

Ruth Margraff July 15-Aug 15, 2013 residency

I will never forget this calm and inspiring studio as a focused place for dreaming longer, wilder and more ambitious work. I was able to reflect, write and refresh my perspective with a depth of concentration rarely afforded to artists. I must have this print instilled in me of the boats going by in a long horizon, because I dreamed later of a world in quiet and powerful motion with all the fervor of lush nature breathing into the firstfruits of life.

I centered my time on writing the last few movements of my libretto *THE PASSION OF LEYLA*, a new opera inspired by Persian Ta'ziyeh theater and a Sufi poem on the story of Joseph in Egypt. I had just completed a workshop concert reading of the first 25 minutes of the brand new score with **Link's Hall/Shapiro Center in the Art Institute Ballroom** on April 21, 2013 in Chicago with director **Mohammad Ghaffari** and composer **Richard Marriott** so I was full of inspiration and notes and ideas. It is slated to premiere at **San Jose Stage Co.** next season. I also drafted an excerpt of the libretto as a short play with the title "All of This" for a Russian playwriting exchange so that it can be translated into Russian. For this excerpt, I put more emphasis on the contrapuntal subplot which comes from the 1925 Eisenstein silent film *Battleship Potemkin*. I was able to read, informally, this shorter excerpt on the last day of my residency for the other artists and Stefanie and it helped me to think about how to translate the poetic language and to simplify parts of the story and yet to retain the musicality of the language.

I also began an early conceptual phase and wrote a grant for *BLUE PLANET* a capstone project of more than 15 years of sustainable international collaboration, productions, touring and performing arts exchange between Serbian and American artists from **Dah Teatar (Belgrade)**, **7 Stages (Atlanta)**, and my own independent **Café Antarsia Ensemble** which I founded with composer **Nikos Brisco**. With core artists Dijana Milosovic and Del Hamilton's devised choreography, I will create unique text, and Nikos will compose incidental music - rooted in a search for deeper artistic, international and environmental coexistence and sustainability. It was a pleasure to talk with Spanish architects **Maier Vélez Olabarria** and **Serrano Amatriain** about their projects in green building and preserving the historic integrity of new contemporary buildings and renovations. We were able to share some resources and thoughts and they recommended some Spanish music for our research and repertoire.

The first week I would open some of the art books randomly, that were left in the cabinet of my studio. I meditated on some workshops in stained glass, suburban landscape and sculpture as I experienced the shades of light that flow through the studio from east to west throughout the day. Nikos and I also did a few jam sessions on accordion and bouzouki and recorded a few sessions at a Minoritenplatz rehearsal studio with **Rully Shabara** and **Wukir Suryadi** the brilliant Indonesian musicians from SENYAWA and attended a session they performed and recorded with a brass musician from Brooklyn. We got to see them perform at the Glatt & Verkehrt NÖ Festival GmbH and also witnessed the live charisma of **Fatima Tabaamrant** from the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, a key player for women's rights in the Berber culture and writer of dedicated poetry. I was personally blown away by **Alireza Ghorbani** and **Dorsaf Hamdani** from Iran and Tunisia who performed stunning arrangements of classical Persian music, works by the scientist/poet Omar Khayyam as well as the Sufi poet Rumi from the 12th century to the present. What a treat to have this experience right in the midst of writing my opera inspired also by a Sufi poem.

I got to talk a few times with poet **Ana Pepelnik** and found we have a few friends in common from the Ljubljana theater scene. I participated in a talk with Romanian artist **Olivia Mihaltianu** for her installation and also met with **Wolfgang Kühn** from the Unabhängiges Literaturhaus and **Josef Aichinger** from Glatt & Verkehrt – both of whom are curating some of the most exciting programming I have seen in years! I tried to meet with Vienna-based theater director **Aida Karic** but our schedules didn't line up.

We had a lovely lunch with **Alexandra Hennig** and Stefanie and spent a long afternoon at the Kiki Kogelnik and Elfie Semotan exhibition at the Kunsthalle Museum and browsed a few times through the galleries on other floors of our building. With Alexandra and Sabine's kind help, I was able to make these and a few other inquiries to contact theater and new opera festivals nearby as well.

The Lithuanian novelist **Dainius Liškevičius** and his wife arrived around the same time as **Andy Grayson** from NYU/Berlin and we had one of my favorite evenings incited by Andy on the terrace of the common room where we drank wine and talked by candlelight (and relit the candles when the cool breeze blew them out!)

I really appreciated the way that we were allowed to bring a collaborator (for companionship in cooking, orienting, and so forth in the crucial solace of working). I also appreciated being left to our own initiative in terms of social scheduling. That way if there is a particularly social group they can make more plans together but if someone needs to work night and day that is accepted as well. I feel this is a mature way to respect artists and created a culture of independence and privacy to work without interruption or to seek interruptions for a friendly break.

Some of my most appreciated moments include:

- Basking in the freshly picked fruits of the marillen harvest and trying for days to locate an elusive apricot trail that was near to Angern – a lovely adventure of other trails I would have never found otherwise!
- The apple walnut vinegar – oh, you can't find it anywhere outside of Krems and it was only a euro or two in the Spars!!! It made salads with a sprinkle of dill just perfect in the evenings.
- Schnitzel even though I am mostly a vegetarian!
- The spinach balls next door and just about everything there was amazing including the dog that comes every day to the beer garden with golden amber eyes and sudden leaps of joy at my shoulders
- The marillen knodel is to die for and the round bio whole wheat Mohnzelten poppy cakes from the bakery around the corner from the AIR – you can't find them anywhere beyond Krems even in the only Austrian bakery I have found here in Chicago.
- We ate most often at the Nana Café <https://www.facebook.com/nanacafekrems> at Langenloiser Straße 4, 3500 Krems an der Donau, run by a gorgeous couple with a little sweet boy. They have healthy vegetarian and vegan buffets and allow you to decide what you can afford to pay! And their Sri Lankan chef makes a specialty buffet on Saturdays that we almost never missed. (Spars and other groceries had better priced and more "bio" or organic products than the health food store, in case anyone else is interested)
- Sonnetor tea boutique for miniature Mohnzelten and herbal teas made from rosebuds which are great for a writing break or chilled in a recycled water bottle.
- Long walks by the river at dusk
- Walks that swerve and get you to wander and see nature full and lost around you until you happen upon a beautiful oasis winery with Gruner Veltliner and apples, plums and peaches heavy laden on branches cascading onto the secret garden dining tables.
- Yoga stretches at sunrise
- Watching people set up privacies along the river for swimming, reading, picnic, shade...
- Reading Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence* cover to cover just for pleasure!
- The efficiency of everything – especially the printer because it always had ink and paper when I needed to comb through drafts
- The toll of the clock tower on the hour
- Long tables for spreading out ideas and notes and bits of research
- The Ethernet cable that kept me from being on the computer too much like I am at home.
- Walking the world heritage vineyards and trails of the Wachau forrest – especially one last meditative silent walk Nikos and I did the day before we left for final reflection. Many of my friends do silent walks and it is amazing what you can see and hear and trace in your own thoughts when not worried about speaking as a response
- The double rainbow one of my last days there – I took some photos and will send to you. I believe it means very good things will come to Krems and Sabine, Stefanie, Alexandra, Jo, Wolfgang, the Nana Café and all the artists under its reach

The time away from home and work in Chicago was infinitely fruitful and stimulating to my professional work and my soul. I really hope to keep in touch with friends I made in Krems and the fellow artists I met in the residency and hope that a new project will grow out of some of our connections and conversations in the future. And I hope for a chance to return some day soon to Austria – especially to Krems.