

Heiner Goebbels's Abstract Extravaganza, *Stifters Dinge*

By Stan Schwartz

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In the beginning, there was piano and water. Or, more precisely, five pianos and three rectangular pools of water. And no human beings.

If this sounds like a strange start for any cosmology—be it metaphysical or theatrical—it's meant to, according to Heiner Goebbels, whose bizarre and strangely beautiful multimedia installation *Stifters Dinge* ("Stifter's Things") continues his trademark inquiry into theatrical mystery and otherness.



Mario del Curto

Hello, German time-warper: Goebbels

From December 16 to 20, the show visits the Park Avenue Armory—one of the few spaces in town that can handle the sheer size of the piece—under the auspices of Lincoln Center's New Visions series.

The 57-year-old German composer/theater director has been dreaming up new visions for several decades now, reimagining the basic building blocks of theater language and picking up numerous awards on the European theater circuit. In a recent phone conversation from his home in Frankfurt, Goebbels describes *Stifters Dinge*—inspired by the 19th-century Austrian romantic novelist Adalbert Stifter—as "an encounter with the Other, with a sense of time which does not mirror our own rhythms . . . the unknown voice which tells you something you don't understand."

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New Yorkers who caught Goebbels's Elias Canetti-inspired music/theater/video piece, *Eraritjaritjaka*, at the 2006 Lincoln Center Festival will recall that performance's notorious moment when its sole player seemingly left the theater, leaving the remainder of his monologue to be viewed by the audience via live video. The director's newest vision pushes the theme of absence one step further: *Stifters Dinge* plays out its 70 minutes of music, light, water, and prerecorded voices without a single live performer (save a few stagehands). A "no-man show," the director has jokingly called it, and a reaction against the kind of theater "that puts the actor in the center and keeps other elements—light, space, music, sound—in an illustrative, subservient role."

The director's ambitious visions are helped in great part by his ongoing alliance with the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne (Switzerland). His entire technical team and apparatus is present from day one of rehearsals, enabling all aspects to develop organically from scratch. Ironically, in this case, the Stifter angle did not suggest itself until a later point in rehearsals—in the beginning, it really *was* just piano and water.

In the finished piece, Stifter's meditative take on nature functions as the glue holding together the diverse components of the piece's enormous, almost sculptural environment. His writing is marked by long, detailed descriptions of Nature in which plot is relegated to the

background, creating a reading process in which time seems to slow down. This deceleration of time and the "thing-ness" of reality is what Goebbels is trying to capture on stage. The director includes in his theatrical collage (among other elements) projected imagery from classical paintings, the voices of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Malcolm X, and old ethnographic recordings of indigenous songs from Papua New Guinea. And, of course, the music emanating from a surreal conglomerate of five pianos piled up, innards exposed, playing by themselves.

Dream-like and contemplative, the experience is an elaborate visual and aural Rorschach test in which the spectator's free-associations create the play in his own head. As Goebbels explains it, "Even though there are no human bodies on stage, you could also say that the audience is the protagonist, sitting in the center of everything." Then he adds with mischievous glee, "A lot of people tell me afterwards they are happy that, finally, there's no one on stage telling them what to think!"