



When the stage is no place for people

Theatre creator Heiner Goebbels says less is more in his “no-man show”, writes **Susan Shineberg**.

HEINER Goebbels likes to call his surreal theatrical installation piece, *Stifter's Dinge* (*Stifter's Things*), a “no-man show”. Joking aside, this description serves well. A performance without performers, it is a bizarrely beautiful ballet of visual and aural elements that holds audiences spellbound, despite the absence of anyone on stage.

The body of work from this internationally acclaimed German composer and theatre creator ranges so widely and combines so many genres that it defies categorisation. In a career spanning more than 30 years, including a 10-year stint in avant garde rock band Cassiber, Goebbels's visionary projects have ranged from radio sound-plays and radical chamber music to large avant-garde theatrical pieces for the concert hall and opera house.

Stifter's Dinge, coming to the Melbourne International Arts Festival next month, is probably his most eclectic and magical work to date.

A wall of disembowelled pianos, playing by themselves, hovers in front of pools of water in a dream-like atmosphere of light, fog, snippets of music, texts and

projected images. Hisses, squeaks, plinks and whirrs issue from an intriguing collection of objects.

“I'd say the elements of theatre are the protagonists here,” says Goebbels, a tall, softly spoken man whose youthful energy belies his 58 years, distinctive shock of white hair notwithstanding. “The light, the props, the objects, the water . . . You and me are only being used to serve, to illustrate and to add contrast,” he says.

“I love this polyphony of elements where what you see is not what you hear, and your attention follows several layers at the same time. For example, maybe the light is doing the sound at one point, going ‘tch-tch, tch-tch’, so for a moment it is the main character.”

At the heart of the work are excerpts from *The Ice Tale* by 19th-century Austrian novelist Adalbert Stifter, who recorded in great detail the aesthetic aspect of nature's wonders and inexplicable “things”. He anticipated many of today's ecological changes, and tacitly encouraged respect for cultures different from one's own.

“We all had to read him in school,” smiles Goebbels. “It was very boring, because he insists on a sort of real time,

decelerating the speech, but it's exactly why I like him now. Actually it's quite a modern thing. I discovered that audiences often really enjoy this slowing down . . . after a while they look at rain as if they've never seen rain before.”

The heightened awareness tends to make the audience conscious of the tiniest details of sound, word or image.

“Children sit there with open mouths for the whole 70 minutes,” says Goebbels. “We were looking for a theatre that doesn't offer protagonists you can identify with, an indirect experience that's different from yourself.”

Stifter's texts came later, Goebbels says. The piece began initially with five pianos and three pools of water and snowballed from there.

Among other elements woven through this trancelike “polyphony” are the voices of William Burroughs, Malcolm X and Claude Levi-Strauss, used as much for their aesthetic and musical elements as their content. There are recordings of indigenous songs and a traditional Greek song welcoming immigrants and strangers.

Surprise, concentration and imagination are key, says Goebbels, who has found that audiences seem more engaged



when the stage is unpeopled. "In other words, the less I do, the more their imagination is going to come into play," he says. "The audience themselves connect with their own reality."

But even Goebbels was taken aback when friend Manfred Eicher, head of ECM records, suggested making a CD of *Stifter's Dinge*. "I said, 'That's crazy, it's such a visual piece!' Then my sound engineer brought me a 24-track recording, and said, 'Just listen to this.' And I heard so many

things I'd never noticed by looking at the piece. I mean, the ticking and tacking of the engines before they start moving — tch-clack-brrrr!" The CD will likely be out next year.

"Curiosity is one of my major characteristics, and it's the only thing I ask of audiences," Goebbels says. "That's why I often give my pieces such strange names; it's the only way to be sure people aren't expecting something they know."

At the end of the work, the

audience is invited to inspect the gadgets, machinery and water. "I think the absence of the performer really turns the direction of communication upside down. It's very clear people just want to talk, to tell me what they make of it all," Goebbels says. "I'm very, very happy about that."

Stifter's Dinge opens on October 8 as part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival.



Heiner Goebbels makes the elements of theatre – the light, the props, the sound – the stars in *Stifter's Dinge*