

# Scientists and cast of thousands swarm stage in Europe

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Arizona State University professors Manfred Laubichler and Gitta Honegger review the charged relationship between art and science. Credit: Manfred Laubichler

Typically science doesn't bed down with theatre, much less mate with artistic vigor, but the accord between the two is explored in the recent production *Heuschrecken* [The Locusts] developed by Stefan Kaegi of Rimini Protokoll. "And why not?" asks Arizona State University's Manfred Laubichler and Gitta Honegger who review the production in the Jan. 29 issue of the journal *Science*.

"Scientists have no trouble seeing themselves as artists," Honegger says. "But can theatre embrace science as art? That's another question. Traditionally there has been skepticism."

Laubichler is a professor in ASU's School of Life Sciences and co-director of the Center for Social Dynamics and Complexity in the College of Liberal Art and Sciences and currently a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. Honegger is a professor in the Herberger Institute's School of Theatre and Film and a fellow with the International Research Center "Interweaving Performance Cultures" at the Free University Berlin. The two viewed Kaegi's production at the Schauspielhaus in Zürich.

On the stage, a small audience sits on risers facing a 60 m<sup>2</sup> terrarium filled with 10,000 [locusts](#). In the terrarium, or around the viewers, are actors and scientists, real ones, doing what scientists do: taking measurements, making observations, and living out complex stories of their own: writ large. Video cameras project the unfolding drama on stage; the living, the dying, the loving, the interwoven narratives and even, locust music.

The marriage of theatre and science is not new. The Greeks, starting with Aristotle embraced a more integrated relationship of the two. "But a divide came when we associated science with the brain and the arts with emotions," Honegger says.

Programs have now arisen, from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to ASU, to re-explore the disciplines shared energies. Honegger and Laubichler have co-taught two courses: Theater and Science and Theater and Medicine. In 2003, they brought in a playwright from New York and, in 2004, surgeon-turned-author Sherwin Nuland came to work with a mix of theater and biology students from ASU's Center for Biology and Society. Students wrote plays, some of which were chosen for presentation: a reading at the Herberger Theater Center in downtown Phoenix.

Experiences at the interface of the disciplines caused one biology

student, Julie Story, to think seriously about the nature of medicine and the role of patients. Her play looked at women in South Africa, where she had spent a summer, as they experienced disease, including HIV-AIDS. Through the writing, she came to see their illness more through their eyes. Story, who went on to medical school at Johns Hopkins University, Maryland, followed by a residency at Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, is now returning to practice Emergency Medicine in Phoenix.

"There is a shared creative relationship between art and science," Laubichler says. "In the laboratory there is an experimental approach. This is also true on stage: something is put forward to be analyzed, considered and interpreted."

Both Honegger and Laubichler feel that if artists were embedded in a science department, "to interact and absorb the art of the scientific process. We would see a new theatrical approach and avoid stereotypes."

"More conversations would reveal the richness of material and insight that cannot be seen from outside that world," the duo asserts.

Of her experience on stage with *Heuschrecken*, Honegger points out that "German theater invests more in the unpredictable reactions of the audience. There is much more interest in experimental approaches, challenging the audience. To 'disturb.'"

"By this I don't mean sex or violence, but transformations. For example, in this production, to transform without sentimentality, creating excitement about the unknown, to connect with the scientist," Honegger states. "There is drama to be found within the animal community, which reflects the unpredictability found in our human community."

"By the end," Honegger adds. "I started to relate to these animals, as if they were fellow beings and actors. I started to understand something of

the relationship between the animals and the scientists who work with them."

**More information:** [www.sciencemag.org/](http://www.sciencemag.org/)

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