

MATERIAL FOR MY THEATRE...

Family Matters by Jochen Stechmann

door Boris Gerrets

Being German is not easy. Even today, the dark shadow of the 12 horrendous years of the Third Reich still looms over everything German. As time goes by Germans have developed many different ways of confronting, handling, analyzing, and ignoring their past, but it is there, ingrained in the deeper layers of their conscience. (...)

Family Matters (...) begins with a song that welcomes you into the home of the Stechmann family, while we slowly zoom in on the parental bedroom where Jochen was conceived. On stage his mother performs the triple role of assistant, witness and soothing presence. Through a wealth of documentary material including his grandmother's diary, taped interviews with her and autobiographical anecdotes, we learn of Jochen's childhood at the family fruit farm and the dubious political affiliations of his grandparents, who were both sympathizers of der Führer, as well as very loving grandparents. (...)



The piece develops into a reflection on the old and the new, an inter-generational dialogue with ghosts of the past. One of them is Rosa Luxemburg, whose picture occupies a central place on stage, like a shrine. In 1919, during the left-wing Spartacus Revolt, she was beaten and shot in the head by right-wing militiamen. Jochen's grandfather was directly involved. Another ghost – printed on Jochen's T-shirt – is Ulrike Meinhof. In the early nineteen-seventies she was engaged in a double rebellion that was as much personal – against her foster parents' Nazi past – as it was a political revolt against the hypocrisy of a society that had superficially whitewashed itself, leaving the Nazis' industrial and economic power structures untouched. These two women represent the other, revolutionary face of Germany, one that despises the passive middle-class submission to the militarism and nationalism summarized in the German term 'Spiesbürgertum'.

His grandmother must have been a stout woman, compassionate and upright, his grandfather principled, courageous and honourable. These are all positive values of hard-working people. So the nagging question remains: how was it possible? What happened, for such values as these to be turned into the madness of the Nazi hordes?

We can guess at his grandmother's religious devotion to Hitler, who was seen as the saviour of the nation. Then we see his grandfather, steeped in Prussian military pride, standing upright in the African bush. This is years after the war had ended, but something of the dark core of the German soul stares us right in the face. Under the burning African sun he stands stoically at the last frontier of the Old Land, a place where natural law still prevails and hierarchy is God-given. But he knows it was a fantasy. The man later shot himself. Was it the end of an era?

Without the slightest hint of sarcasm, Jochen sums it up at the end of the piece, with these words to his grandfather: *I am sorry that the only way you are still present in this world is as material for my theatre.* And I left the theatre thinking that some ghosts had been laid to rest.

DasArts Laudatio, Februari 2010