

# Yamantaka, Killer of Death, Reconsecrates Herchen Thingstätte

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Project

## Doug Fitch





My work ranges from architecture and opera to visual and edible art. A childhood interest in the art of puppetry led my family to found a company that toured puppet shows throughout New England. This fascination for making “little worlds” or “parallel universes” has fueled my work in opera and concert-theater. From age 4, I took up the violin and started dance training at age 8. Later in life, I took up boxing, circus and flying trapeze. I believe this training in different movement genres has been critical to the way I shape stories as a director. 2009, I co-founded *Giants Are Small*, a company that produced groundbreaking work for the New York Philharmonic including *Grand Macabre*, *the Cunning Little Vixen* and *Petrushka*. We developed a technique called “live animation” wherein puppeteers brought small dioramas to life, while cameras filmed and simultaneously projected these worlds over the orchestra. I am compelled by transformations on stage. I storyboard my designs, seeing them as a choreography of space and objects. *The Boston Globe* described my work like this: “a world where anything can become anything else, where absurd juxtapositions surprise and delight, where deep seriousness about art is infused with an equally profound sense of play.”



In 2000, I met Katharina Bosse, who was commissioned by *NEST Magazine* to photograph an elaborate home movie theater I had designed for a wealthy client in Wisconsin. The room felt like a subterranean forest where sheep grazed in a glen with reclining shrubs you could sit on. The sheep had necks that would slide forward to accommodate beverages, and the whole environment was programmed to deploy five different sunsets, leading to the movie of your choice.

I loved the way Katharina bridged my vision of the project with her own. She made it feel like people actually lived there, which, of course, they did—but most design magazines would rather preserve a more precious illusion of the perfect artifice!

So years later, when she asked me to participate in the Thingstätten project I was immediately intrigued. It seemed like a perfect way to make the image of a theatrical moment suggest a whole story that viewers could make up for themselves. In the way she brought a sense of reality to my theater, I wanted to bring theater into a context of reality, in this case one that had a very painful history to reckon with.

It was Katharina’s remarkable idea to assemble a group of artists to take on the dark history of these Nazi meeting forums and, by making a new visual image for them, to allow those who have been affected by their negative histories to see a chance for imbuing them with new meaning. Is it possible to reincarnate the spirit of a place?

I had just created a piece of theater called *How Did We ...?*, a contemporary story about Millennials, which ended with a multi-armed Buddhist god called Yamantaka, also known as the conqueror—or killer—of death. It is a very powerful character because

“terminating death” means overcoming the relentless cycle of rebirth and constant wandering. Yamantaka, then, represents the goal of the journey toward enlightenment: by “awakening” beyond the realm of death. I wondered if we could bring around a degree of cathartic transformation in the region by offering a new image of the local Thingstätte. I wanted to “kill” its power of being solely a symbol of Nazi strength, by bringing to life a deity from an entirely different culture—one so opposite of anything that represented the Third Reich that I hoped it could invite new ways to see the place—and therefore to offer an idea of what it could become.



It was very cold on the day we decided to shoot. I had not brought enough dancers to wear the costumes but every person we approached immediately wanted to participate. We had a propane heater inside the Thingstätte, a smoke machine and some theatrical lights. We had to keep wrapping everyone in blankets before each shoot. It was a difficult shoot that brought us together. In the end, I believe we were all transformed by being there. It really felt like we had done something useful, in the way that only art can be an agent for certain kinds of change. It felt like we had changed the nature of the story of this town. Had we terminated its negative legacy? Perhaps not, but we had officially offered an alternative to the death cult narrative pervading its recent history.

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Director, choreography, puppet: Doug Fitch

Dancers: Annika Harder, Irantzu Schneider, Isabel Martin Perez, Anna-Lena Christmann, Janika Hampl, Maya Dolata

Still photography and video: Katharina Bosse, Jan Merlin Friedrich, Hendrik Lüders, Kuno Seltmann

Director's assistant: Lutz Rödiger

Production: Katharina Bosse, Franz Kluwe (Herchen), Nassim Rad (Assistant)

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