

Interview

Klaus Händl

“I need literature to survive”

Esteve Soler

Klaus Händl is not a normal person. You only need to look into his eyes to realise that. His gaze, complex and innocent, reveals all the extreme sensitivity of his writing, while his childlike attitude makes you wonder where the fearful obscurity of works such as *Dark Inviting World* and *This is How Lakes are Formed* actually originates.

He is not a normal person, because he writes with such extraordinary talent that it has made him one of the intellectuals on today's Germanic culture scene with the greatest projection, a talent constantly illustrated by his different facets, such as directing, playwriting and acting, in theatre and cinema alike.

We took advantage of his visit to Barcelona for the premiere of *Savages*, directed by Thomas Sauerteig, to hold a fast but very cooperative interview after the performance. The lucidity of some of his answers explains the brilliance of his creations.

Your work with language is masterly, especially in *Savages*. Do you plan the construction of the work before you start writing?

In *Savages* I tried to develop a special language for a family. All families have their own special way of communicating, through secrets, rituals, little jokes... I started writing the work without bearing that in mind and, when I had a part written, I worked specifically on that aspect, increasingly developing it, re-writing the text. Then I identified the specific laws of this text, which are different to those of any other. I believe that the key to the language in the work lies in the fact that the characters are always hiding; they say certain things only in order to hide others.

For *Savages* you took inspiration from the sculptural work by Gregor Schneider that won the main prize at the Venice Biennial Art Exhibition. How did it occur to you to use it?

I saw a film on the work and I searched for more information in books and catalogues. It made an impact on me. Schneider shows that what we understand as protection is impossible. He built a house in which the walls move and the spaces cannot transmit the feeling of being protected to anyone, though they can imprison you. I believe that we can use language to build an imaginary construction, creating walls, holes, common spaces for sharing...

Specifically, how does one visualise a physical body in a narration?

The rhythm is essential. If you listen to music, you can perceive the architecture in its interior. If you listen to a symphony, you can envisage it as a cathedral or a natural beauty spot or the portrait of a soul... When I think about a work, I have its structure, its architecture, in my mind from the start. In the case of *Savages*, this structure is like the thread of a screw with a pointed tip, and it goes from the outside to the inside, so to speak. It is a large circle that gradually gets smaller as we go round and round, until it reaches the centre and disappears. At the start, we have the atmosphere of this great big ghost town, then the family appears on a smaller scale, until we reach the white spots, which indicate the disappearance of a species. In my most recent work, *Furcht und zittern* (Fear and Trembling), I used the same structure, but reversing the process. It is a screw that goes from the inside to the outside. We start off with a couple evicted from their home and who have to live on the streets.

I was able to listen to the dramatised reading of *Savages* this past summer at the La Mousson d'Été festival and the people laughed from start to finish, showing their enthusiasm. I've heard the text doesn't always get this reaction. Did you imagine any specific response from the audience when you were writing the work?

I think that if there is humour in the things that I write it is due to the component of the absurd included there. And therefore it seems normal to me that the people laugh, but I never plan in advance whether the audience should laugh or not. I have seen very different stagings of the work and I think all of them are valid. Just as much those that use horror as those that prefer humour or bewilderment.

***Savages* is loaded with guilt, resentment and fear... And like in the rest of your texts, communication becomes more and more difficult. Do you think that total communication can exist between people or are we eternally condemned to fail in the attempt?**

It is probably a situation that doesn't occur very often, but, occasionally, in real life, we encounter very intense moments of truth. When love or hate reaches extremes, for example. Those are very amusing moments.

This confused lack of communication reminds me of Kafka's works. One gets the feeling there's a great love of literature underlying your writing.

Yes, it is true. I feel very close to Kafka, Juan Carlos Onetti, Juan Rulfo... I need literature to survive. Beckett, Koltès... My country is Austria, where the greatest living playwright is Elfriede Jelinek, someone who has taken language beyond words.

As an actor you worked on the filming of *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* by Michael Haneke, probably the most acclaimed European filmmaker of the moment, for *The White Ribbon*. What was the experience like? What is your opinion of his cinema?

He was very kind to the actors and very demanding with the technicians. I wanted to work with him because I had seen his previous films and I loved them. He makes minority cinema but, curiously enough, he really made an extraordinary impact after working with stars from French cinema. He is a very demanding filmmaker, very faithful to himself and, thank God, he does not let himself be influenced by television or the more powerful producers. He is very intelligent, he

likes keeping the actors amused and happy all the time. It was a short-lived experience, but we laughed a lot.

In your works there is an obsession with showing the dark side of your homeland, the Tyrol, which people usually associate with peace and quiet.

It's true, but I don't only do it with the Tyrol. For example, when I am drinking a coffee here in Barcelona, I can't help observing the people around me and trying to analyse them, to see what the terrors this society harbours, albeit while they're drinking hot chocolate or smoking a cigarette. Deep down I believe that my idea of home, the place where I belong, is not any country in particular, but among my friends. Nationalism horrifies me. My home is among the people who I share my life and attitudes with.

Haneke has often criticised the emotional coldness of the Austrians and this is a determining idea in your works *I'm Longing For the Alps* and *This is How Lakes are Formed*. Are the Austrians cold to a point where it starts to become a problem?

Of course we are! It is a very serious problem. It's horrible and results in a great deal of suffering. You have to remember that people don't look at each other in the street.

This is also one of Elfriede Jelinek's recurring themes.

Her work helped me to survive. I know that her mother died when she was very old, aged ninety or older, and that makes me feel better, because I know that she too may live until the same age. I can't live in Austria without Jelinek's perspective. What she does as a writer is incredible. When it looks like she has reached her best as a writer, despite everything, she continues to excel herself time and time again.

*Esteve Soler
is a playwright.*