

Translated excerpt

**Christoph Schlingensief**  
*Ich weiß, ich war's*

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**Christoph Schlingensief**  
*I know, it was me*

Translated by Zaia Alexander



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## **Immortality kills**

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I'm truly overjoyed. Really. I didn't expect to see so many people. Saturday night and then the soccer game having only just ended. 1-0, we did it, Germany's in! Great! Of course that lightens up the evening for us; makes everything all warm and fuzzy. It's the second time I've gone out today; I've also learned to switch on the recorder so that we can deal better if somebody presses charges.

Nah that was another time. I often used to say things on stage that caused a huge commotion afterwards. I'm done with all that now. I want to throw my own lawsuit and be my own prosecutor and maybe I can hope for leniency.

I honestly have to say I'm deeply touched to be in Hamburg again, because even back then the *Bahnhofsmision* used to be a really great thing. The energy they put into it, the incredible cavorting—it was crazy. Right from the start of the theater's fundraising event. I think it finished at around half past four in the morning— Irm Hermann and the guy from the *Tagesschau* had fallen asleep, they were just lying around, and several people from the theater were long gone. We did an *Aktion* and we might have pulled in around 112 Marks. A disaster.

But then there was this gorgeous moment when Bernhard Schütz decided we had to drag a tent off the stage and place it in the audience. As a symbol. Symbols are always super important in the theater. In my first longer movie, "Tunguska," I had lit a fire for all the people in the world who were hoping for salvation. Such symbols are supposed to help us during the final phases of our life, in my case, of course, particularly Christian symbols; obviously, there are also Muslim ones, or whatever. Anyway, the question is whether they really help; by now, I'm having my serious doubts because,

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ultimately, those images only depict people with these sad doggy eyes gazing up at the sky, hoping something will happen. Whatever happened to that beautiful, dashing Jesus in the Catacombs of Rome? He's laughing at these frescoes, he's wearing a white robe, totally pleased with himself, joking around and playing tricks, and knocking over the Pharisees' tables in the temple—and then he wonders why they think he's a piece of shit...

But whatever: Jesus is laughing his head off all day long and is having lots of fun with his cronies. And then later they depict this man as a mopey, blood here and bones there, sad sack hanging on the cross, totally emaciated and suffering with his skinny little legs. This is all terribly tedious, I think. Nobody is expected to be funny when their dying, but you can't get the hell outta' here, if you think, now I'm stuck in some funereal event with a bunch of broken bones, like in the Xanten Cathedral here in front of me.

I grew up there, yes. In the Xanten Cathedral, which means I had been to the Xanten Cathedral many times in my life, a) because my parents traveled there all the time, and b) because of the model Roman fort we built in Greek class. Yes, I took Greek, I also took advanced Latin, but it didn't help. That's why I don't speak English or French, because I studied Greek and Latin. And because after half a year teaching us, my English teacher got shit-faced drunk, fell into a pit and broke a bunch of bones in his body. He couldn't come back. So instead they gave us a French teacher who half-heartedly taught us French, that wasn't so great. And anyway I was against the French back then because I had read about these young women historians, who claimed ergot had triggered the revolution in France. Ergot. Ernst Jünger – I'm sure you all know this already. Nonetheless, just so we're on the same page: This ergot thing is some kind of fungus and it's the source of LSD. Albert Hofmann (who invented it) had sucked or swallowed LSD together with Ernst Jünger. In any case, the two of them experimented around a bit. As a result, these works got created that were always talking



Caption: "Passion Impossible: 7 day emergency call for Germany. A Bahnhofsmission" 1997. Mass in front of the Hamburg Central Station

about the here, and the but-not- here, insects, the moon, the stars, then first it's very small, then it's very large, and then all the sudden everything is very small, etc.

Anyway, this Ernst Jünger, who never really made any sense to me—maybe one day I'll get to know his stuff better. We'll see. In any case, somebody told me that during the last moments of his life, he was supposed to have bathed in ice water for half an hour every morning just like Mozart had. I'm really impressed by that, but I could never do it. Not even if they promised it would prolong my life. But actually I wanted to talk about ergot. So: Ergot is a fungus in grain that makes people a bit high and aggressive.

According to these historians, that's what started the French Revolution, nothing else. That's why I was against France. Because I happen to like revolutions, as long as they are carried out in full consciousness. Even though nation building—according to Alexander Kluge—only occurs when you're high. That means you can never build a nation while sitting soberly at a table and saying: I'm going to create a nation with you, and then we'll stage a glitzy show, and then we're a nation. It ain't gonna' happen. Everybody goes home and then the next day it was all for naught. No, you've got to booze, booze, booze it up, and when you wake up the next morning with a big hangover, you'll sit there wondering how the heck you created a nation. And nobody knows exactly how it happened, that's crucial!

I wanted to talk about the ergot thing a lot later, but whatever. In the meantime, I've been given a very good staff, which I need, because I'm not as spunky as I used to be. That's why, for example, Michael Gmaj, a young dramaturge from Leipzig, thankfully wrote a rough outline of how to begin. So let's see, there's the welcome, I've taken care of that, and then there's the second topic, 'how am I feeling right now?'

So, how am I feeling right now?

Well, I just got back from my honeymoon a couple of weeks ago. It's really great to be married, Aino, my wife, sends her warmest greetings. She's seriously cuddly, but yesterday she had to go through a really tough tooth procedure— *Achtung!* News for the tabloids! – in any case, the swelling in her cheek has gone down and she's going to survive. But it seems we've become outrageously interesting for these people from the tabloids because such funny things happen to us. They don't know too much, and that's a good thing, but nonetheless, I'm going to tell you some things about me, about us – and actually I think there's nothing wrong with that. I've read somewhere you're not supposed to write literature about cancer because it isn't beautiful and it's disturbing. And then somehow it calls into question the dignity of the person who is dying. At least that's what a couple of journalists claimed. I just thought, with eight million romance novels and five thousand books about new Porsches, sixty books about cancer wouldn't spoil the fun, no matter how hard you might try. And of course everything gets lumped together anyway. I'm also not so crazy about people hawking their illness ad nauseum and then claiming they've conquered cancer. What I really wanted to say is that this disease is now a part of my work, because I've never separated my life and work, and that's why I can't keep silent about it, given the ways it has changed the way I think, or that suddenly I've become disabled, or that I can't believe in the future the way other people do.

When it comes to criticism, of course, Germany has an insane advantage over other countries because, fundamentally, we always know this and that won't work, everything is totally wrong, that in the end, it was all about the money, that what's-his-name has very bizarre intentions, and that no matter what, everything here is just plain awful. Real desire and real joy, at least in this country, are in short supply. But I have—and I can say this with a clear conscience— spent a lifetime fighting for more joy in Germany, that people take a stand and actually enjoy doing it. And I think a

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lot of people got involved because they felt it, and I'm truly proud of this. Of course, we immediately got bopped on the head for it, but it's a feeling that has remained deep inside. I think the three catchwords that have always played a role are: tolerance, intolerance and ignorance. Especially ignorance. If somebody was ignorant, he'd get the opposite of what he'd wanted. Even now: if somebody starts treating somebody with ignorance, and doesn't want to listen to him, or doesn't have time for him, then it's his turn and he's going to get screwed. I still enjoy this struggle, it gives me a lot of strength. Therefore: ignorant people come to me, please, it stimulates the immune system, and at the moment I could really use that.

So, how do I feel now? I'll take this question seriously for once, and have to say, unfortunately, that right after my honeymoon the metastases flared up again. Picture this: For some time now, I've been living with this thing inside of me that doesn't want to die. Immortality is a guest inside of me. And this immortality can kill - me. God the Father, or Lord God, or whatever he's called also can't die. Yet he's omnipotent. How does that work? Somebody's omnipotent, yet isn't even able to die? Everybody can die. But God can't! God is immortal - that's easy to say, it's also very nice for him, congratulations! But there's also something immortal in me, because this cancer doesn't have a switch that can be turned off, at least the other cells around it can't seem to find the switch. It just keeps going and going and going. Actually, God is like cancer, he also has to keep going, he also can't get his act together. And if we do have something in common, me and God, maybe it's the pain: God's pain that he cannot die; my pain that I cannot be God. That, which colossally divides us, links us together.

Thoughts like that constantly run through your mind. A few days ago, I spoke to a wonderfully astute and kind Catholic theologian about all that, and also about my battle with the bullshit Catholic images inside my head. He teaches in Wales and has a very unique way of thinking: Meister Eckhart,

Nicholas of Cusa, deconstruction, radical orthodoxy, and god knows what else, a kind of mishmash. But it is a lovely mishmash, a very relaxing mishmash. It's nice to listen to him and you get the feeling it's not about God himself as such, and that there's no more quibbling over the Saints: Who's in charge here? Is Archangel Gabriel coming? Or can St. Anthony help? What's up with St. Michael? Where's the dragon? There sure are a lot of images in your head, all those Catholic images can seriously cloud your mind. And it works brilliantly, if you can believe in it. Recently, I lost a chain, so I promised St. Anthony I'd give him some money- and bang, there's the chain, naturally. And Archangel Gabriel found me a great doctor, of course. But it's a horrible thing, if it makes you totally dependent on it, if you lose your autonomy. And that's exactly what the Catholic Church wants with all their mumbo jumbo: They want us to lose our autonomy, otherwise they'd have never invented their costume party in Rome. This carnival at St. Peter's Cathedral is really only there to confuse us and then they can claim: "You're blind, you're stupid, you're guilty, but the Pope and the Church see and know everything." So what? What do I get out of it, if they can see everything and I don't? That's ridiculous! That's exactly how the Church betrays Christian thought. Because they monopolize the relationship to God and to his grandiose creation and by doing that, they rob people of their autonomy and degrade them.

And John Hoff says it's totally idiotic, that we limit God that way. All these limitations that we wormy Christians keep doing are wrong: Gracious God, God Almighty, eternal God, merciful God - all limitations. We attach all these idiotic-childish-terms to him thinking it somehow will make him graspable. Because we are small people and it pleases us if God sometimes looks a little more human. But it doesn't work when you need it. It does just the opposite, it drives you crazy. And John Hoff says, no, that's not it, God is everything and nothing, the nothingness of something or something of nothingness - Adorno said that, too. And most importantly, perhaps, is not

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even to think about the beyond, but rather about the little cactus on the piano. This little cactus was most important for Adorno, he even said so.

I've also got a cactus like that. It's not the most important thing in my life right now, but maybe that moment is yet to come, and maybe I'll be totally calm and it'll just be me and this cactus. Then when it's time to say good-bye, I'll fall over the cactus and then I'm just gone. But for now, I'm seriously hoping this new CT will show there's no more cancer. And then we'll just have to see.

The dangerous thing is that the cancer wants to wear you down, all it wants is to punch you from the right, sometimes from the left, or then surprise you and come from the front. All these things steal so much energy from you, and I'm really lucky to have such good friends, especially at the theaters. Armin Petras from "Maxim Gorki Theater," for example. At the time, he told me, just take your texts from the hospital and put them into some kind of form for the stage. He just left me the studio without pressuring me in any way. The first performance was only for friends, none of the journalists knew about it. That was an incredible relief to take this step, to say, I'm starting all over again, I'm trying to express myself somehow. But it was damned difficult because I didn't really dare to do it. For decades I've been dutifully ringing the bells, provoked here and shouted there, because I've done everything I could and never spared myself. In some ways it was beautiful, in others it wasn't so beautiful. And suddenly it's as if I don't think this bell is all that important. Lately, I've started to enjoy being in nature and realizing: man, super, all these worms, all the animals are out and about, digging, biting, sucking, farting and doing, furrowing everywhere— crazy stuff. And I don't have to yell at them, they just do it. Even without me. I used to yell all the time, I'd run around the garden and yell at the plants, animals, trees, and of course at people- but now I've finally realized they're doing their thing without me. At least it's clearer than

it used to be. And then I can relax for a few moments and ask myself: What kind of life have you lived up to now? Did you become the person you wanted to be, or are you just trying to imitate something? What do you want to do now? Will you ever know who you really are?