

Tone Avenstroup

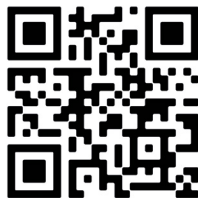


Tone Avenstroup at the project's first production workshop

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Tone Avenstroup (born in 1963 in Oslo) is a Norwegian poet, translator, theatrical director, and performance artist living in Berlin. She co-founded the theatre and performance collective BAK-TRUPPEN in Bergen, Norway in 1986. Between 1997 and 2000, she was a member of the performance group Akt. She edited the journal *Gegner* from 2005 to 2017. Most of her books have been published in Norwegian and German by Peter Engstler (Ostheim/Rhön): *durch blanke landschaften* (2013), *silene* (2016), and *november im schlaf* (2019), amongst others.

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Tone Avenstroup

Mare Monstrum

a wave-work for sprechbohrer

Text about the score

Translated from Norwegian by B.L. Crook

Always the sound of wind, it is not often silent here on the coast, on the southern coast of Norway, at Skagerak. Whether one approaches from this or that side of the river, from the islands beyond or from the mainland; one needs not travel farther than Mosby to detect a different dialect. It is possible to hear where one comes from, but one cannot hear the screams issued from the Mediterranean.

A picture does not render the screams. Every day we are informed of the newly dead. As well as those who were saved: colorful faces, red vests, blue sea. We rarely witness the horror of a drowning death, and we've grown so used to these images that they no longer disturb our everyday lives.

The wave of refugees is not a natural disaster. The media reports on a storm of refugees that is washing over us. Overwhelming. These are water metaphors. The score touches on these very real events, but at present the war in Ukraine and our willingness to do something for those fleeing this catastrophe, has become the dominate topic.

Mass death in the Mediterranean is a constant nightmare. The Norwegian word for this, "mare," mirrors the English (night)"mare" and the German "märe." In Norwegian and Anglo-Saxon etymology, a mare is a creature that sits atop a person's chest at night plaguing them while they sleep. In modern English, a mare is a female horse, "merr" in Norwegian and "Stute" or "eine Mähre" in German, but here the mare is without the h, as in the German word "Märchen," meaning fairytale. This, however, is not a fairytale; it is a nightmare.

This piece is dedicated to those who have died, those who did not survive the waves, who went under, who never survived to tell their stories, who never became problematic to our economy, who never threatened to "take our jobs," those who never made it far enough "to mooch off of our welfare state." (There is apparently no lack of damning expressions with which to cast suspicion on the motives of people forced to flee their lands). This piece has been written in memory of those who lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea – which is now a grave of sorts, a churchyard, a shipping route without *Stolpersteins*.

Arian Leka, an Albanian poet born in Durrës, writes in remembrance of his father and other Albanian sailors who lost their lives at sea. He refers to *Mare Nostrum* (our sea) as a *Mare Monstrum*. In the long poem *Auschwitz Detar* (Auschwitz Ocean) he imagines the swaths of the Mediterranean Sea as various barracks (*Abwärts!* 3/2021: "Barracks II - The coast of Lampedusa"). The poem has a provocative title in German: *Das Auschwitz der Meere*. It has been translated from Albanian by Zuzana Finger: "We have a word for what happened to people at Auschwitz, but we do not have a word for what happened at sea." (*Lifeboat for the drowned souls*, "17.03.21)

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I have never learned to play an instrument, but I know the sea. I've learned to see the way it ripples, curves and breaks, forming sea spray and foam flecks, I know the effects of the wind on the water. Starting with the Norwegian/German/English words "bølge," "Welle," "wave," I created a diagram based on the letters of these words. Three words, five letters. The Beaufort scale of wind force has thirteen levels for measuring wind speed. "Leiser Zug" (*light air*), wind speed 1 with wind up to 1.5 meters/second translates to the Norwegian equivalent of "embarrassing wind" (Norwegian: *flau vind*) with a slightly rippling sea, however "leichte Brise" (*light breeze*), the German wind speed 2 cannot be translated directly into the Norwegian as "lett bris" because this is Norwegian for wind speed 3, "Sturm," "storm," "storm" "is also a false friend," I created six approximate levels.

It is never brilliantly calm in *Mare Monstrum*, but the gusts gradually become a hurricane. Of course, no one wants to climb into a boat in such terrible weather – constant chaos, white noise, the image white with sea spray, foaming white.

The wave-variations were at the outset a material; in the diagram I found a structure, a pattern. The piece is written for sprechbohrer and the trio is German, I work most often from German and used the German terminology for wind speeds. Norwegian text dominates the highest tones, the bass is primarily German, and the middle layers are primarily in English. These three languages were each given a designated color, so that I was able to see the interplay of the languages.

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The other bits of information, excerpts from news reports, have been inserted into the wave-variations: "N.N. . . . drowned . . . 10 . . . unknown . . . unknown . . ." *Todesursache: Flucht. Eine unvollständige Liste*. (Cause of death: Seeking refuge. An incomplete list) is the main source that I have drawn from. Over 400 dense pages, over 35,000 souls, where they came from, how they died, as much as we can tell, on their way to Europe, a database that has been kept since 1993. Published by Kristina Milz and Anja Tuckermann on Hirnkost KG in Berlin, for the first time in 2018. There is no

translation or publication of this list in Norwegian, which was originally compiled and published by the pan-European network and organization UNITED for Intercultural Action.

Place names, numbers, and narrative fragments, without elucidating individual fates. Swaths of information reduced down, the fragments are almost poetic, but none of them are contrived. They are extracts, text bites pulled from the ocean of information that already exists.

Only one case appears familiar – the boy on the beach. Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy who was found dead on the beach near the Turkish seaside town Bodrum. The photo of the drowned boy in the arms of a coastguard quickly became a symbol of the catastrophe. He was photographed by Nilüfer Demir one September morning in 2015. "September 2: The world wakes up," (from: *Gutten på Stranden*, Quintano Forlag, 2021). The escape route through the Balkans had been shut down weeks earlier, and Angela Merkel repeated her words "We can do this" (*wir schaffen das*) to the German people. The boy's mother, Rehab (35 years old) and his brother Galip (5 years) died too, somewhere between Bodrum and Kos.

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The Norwegian language is contrived and in constant flux. It is not one single language, officially it is two, *bokmål* and *nynorsk*, based on the development of local and federal tongues. Following a series of comprehensive orthographic reforms in the first half of the previous century, the Norwegian Language Board was established in 1952, which became the Norwegian Language Council in 1972, and later, in 2005, simply The Language Council, a federal agency with standardizing authority. The Council regularly proposes changes to both recognized language forms, approves new words, Norwegianizes words from English, and decides on gender-correct designations. Variations in both official languages are approached equally; in 2005, the distinction between standard and non-standard word forms in *bokmål* was abolished, and the non-standard forms in *nynorsk* based on the equilibrium rule were made so in 2012.

Dialectal variation is at its richest in the spoken forms of Norwegian, which can be divided into two branches and encompass four dialects, or five, depending on how one sees it. In Norwegian, there are several options for how to say the word "I," "jeg" in *bokmål* or "eg" in *nynorsk*. For example, one may choose to pronounce the word [æ], [e:] [e:g] [jæI] [jei] or [i:]. And one can often choose which gender a substantive takes: *ei* or *ein sol* (a sun), *ei* or *en jord* (an earth), but *et menneske* (a person).

My dialect is from the south (*sørlandsk*) but it is categorized under *vestlandsk*, even though it is closer to Danish or southern Swedish. The familiar "downward lilt" is typical of the southern dialect, and stands in stark contrast to the lighter, freer eastern and Trøndelag tonalities, which tend to turn upward at the end of the sentence. I use a rough guttural "r" and some of the soft

consonants, but my spoken Norwegian is not what one would call typical Norwegian. Thus, I run into problems when I am required to standardize my articulation.

At the start of the project, we were given an introduction to IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet) and I got stuck pondering the differences between the many Norwegian dialects; I ran into problems that were neither semantic nor experimental. Should “dag” (day) be pronounced with a silent g, [da:] or a soft g [da:g^h], at all; which r should I choose? A purely eastern Norwegian r (an Oslo dialect) that almost fits into the standard IPA, felt foreign to me, but a purely southern dialect r wasn’t correct either, because I knew it would come across strangely; I could hardly avoid that the German pronunciation of r would influence the sprechbohrer performance. And I wanted the construction to be clear, so that the foreign sound would not come across as flawed. The end result was two types of Norwegian. Sigrid who has the most Norwegian passages in the piece was given the eastern Norwegian, rolling r sound, [r], as was Harald, whereas Georg was given the southern Norwegian guttural r [ʀ]. The IPA transcription was not completely consistent; it is, like Norwegian, full of exceptions and choices.

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What was new for me was the particularization of the language, stripping it down into individual letters, new symbols; the text looked foreign written in IPA. Categorizing the different text fragments by color helped with this; I was able to see the different colors in stripes in an editing program. In working with the audio pieces, much of the composition takes place with finished sound material, and here I had to do it on paper. I spread the various “wind speeds” out across the floor to get a visual overview, the material apart from the machine. Three voices and three languages; this became a progression of ten sequences.

Also new to me was thinking about placing sound anatomically. To concentrate on where the sound is localized within the mouth, a new experience; I am used to a situational or spatial presentation. In earlier pieces I have worked with the reciprocal effects between recording and speech, between live and archived, voice with and without amplification, digital vs. analog sound. In this instance it was also new that I would not be participating in the presentation.

Speech as sound, *grammelot* or *grummelot*, that the language vanishes in the noise, an abstraction, that the semantic is brought forth with repetition. That the text drowns in the music, or is not the dominant meaning-bearing element in a presentation, theatre, but is in matched, syntonic, in relation to the other elements in the room: light, movement, figure. That it is an interaction between the scenic elements; I recognize this from theatre forms with equal dramaturgy.

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The score is an exhortation, not a solution, not an analysis; in that way it is not political. It also does not accuse anyone; no one is directly indicted, neither those who have something to gain by being a loser or those who make their living from the “refugee industry.” Frontex’s brutal pushbacks are not directly criticized, they are only named, as words floating on the waves. The accusations are open.

Kristiansand/Berlin, February–April 2022