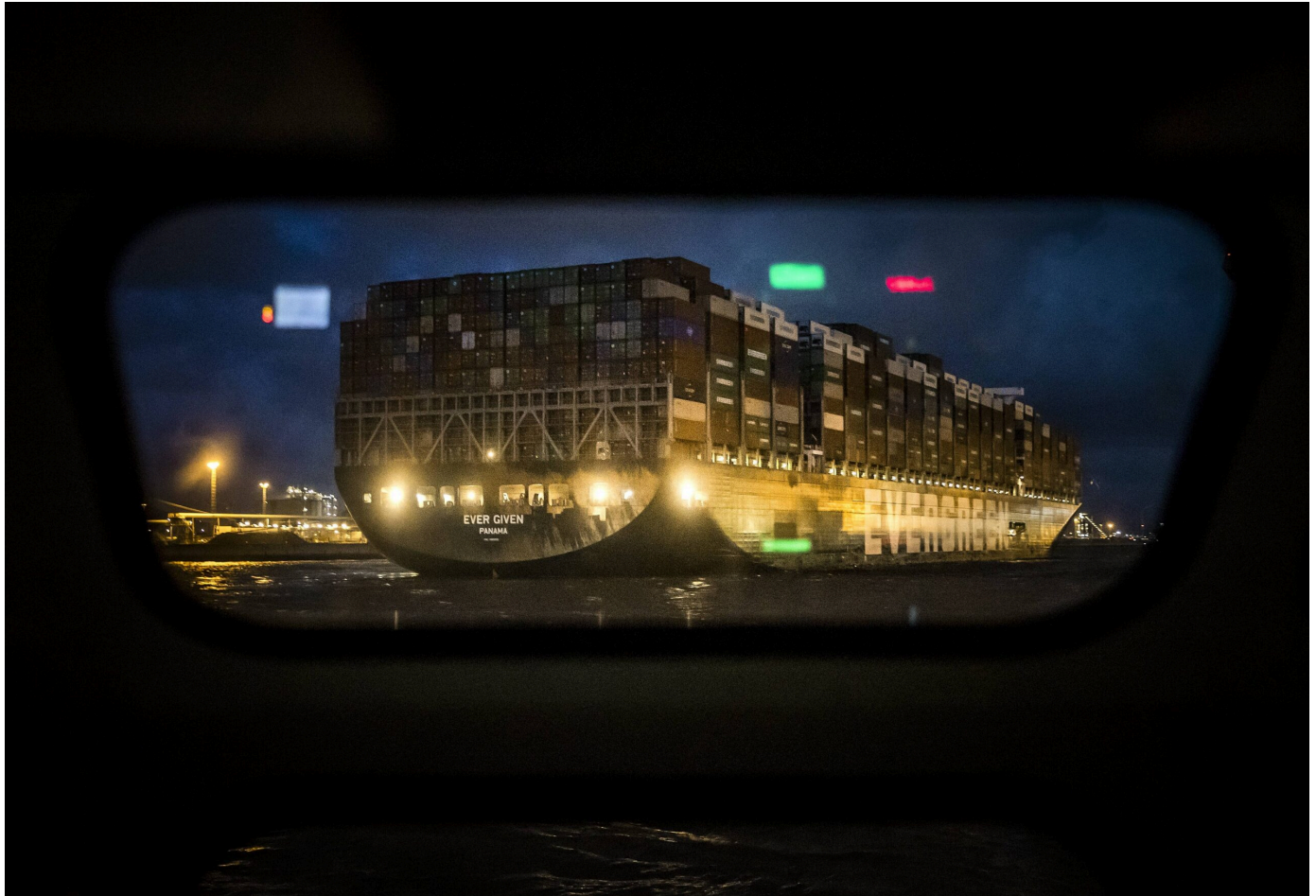


Photo: IMAGO / ANP

How do you see the form of *Ever Given* as a “revue” shaping the evening?

The cool thing about the evening is that it is really an experiment, because it isn't arranged linearly. Each evening we tell a [different] version, so that each performance is somehow a version of one possible beginning and ending arranged in a circle. It's not that every evening begins with the same scene and ends accordingly. Rather, we can enter at several points in this piece, which is an exciting discovery that we made. And so it has a loop that is also a musical structure.

We have built this loop, in which all the action, scenes, text and music are arranged. The first evening begins at one point, the second at another. This was the biggest pleasure that we had, as well as the most difficult element in the sense of persevering to take this concept really seriously and arrange everything circularly. That is, perhaps, formally speaking, the most interesting development in the piece. It means that the audience can see the piece five times and see it differently five times.



The show opens in March, but right now you're in Myanmar conducting a theatre workshop there. What is that like?

I'm working with theatre people, who are all professional performers, as well as people from film and visual art, all of whom have had no opportunity for years to show their work. On February 1 [2021], there was a military Putsch and since then it's been unbelievably fragile and really dangerous to express oneself with art that is potentially critical.

The Goethe Institute [where the workshop is taking place] is actually an oasis – you can even say a safe space – that places a really very well outfitted black box theatre at the disposal of these artists who are invited to experiment here. Artists from different contexts rehearse together and develop something together.

Does leading this workshop under these rather extreme circumstances lead you to reflect on your own practice?

The entire time I am also thinking about my own work. I'm thinking about the possibilities that I have as well as the work processes I have, but also about my general life circumstances, how I live and what claims I have and what is possible on the main stage. It's actually really instructive, to set out for other contexts and countries and systems, in order to see one's own world more clearly.

And on the other hand we often work internationally. We have a format that's called '100% City', which is basically about showing how diverse a city's society is. We have 100 people on the stage and they each state their own opinion. We've also been in countries where there's strong censorship or a lot of fear and concern about what will happen to those who openly go on stage and speak.

And from that I know how this can be done between the lines, how you can write a text that someone can read between the lines. I also know that process, the backwards crabwalk where one censors oneself more and more strongly, but also the development of playful arrangements to allow one to say something that is relevant. And I do that now with these artists.



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Does such an experience make you reflect on the art of theatre as a kind of world network, perhaps like the international network of trade, or do you think of it as something very place-specific?

How does art, and above all theatre, function outside of the context in which it was first conceived? That is perhaps the question. How do you take it out of its context and show it? I absolutely think it works, that you can do that.

On the other hand, of course, there are the systems of references that you build into your own work and the humour or the way you tell the story – and those function differently depending on each place and context. And so, what kind of lens do the viewers look through? That is also an important question. But it is a worldwide market. And there is also a huge exchange. There is great interest. There is a huge network, in which everything happens. And there is also a lot of tradition – and theatre is a very traditional medium, a tradition-laden art.

“What do we do then, when this system of intricate timing comes to rest?”

People always talk about viewing habits, but here there are not only totally different viewing habits but also production habits – for example, in terms of access. And I am extremely interested in what’s happening beyond my context and outside of the theatre. And I am extremely interested in the now and in reality and in the question of how I can bring that into theatre. How can I go outside and, through the lens of theatre, look at reality? And both are here.

But to bring it back to me here [in Myanmar], it is extremely difficult and not what they're looking for. People don't want to deal with reality because it is too dangerous. Reality is such an intense war that you can't really negotiate with it.

Your new work is subtitled "A Tipping Point". Do you see us approaching or living through a tipping point?

I believe that we are already experiencing it. We are at a crisis inflection point on many different levels. I'm following, of course, how the debate is going on right now in the Bundestag; in this situation, we have already tipped over. We now consider normal a situation that 10 years ago we couldn't even have imagined. We notice that somehow we are constantly adjusting.

So perhaps you can say that things are continuing, but we are constantly adjusting to the "new normal". We are getting used to something so, so quickly and so intensely that we would not have thought possible before. And in this moment, it's going very, very fast. So, as far as the political situation is concerned, in terms of its forms – how one speaks or one interacts socially, which thoughts are becoming louder and louder – I think that the tipping point is absolutely the right concept for this.

- *Ever Given: A Tipping Point Revue*, Mar 8-10, HAU 1, German with English surtitles, [details](#).

Interviews Theatre Berlin Immigration Stage



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