

Keynote Speaker Announcement: Luanda Casella

We are thrilled to announce that **Luanda Casella** and **Milo Rau** will be the keynote speakers at the 37th ITI World Congress. They will deliver their addresses **on the morning of 19 September**. This year's Congress, themed "Connect and Embrace," emphasizes our commitment to promoting cultural diversity and fostering international collaboration in the performing arts.



Photo credit: Michiel Devijver

The title of Luanda's speech " ***Hijacked Imagination & The Aesthetics of Speculation*** "

LUANDA CASELLA is a writer, performing artist and theatre director from São Paulo based in Ghent. She's a house artist at NTGent and artist in residence at deSingel International Arts Centre. Above all, she is an ingenious storyteller who knows exactly how to get her point across.

Her work is about the deconstruction of language with a main focus on how storytelling influences the ways in which we perceive the world and the role of literature in the development of critical thinking. Her pieces have been referred to as 'awfully intelligent', 'surprisingly light-footed' and 'horribly funny'.

Casella has created four performances in recent years: *Short of Lying* (2018), *Killjoy Quiz* (2020), *Ferox Tempus* (2022) and *Elektra Unbound* (2024), all of which are touring internationally. Casella's work has been shown at Theater Spektakel (Zurich), Edinburgh Theatre Festival, HAU, (Berlin), Kaserne (Basel), Spielart Festival (Munich), Dublin Theatre Festival, Venice Biennale, a.o.. Her work has been selected for the Belgian Theaterfestival three times as best performances of the season.

Alongside her performances, Casella has a career in education and academia. She is currently a teacher at the drama department at the KASK Conservatory, Ghent, and has also been a guest lecturer at several master programs such as DAS Graduate School (Amsterdam), KABK (The Hague), P.A.R.T.S, School for Contemporary Dance (Brussels), Toneelacademie (Maastricht), Universität der Künste Berlin, Cité Universitaire de Paris, a.o.

37th ITI World Congress / deSingel International Arts Centre

'Highjacked Imagination & The Aesthetics of Speculation'

keynote by Luanda Casella

Good morning! It is a real pleasure to be here this morning sharing my views on theatre with all of you. Much less pleasurable is being in the world.

These days, we can't escape seeing terrible things everywhere. The pervasiveness of images of violence, suffering, torture, horror, war.

So what do we do? We pay attention.

Lately, I've been paying attention to the emotionalisation of public discourse, politics framed in emotional terms, polarisation, hatred. I've been paying attention to how discussions are focused on personal experiences, social media, you know, 'connecting with others'. I've been paying attention to the commodification of emotions, how emotions are increasingly becoming valuable commodities that can be marketed and sold, emotional labor, the emotional economy. I've been paying attention to the blurring of boundaries between public & private, reality & fiction, life & art.

And in the Arts, it's also the age of affect.

We want content!

Give me protest, give me grief, I want to see despair.

Tell me about social inequality, the decadence of money, the commercialisation of psychological vulnerability, the celebration of the individual.

Show me your lack of hope towards the ecological crisis. Give me mass murder, give me natural disaster. Let me hear your speech about the importance of collective action.

Show me what AI can do for me, beautiful AI, Super AI, tell me that it's coming to annihilate us all.

I want identity. I want to see those in a wheelchair talking about accessibility, I want the blind giving me new perspectives, I want the blacks talking about racial profiling. I want to hear the voices of those living under occupied territories to tell me that war is a terrible thing, bring out the migrants! I want frustration, I want pain.

But in the meantime, give me some sensuality. Give sexuality, give me naked bodies and violence done upon them.

This is an urgent invitation to queer love, queer blackness, queer justice, and the queering of spaces against the impossibility of inclusivity. Make a piece about inclusivity. Turn this around!

And call out the caretakers! Bring out the witches. Wake up the dead. Summon the shamans of erased indigenous cultures, let us hear their chant and let's talk about the loss collective memory.

Bring out the female voices! Give me trans voices, trans feminine, female now! Give me dreams crushed by transphobia, and hopes destroyed by right-wing nationalism. The world is ending.

So let's talk about men, male men, masculine bodies of boys and men and their loss of confidence, and their identity crisis in this world where everything is changing.

Let's talk about social media, the exploitation of suffering.

I want vulnerable vulnerabilities with their enchanting personalities!

Or else give me nihilism. I want to see people shitting on stage. No better, put a needle in your vein, suck the blood out of your body and throw it on my face! I want to see biography, I want pain; I want pain now!

Give it to me, bloody and raw! Shock me! Shake me out of my dormant, anaesthesia-tic state of indifferent numbness; I want to prove to myself that I care, that we care.

And there's nothing wrong about wanting all those things... As long as you give me a focus program!

Fuck context, I want focus!

Focus!

Give me a program where, together, we can acknowledge the damages of colonialism, the current deplorable state of the world, our faltering democracy, and talk about our anger, and despair, and about our reckless hedonism and our exorcisms in madness and our exercises in sadness.

Focus!

Give me a space of debate. Where we will not stop talking about Palestine, but perhaps start talking about Sudan, and not forget Ukraine, nor Congo. Well, why don't you give me a space to talk about countries by intentional homicide rate, and about the ongoing sexual violence towards women, and the death of children, drought and scarcity everywhere, and our responsibility for the deterioration of living conditions around the entire universe!

No! Focus!

Give me a program where we can have an encounter. Where we can hear everything about shared practices and the 'politics of empathy'.

I want alternatives, give me hope, give me care, give me tenderness and less noise for the neuro-diverse.

Let's talk about farming and about loving one another.

Focus! Give me a program where we can clear our dream field of bad habits, inhibiting behaviours, limiting belief systems, traumas and suppressed emotions! Give me anything that will inspire me to make better choices.

Just do it.

Like Nike.

I don't mean to sound anti-woke. Because I'm not.

I do hold close to my heart the idea that art reflects on its time and that the struggles of our past and present should be critically reflected upon in the art we practice.

But what happened?

When was our imagination hijacked by our collective hallucination?

When has theatre become a product of the disenchantment of the world?

It seems to me that this commodification of experience and emotion also raises the question of who defines woke & wokeness—which seems to be at the heart of our current fascination with this ‘dramaturgy of the real’.

And I dare say, (it is the International theatre congress after all), it seems like the commodification of everything in the world manages to envelop even artists’ and programmers’ very anxiety about being or not being woke. And this is (sadly) pushing the theatre field away from Fiction to the detriment of our own imagination.

Perhaps I come from a generation for which the aesthetic experience moved beyond our political engagement. I do believe the crisis we are experiencing today goes deeper than inequality, global warming, or the power of the populist politicians. We are suffering a profound crisis of imagination; indeed caused by the rise of individualistic cultures, and the news-cycle lifestyle where governments present easy solutions to deep rooted problems, where we eagerly embrace techno-fixes to save the planet all the while being seduced by our drive for mass consumption that ensures that we remain in an artificial state of scarcity, while being distracted by the new surveillance society with its digital tools that merely reflect ourselves back at us and numb us in a more elegantly totalitarian and oppressive way than anything described by George Orwell in his book *1984*.

BUT... our crisis of imagination is also present in the way we perceive culture. In the arts, it reflects on the eager portraying of violence, of our loss of agency and the deepening of our fear for the future. Above all, it reflects on the mistaking of ‘content’ for ‘form’ and it reflects on our reckless dismissal of the knowledge that *fiction* and the *aesthetic experience* can provide us.

In *The Future of Time*, Toni Morrison writes: “If scientific language is about longer individual life in exchange for an ethical one; if political agenda is the xenophobic protection of a few families against the catastrophic others; ...if the future of knowledge is simply ‘upgrade’... No wonder our imagination stumbles beyond 2030—when we may be regarded as monsters to the generations that follow us.”

What she’s saying in this essay is that we might be able to imagine a different life or future for ourselves, but not for society as a whole. She’s saying imagination matters because we all need a bigger range of ideas to help us envision extremely radical changes in our social arrangements. And she points to literature and the arts for signs of renewal.

I’ve been asking myself lately *what is happening to our theatre field?* When did we stop talking about form? What happened to technique? To text? To character development? To world-building? Why do we hardly hear anything about Beauty, in its aesthetic sense? What does representation of brutality do or do not accomplish? How can concerns with ‘form’ transform the ‘aesthetics of protest’?

I believe that as long as we go on seeing theatre as a ‘platform for action’ (even if the aim is to amplify those whose voices go unnoticed) we are limiting our potential to expand the very language of art. By refusing to expand the language of art, we are paradoxically letting one of the most powerful tools of resistance die.

Amidst the total precariousness of the world, if we wish to be good ancestors for generations to come (so they don’t wonder how we could know so much and yet fail so bluntly) we should be indulging in the miraculous! In Fiction.

Two weeks ago we were here at deSingel performing our latest piece, *Elektra Unbound*, during the Theatre Festival. Every time we perform, I cross the backstage, that direct space behind the scene, and I see a lot of reality. I see stocks of cables and spotlights, I see boxes with tools, tape, rope, plugs, our props, the wood structures holding the scenography, chains of lights on the floor so we don't fall while crossing to the other side of the scene, I drink from the water waiting on the side... Everything works behind the stage. Everything functions so that on stage we can make-believe. We can transport the audience to another period in time, to an eerie landscape, we can lie about being the people we are, or say brutal things and get away with it. We make fakery and call it reality. And the audience, in suspension of disbelief, believes us, in a pact as old as storytelling itself.

Why are we breaking this pact? When has Life decided to invade our House of Fiction and force us out?

In 1936, in a beautiful essay called 'The Storyteller', Walter Benjamin announced *the end* of the art of storytelling with the advent of the printing press (the novel, and later the newspaper). He draws attention to the transition from *story* to *information*. His critique couldn't be more accurate today with the advent of the Internet and social media.

In the essay, he emphasises that the role of the storyteller was to disseminate wisdom, and therefore create memory. This difference between *wisdom* and *information* is emphasised by the idea of 'validity of sources'.

He writes: "When a storyteller travelled afar and brought back both spatial and temporal experiences, the story possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information, on the other hand, has no validity if it can't be subject to verification" (fact-checked?). So while storytelling could borrow from the miraculous and still provide ground for imagination, and therefore the propagation of wisdom, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. According to Benjamin, this proved incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. He writes: "Every morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories."

We have this strange claim of a post-truth society, when it seems like we are trapped in an over-truthed society, because 'truth' is more emotional and personal (in a really counter-intuitive way) than empirical fact.

Stories—real make-believe—can offer us some refuge from all this.

In his 1891 essay 'The decay of Lying', Oscar Wilde makes a plea for the return of 'lying' as an art and of the artist as a 'true liar' who, according to him, is someone who "makes fearless statements, possesses a superb irresponsibility, and a healthy and natural disdain of proof of any kind."

He writes: "Art begins with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes Life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, it is absolutely indifferent to fact, it invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering."

How will theatre reclaim its imaginative potential and move beyond its limitations? How will we foster new forms of theatrical experimentation and expression?

One of my favourite sci-fi authors, Octavia Butler, creates worlds in which hardly anything really defies the laws of nature, where things are not stable but in constant decay and regrowth.

In one story, 'The Parable of the Sower' (1993), Octavia Butler brings up a post-apocalyptic Earth heavily affected by climate change and social inequality. The novel follows a young woman who becomes displaced from her home.

Butler's rule for writing the novel was that she *couldn't* write about anything that *couldn't* actually happen. So her character couldn't have any special powers. Oddly enough her character has a kind of delusion of empathy—an extra-sensory gift that she calls 'hyper-empathy syndrome'—which is the ability (or the curse) to observe someone in pain and physically and emotionally feel their pain.

So she gives her character this affliction, not power but affliction, and forces her to respond then to the misery that she sees around her.

Every time I read her, I am left with a myriad of new ideas on how to look at our world. Strangely enough, I feel more empowered than I do when I watch any sort of raw violence followed by righteous sermons.

What is the aesthetics of speculation?

How far can storytelling push a certain reality further?

In a speech in 1998 at MIT Octavia Butler comments on three types of science fiction stories:

The 'what-if' stories; the 'if-only' stories; and the 'if-this-goes-on' stories. And I liked the idea. Each of these questions give us a different way of imagining a fictional society.

— **What if** all of us suffered from hyper-empathy syndrome?

— **If only** Super AI was envisioned as a hybrid system to amplify human intelligence...

— **If the exploitation of minerals through deep sea mining goes on...**

It's a way of taking things further. Stretching the imaginary.

So Yes!

Take me to a world where new viruses swamp the Planet.

Take me to the cabinet of cyber-doctors creating hybrids of human-beings and computers, be they monsters, adorable creatures, or artists.

Take me to a matriarchic society where men strive to solve feminist-designed riddles in dangerous escape rooms.

Take me to the office of a nanotech engineer who's infiltrated a secret cabal of scientists after a series of inexplicable suicides.

Take me to the world after the collapse of Western civilisation.

Introduce me to a full-blown totalitarian dystopia or a complex anarchist utopia, show me the gaps within our current ideological frameworks.

Take me inside your time machine, let us travel through the galaxies, collect harrowing survival stories, and think about cultural diversity.

Let me read the diaries of a Stranger in a strange land.

Take me to the apartment of a rich woman who disillusioned by life, decides to sleep for an entire year with the help of the pharmaceutical industry.

Take me to a world where all individuals are *ambisexual*, and force me to crack my head to escape my current understanding of gender.

Take me to the headquarters of the world's most powerful art institution to discover their sinister plan of remaking the world in its image.

Blow my mind!

As one of the great speculative fiction writers of all times, Ursula K. Le Guin, once said: "Speculation cannot be lazy. Inventing a Universe is a complicated business."

Context is everything. World-building is also a way of dealing not only with the histories but the mythologies that make us humans.

In many of her novels she portrays a particular *sense* of reality, often the fragile boundary between different levels of reality. She sorts through the false ideas of mythology, then hits on its origins in our own psyches.

She writes: "Myth is not primitive science, no longer necessary because we have a more rational understanding of Nature. Nor is it a bunch of intellectualised symbols concealing abstract meaning. [...] Myth, rather, flows from the unconscious, not as specific beings or structures but as elemental forces that can take many shapes. It is the work of the artist [...] to connect the conscious world with these unconscious forces."

Maybe we need to create new mythologies to fortify the future; new floods, new chaoses, new liminal dainties, tricksters, ouroboros, life-death crossroads, I don't know.

Maybe we need hybrid-genres to expand the language of theatre.

Maybe we need to transform the text-hysteria of our times into

polyphonic text symphonies, allegoric experiences that embrace the ephemeral and take it seriously; that moment when we all sit quietly in the theatre-hall hoping to be mesmerised. And then care for what lingers in our minds about our very handling of language: Essay-Theatre, Sci-fi-Theatre, Post-Apocalyptic-Pastiche; Psycho-Speculative Theatre; Mythical-Poetic-Pop-Theatre... As Ursula Le Guin once said: "*Genre* is (just) an unpronounceable French word."

I would like to finish with Oscar Wild's 'The decay of Lying' and offer you his ode to the imagination, to Art:

"Art finds her own perfection within, not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread. Hers are the forms more real than living men, and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies. Nature has, in her eyes, no laws, no uniformity. When she calls monsters from the deep they come."