

Angelika Göken

People Who Meet and Love

Interview by Julia Varley

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On October 9, 2003, our friend and colleague Angelika Göken died after many years of serious illness. We miss her.
The Theaterlabor Team

Memorial website:
www.angelika-goeken.de

When did you start working in theatre?

My interest in theatre comes from my Catholic childhood. I liked the processions, the church services and meditation. When I decided not to have anything more to do with the Catholic Church, I was able to find ritual again in theatre.

The first time I went to see a performance I was twenty years old. I saw *King Lear* done by a German theatre company. It was boring. In Bielefeld, some years later I saw Teatro Nucleo making a street parade. I didn't know anything about this Italian group. Suddenly windows opened, and trumpets, stilts, fire, musicians and dancers appeared from all sides. I thought: "Wow! Yes!"

I was studying pedagogy and I took part in some workshops, but I didn't really know what to do. I was interested in working in close contact with other people and with movement. I met Siegmund Schröder at the university and participated in a workshop of his. It was engaging and difficult physical work. I loved it. Later I saw many theatre performances and little by little my interest in theatre grew. I cannot say that there was one exact moment when I decided to work in theatre. I never thought I could be an actress and I wasn't really interested in becoming one.

When did you start your group, Theaterlabor?

We founded Theaterlabor twenty years ago. Siegmund had been to Italy and returned in 1983. We had kept in contact and when we met again he told me that he wanted to start a theatre group. I had finished my studies and had various jobs. I said: "OK, I will join you." Siegmund, Karin, some other people and I started to work at the university.

We had a small windowless room. We started to make shows based on what Siegmund had learnt. At first we met once a week, then twice, then three times and finally every day. I didn't decide that I would make theatre for the rest of my life; I just felt that it was worth trying, that it was better

than working in a home for old people, or something similar.

I am not a typical actress. When I was young I was very shy and rather a "wallflower". I was not good! It was not so important to me to be on stage in front of an audience. When we started to perform, for the first couple of years I didn't like it. I thought that I was bad and that I didn't look nice enough.

The most interesting thing for me in these first years of work with Theaterlabor was to be in our windowless room, doing strenuous training with five or ten other people, sweating and getting sore, fighting with my body and its potential, and then changing over to improvisation. I loved the improvisations we did. It was a way of playing and experiencing myself - my body and mind as a whole. That is what I wanted to do.

What convinced you that you could be an actress?

It was a long process. Over the years I became concerned that spectators should see our theatre. I was pleased when I performed well, but I was just as happy when one of my colleagues had a good idea or made a scene powerful. It was not important that I should act before the public, but that whoever did was authentic, speaking from his or her soul. After ten years I realised that I was not a bad actress! I could be good! I was satisfied with some of my performances. Nowadays it has changed again and I am not really interested in being on stage. I am more interested in helping others, making suggestions about what they can do on stage and looking after the dramaturgy.

What do you think has been your biggest contribution to Theaterlabor?

It has been my love, my total attention to

the group and to the idea.

Can you think of a particularly important episode in the first years of your theatre?

Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* inspired our first performance. The first version was fine, but we wanted to make another one. The second version became important to us because we all contributed ideas and it was really successful. We had many fierce discussions. It was a turning point for the relationship between Siegmars, our director, and the rest of the group, and amongst the actors themselves. We changed. Previously we had been playing and having fun, but we decided it was not enough. Bulgakov was saying more to us. The decision that we should be honest was an important one.

What were the discussions about?

Siegmars is the kind of director who observes. He doesn't like to tell the actors what they should do, but many of the actors wanted a director who did. Siegmars would ask us to show something and then he would comment. If he had told every actor what to do, the process would have been boring. We decided that the actors would make proposals and then Siegmars would make the composition.

We were very young and we wanted someone who could guide us, but there wasn't anyone. We were alone here in Bielefeld. Many people around said that we were slightly crazy. We were afraid, but we had to find out for ourselves why we went on stage and what we could do there. This was important for Theaterlabor and it is one of the reasons that we still exist.

Did your personal relationship with Siegmars start at the same time as Theaterlabor?

No, it came later. For the first six years, until

1988, I was shy and I had a boyfriend in another town. During the week I worked a lot, and one day a week I would take my car and go out with my boyfriend, and everything was fine. I had a very good relationship with the other actors. We were friends. Then Siegmar and I fell in love, I don't know why. I fought against this love for nearly two years. I never wanted to have a relationship with my director! It was too difficult! It could not function! I didn't want it! No! The moment the others knew, it was as though I was divorced from them. I was lonely. For example, they would no longer keep me informed about things. It was all right. I could understand them. I think I would have had the same reaction, because it was as if I had changed sides. This lonely path was necessary. Although it was very hard, I can see now looking back that it was good for me because it made me discover my own way. If this hadn't happened, I would have remained in my "wall-flower" role or I would have left the group.

Where did you find the strength?

I started to work more. I developed my own ideas and theatre projects for myself and for the whole group. The love I shared with Siegmar was strong and we had a child.

Was it difficult to combine the theatre work with having a child?

Yes, it was very difficult. We had had a meeting in the group and decided that if someone wanted to have a child we would try to be supportive. We knew of the difficulties of many other groups. I had met many women who got pregnant and had to leave their theatres. We were not travelling so much as we mostly work in Bielefeld, so it was easier for us. I was the third woman in the group to have a child, but it was special because both Siegmar and I

worked in the theatre. I took only six weeks off for breast-feeding. Now I know that it was not enough. After six weeks Siegmar took Hano in the snuggly and we went to rehearsal. We made breaks when I gave the baby milk and we had thousands of baby-sitters. Siegmar's parents had to look after Hano as did many friends. Then for the first time I had problems with my health. I looked after our home and garden, I cooked every day... I was like many women of my generation who think they can do everything. And everything is too much. I thought I was strong, that I was used to working very hard. I had worked for ten years in Theaterlabor and it was exhausting, but then it was only Theaterlabor. Now, with the child, it was a totally new situation that needed a completely different space. We had to build a house. I wished to make a home for our son. It was too much. Now I think it would have been better to take a whole year off for breast-feeding. But I was afraid to be away for so long.

You were afraid that you wouldn't have a place when you got back?

Yes, it was a difficult situation. I didn't trust myself or believe that I could come back. I didn't take care of myself.

What happened?

When Hano was two and a half we made a big project here in Bielefeld for the opening of a museum. It was *my* project. Two weeks before the premiere I felt a lump in my breast. I thought that I would make the premiere and then go to the doctor. Nothing would stop me making the project. Then after two or three weeks this cancer stopped me. I had to stop completely. The others started to work with Yoshi Oida on *The Woman in the Dunes*. I was envious. I thought the others would become famous, go on television and travel all around the world

without me. Why? It was the end.

But when there are crucial moments in my life, I am able to take decisions. I could say, "OK, now I shall stop". And I stopped, totally, for nine months. I only went to the theatre three times in that period. I would sit here at home outside in the garden. It was a nice summer. I thought about what was important: my son, my husband, myself. I recognised that I had made some mistakes.

For the first month I couldn't separate myself from my theatre work. I thought it was impossible, but I had a lot of time to reflect on it. I sat here that summer for hours and hours, alone. Nobody was here. I didn't read. I did nothing. I looked at the sky, and it was good. After some weeks I thought, yes it was time to make this stop. It is necessary to stop. Then I started to look around at other people outside Theater-labor. It was nice. For the previous two years I had forgotten a little

bit about the rest of the world, I didn't have the time. Now I realised that life was not only theatre. I *love* theatre. I have learnt how to do it, it is my job, my passion, it is important for my communication with Siegmar. Siegmar and I talk for hours every day about theatre.

Then very slowly I got involved again in what I prefer to call art rather than theatre. Art is my life. I started painting and writing. I went to museums to see installations and paintings. My world got bigger and at the same I changed from being an actress to being more of a maker of projects and ideas. My idea of theatre changed. I realised I was not just an actress, but an actress-and-and-and. No one thing was more important than any other. My heart beats for people who make art and for art everywhere.

Is there a performance that is particularly significant for you?



Angelika Göken in *Barock*, 1995. Photo: Tom Dombrowski

Yes, one of the most recent, that we made in 2001. It was about Felix Nussbaum, a Jewish painter who was born in a nearby town and who was taken on the last trip to Auschwitz. He painted his suffering. Siegmar and I went with our son to a museum fifty kilometres from Bielefeld to see his paintings. We were there for three hours, and when we came out, we looked at each other and agreed that we would make our next performance about him. Not very many people saw it. It was very hard, without words, with strong music and moving pictures. We performed it only here in Bielefeld, we didn't go on tour. I don't know why, but nobody wanted to see it.

Paintings are very important for us and in every performance we make reference to painters. As Felix Nussbaum spoke of his life in his paintings, we spoke about him with images. With no special plan, we tried to create a particular energy and a special kind of movement. It was especially important for me because I had had many problems in moving for the last few years because of my cancer. But when I saw these paintings they touched me so deeply, I immediately had an idea about how to move. I made a dance in one scene. The movement was characterised by the face, hands, arms and the position of the fingers. The movements were slower. It is difficult to describe, but I know it was good!

What became central after the training of the first years?

I can only speak for myself, not for my colleagues. When we decide on a theme, at first I don't do much work, but the theme goes round in my head. I need time, one, two, three weeks. I look for books. I listen to different music, selecting melodies that seem to fit. I look for images and objects, and do totally other things, while the theme grows within me. Then we meet at the theatre and

we make a kind of training. We go into an empty room and are there together with whatever we bring with us. Sometimes we just work alone, taking an idea of a movement in relation to the theme. It is not a role or a character that is important, but the theme.

When we made *The Odyssey*, we worked with the whole poem and when we made *Barock*, we referred to the whole baroque period of 300-400 years. The theme moves from my mind to my body. During recent years it has been important for me to work with my body's potential even though it doesn't really function. The fact that my body is handicapped has been an interesting challenge. I couldn't move my back easily, so I had to try to place the movement in another part of my body, like my face or just in a finger. I used my handicap.

Did your physical handicap take you more towards vocal and text work?

No, the cancer stole my voice. From the moment I got cancer I could not sing. Before I sang a lot, but I got cancer and the singing stopped. It was simply not possible. It was not a physical problem. The music disappeared. I had no difficulty in speaking text or poems, but I didn't want to sing. Even when I started acting again five years later, I knew my singing had gone. It was over.

Do you miss it?

No, I know it was fate. It is how it is. It was a kind of price.

How did you get back into theatre?

After nine months, I felt very well. The others started to make a street performance and the theme of "baroque" appeared. I started thinking about what "baroque" is. I discovered the

famous German poet Andreas Gryphius. I read his poems and loved them. They said so much about my own recent experience, because he focuses on the closeness of life and death. One must seize life while it is there. Tomorrow can bring suffering. Tomorrow you can be dead. Siegmar and I took many ideas from the historical baroque phase to build the performance on the Thirty Years War, the plague, Louis XIV and Versailles.

For me it was good to be back in the group after my break. The feeling was different. The others gave me a lot of freedom. I could say: "I can't carry props anymore, I cannot build the performances, you have to help me." They answered that they would, they were happy that I was there and they wanted to support me. The relationships between us all got better. They knew that I was the same age as them and that it was possible I would no longer be here next year.

We started to rehearse and I thought about what I would do in this performance. I had to make some scenes; Michael, Karin could not do them! I had to do them! I like this street performance. I played it last year for the last time. Now we have had to change some roles, because I cannot do it anymore. We performed it very often in castles in the region. It gave me so much life. I taught myself to think, you may die tomorrow, but today you can move and enjoy yourself.

The fact of knowing that time is not forever gives you strength?

Yes, it does. When my friends saw the performance, they said: "Angelika is back again." I felt it too. I was back again. For two or three years, I was especially alive with this performance, *Barock*.

Are you feeling weaker again now?

In 1994 I fell ill, *Barock* was made in 1995, and in 1998 the cancer went to my bones. I

had been feeling tired for some months and I went to the doctor. It was hard, I thought: "Now it is over." But it was not. For two years I was in a lot of pain. In 1999 and 2000 I had to go to the doctor's very often. The first time I got ill I had taken a nine months' break. The second time I felt I didn't need time. I wanted to work, to live my life. I had found my life in theatre and everything else was managed fine. My family structure was functioning very well, Hano was healthy and for me it was no longer hard. I had a lot of help. It was easy. I was very sad, certainly, because I now knew that my illness would always be there. For the first two years I thought about this, but I would not stop living. I would really live more than ever before. I took two weeks break and some medicine and I worked. I did it. And then we made *Odyssey*.

Everything was very good, and then, after two years, the cancer came back. Until June of this year (2003) I thought it had gone. I had been feeling all right for nearly five years. These were five very good years: my life. I had some wearisome experiences, but I did what I could do, and it was okay. The doctors said I should be careful because the cancer would come back. But why should I think about something that was not present then? What should I do? Should I stop living? It was out of the question.

Do you feel a responsibility because you are in most of the group performances? I hear that you are going to teach somebody else one of your parts in Kamikaze. How do you feel about that?

It is no longer a problem. After we made *Barock* I decided not to be in another street performance, because our street performances are hard. I was no longer able to do them. I distanced myself from my own acting work and this spring I directed my first performance with a group of young actors. I am sad about *Odyssey* and *Tanz an der*

Mauer. Some months ago I realised that these are the only two performances that I would like to go on playing in the next few years, but for all the other performances it is not a problem.

Has directing been a new challenge for you?

I don't really think that I am a director. I am very soft and it was interesting for me to see whether I would be able to direct. The group is made up of six very young actors who love me! Yes! They love me! It is a small, simple performance. They are not professional actors. We worked on text and voice. We all liked it and we liked each other.

The other members of Theaterlabor have had the same experience. We have all made our own projects recently. There are only four actors and we cannot make one performance after the other. There is not enough creativity!

Do you feel that the cancer has given you a perspective on problems and conflicts, that it gives you a clearer vision?

Problems get smaller. Most of the problems we have in Theaterlabor are not serious. There are six in the group, with Tom and Siegmars. After twenty years of work together we are more silent. When we were young we could talk for weeks about money or how to sell our performances. Today I feel that we are in a very good situation in Theaterlabor. We are rich! None of us needs a lot of money. We are not so interested in it, and we are very good organisers so our business functions! The question is more how to take care of our work.

I especially like discussions. I enjoy fighting! Thomas hates it! When I start with, "Thomas, what have you done?" he says, "Stop! Please stop! I don't want to fight with you." He knows that I like it. I know him and

he knows me! We are not a family in the group, but we respect each other a lot, and for me that is the most important thing. I have had a very special position in the last few years in the theatre. I could come and go. I had so much freedom. Money can't buy the freedom that I have had in recent years.

Is there something that you would still like to do?

I had planned to make a book about our twenty years of existence, to write something myself, but also collect stories, texts and photographs. That would have been my project for the next year. Then yesterday, looking at Mike Pearson's performance I suddenly wished to make a solo performance! I would be a special kind of actor.

So the fact of being ill doesn't stop you having ideas and projects and wishes?

Not every day. Last week was very bad. I didn't have ideas and I didn't really want any ideas. Sometimes I suffer from a lot of complications in my body, but then I get over them, for example by talking or going to the theatre. Often when I see other performances, I get ideas, and on the way home with Siegmars we talk and talk. I arrive just before performances and I leave quickly afterwards, because I don't want to meet too many people. People get shocked if they have not seen me for a few weeks. I have to take care of myself. I am very sad about missing out on things, but I have to be careful. It is life.

At times it is necessary to stop and have a silent, ordinary day and look out of the window. From my bed I can see some big trees and birds. Sometimes I can stay there for three hours and look at birds. It is good. I need this. It is a kind of meditation, to be quiet. I was full of fear eight weeks ago, I felt so ill and our festival was coming up. I



Angelika Göken in *Im Spiegel der Schatten*, 1997. Photo: Tom Dombrowski

thought that it could not function. It was very hard for some days, but I managed. It is like this. I don't know really, we will see. Life always goes on.

I am tired. The last two weeks I have slept for only two hours a night. I don't want to close my eyes. I don't know how to sleep. But I am not in much pain. I have had very good doctors for nine years and they love me. It is interesting... the body.

Is there one particular thing that you can think of that is so important that you want to include it in this interview?

No. These twenty years... Yesterday evening I was thinking about what it would be important to say, but there is too much. The important things have to do with the people who meet and love. The theme of love is central in these last weeks for me. I think art or theatre... People can only make theatre and go into this kind of work, because it offers a possibility to love and give love and receive love. People have souls. These are my ques-

tions now: what comes later? There is something. Every one of us has a soul, I am sure it exists. If it didn't exist no one would make theatre. Why? There would be no reason to make theatre, to be an artist. An artist is peaceful. It is good to make art.

ANGELIKA GÖKEN (Germany) was born in Friesoythe in 1959. In 1983 she started to work with Theaterlabor Bielefeld as a founding member and she acted in twenty-six of the company's productions.

In 1988 she started focusing on the dramaturgy of the performances and on writing her own texts and poems. In 2003 she directed her first play. She died on the 9th of October 2003, after struggling for nine years with breast cancer.