

IT'S LIBERATING TO PERFORM NAKED ON STAGE

INTERVIEW
PHOTOS

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The elderly lady sitting to my left in our opera box seems to have brought an extra handkerchief in innocent white. She holds it theatrically in front of her eyes like a curtain just at the moment when a finger is pressed into an open flesh wound. What would only be visible on a small scale on the distant opera stage does not fail to make an impact thanks to two large screens to the right and left of the action. This scene is said to have caused a few circulatory problems and even fainting in the opera *Sancta*. In 1921, Paul Hindemith's opera, *Sancta Susanna*, was to be premiered in Stuttgart as one of three one-act operas. However, due to fear of a scandal, it never saw the stage at its place of origin. The story is about the very pious nun, Susanna, who has an erotic awakening one May night. She strips off her robe and falls into ecstasy in front of the crucified man. A no-go. A century later, we are standing in front of the venerable Stuttgart Opera House waiting to see my friend, Sara Lancerio, skate on a large white mini ramp as a naked nun and grace the stage as a female cardinal. Austrian artist, Florentine Holzinger, has brought *Sancta* to the stage as an opera performance. Basically, Hindemith's 25 minutes of classical opera are followed by two and a half hours of a wild and ecstatic show bringing together classical music and heavy metal, body suspension, and sex on stage. A piece in which 17 FLINTA artists (German abbreviation that stands for "women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans and agender people") let off steam in a radical holy mass, revealing and dismantling the relationship of women to the church in many layers. It's a real joy to watch these strong humans on stage, not just performing physically demanding experiences—like climbing and hanging onto the wall or being a human bell clapper—but exuding immense power. In early November, after seeing the piece, we had the great privilege of having a photo shoot at the opera and sitting down with Sara for an interview to find out how this US skater who lives in Germany got this dream job.

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At the premiere of *Sancta* in Stuttgart, 18 people needed medical treatment or fainted. It felt like the tabloids then created a scandal where there was none, because *Sancta* had been staged in Schwerin and Vienna, where nothing like this happened.

We had a really strong audience in Schwerin for the first premiere. There were also fainters in Vienna. But after the first Stuttgart shows, we were written about a lot in a sensationalized way. I learned a lot about how publications work through this experience. What we do is considered art, and some of the things we do on stage can be really triggering for people. It's an intense experience if you haven't seen any of the director's past work before.

Online channels want to put everything out super fast.

Yeah, it was a lot of copy and paste and there was no context to what journalists were writing about Sancta, because we assume they didn't see the show. A lot of the media was written in a scandal-ridden way. We were also criticized by religious organizations and Austrian bishops. If writers had seen it, it might have been a different experience for them. We sold out the rest of the Stuttgart shows right after the bad press was leaked.

From there on, every evening there were dozens of people standing outside hoping to get tickets. When we arrived last Saturday, there was a long queue of people. One of the opera workers came out and said, 'You can all leave now. There are no tickets.' It was so sweet.

I didn't know that! There were also demonstrations by religious organizations during the last shows, but they were more peaceful than anything. Before one of the shows, we had a group of maybe 20 people that were praying outside the theater with a statue of Ave Maria.

Do you understand that faithful Catholics feel kind of offended or hurt?

Yes, totally. But what people have to know is that we're not making fun of religion or mocking it in any way. It's mostly a spin on Catholicism. The original "Sancta Susanna" was about to premiere in Stuttgart in the

1920s, but it never did. I think it's amazing that we created this work as an all FLINTA (ed. note: German abbreviation that stands for "women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans and agender people") cast where the pope is not a man. Cardinals are females. Everyone is FLINTA! And I think it's really cool that we were able to premiere it 100 years later.

How was the overall mood in your team after you had these bad headlines? I read that there was some hate mail coming in and stuff.

We had a meeting with the entire production team to discuss this, because some of us were really worried about our safety during the shows. The production managers took steps to ensure that we'd be safe during the shows. I remember that my heart had never raced as fast as the first time I was about to skate on the ramp when all this was unfolding. It made me a little nervous, just like skating for the first time. We were all going through it and processing what was happening that week. Eventually, it eased off in all of us after having a huge, excited audience applauding at the end.

However, there is a lot of blood and sexual acts on stage. And *Sancta* is more of an opera performance than a classic opera. Most opera houses have probably never staged anything similar. What were your first thoughts after reading the script?

Actually, there was no script. We had a creation period that started in March, and it lasted about three months. Flo had lots of ideas for the piece and was the mastermind of this. The first 20 minutes of the opera are the original "Sancta Susanna" piece, and after that is our own thing. Basically, we all implemented ideas for certain scenes during the creation process. I think there was a point where it was hard to imagine how it



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would look in the end. We were rehearsing all these little scenes, and a lot of things were naturally taken out and added. But over time, it quickly welded together in its own way and became this organism of collage work. Before we knew it, we were rehearsing it back to back.

How did you get this job?

I've known Flo's work for a while now, and some of the performers and I have mutual friends in the art world. I heard that she was looking for a skater for her next piece. I thought it was freaking cool that they're doing that. And some of my friends told me to go for it, but I thought to myself, 'No.' My work is really demanding. I work as a birth doula in Berlin. Occasionally I do some skate work on the side and manage the skating bowl I built in Berlin with my boyfriend and our friend. I couldn't see myself committing, because my work was demanding around that time. I would have to leave my work.

Which you did in the end—for a while.

Yeah, I did (laughs). I ended up emailing a video of me skating. I heard back right away and they said, 'Flo wants to see you Monday at 10:00.' She and Annina (Machaz)—who plays Jesus—came to my studio. We had a long discussion, just getting to know each other for a couple of hours, then they saw me skating. That's how it all went down.

How did it feel for you in the beginning to skate naked on stage, knowing that thousands of people would see it in the end? That was probably something new for you.

There was a time where I did theater in my teen years, and I really loved it. In 2011, I was in art school and pursued this, but it never happened for me, because I thought I wanted to feel more financially secure in my future. I felt lost back then and didn't know what the future would look like for me. So I pursued helping birthing people. But to answer your question about being naked on stage: No, I felt really comfortable with it and I find it really liberating to perform naked on stage.

How did you prepare for the skating?

Oh, I hella prepared! During that time I needed a lot of privacy and a lot of quiet time away from rehearsals to recharge and ground myself. Also, the ramp is two meters high, and I'm not used to skating anything like this. In Berlin, we mostly have low transitions. So I skated loads and built up my endurance with 10K runs. I went to the tall ramp at Berlin Tempelhof often.

Do you know why Flo wanted to have this ramp and skaters in her piece?

Flo is a multi-disciplinary artist and loves exploring many forms of movement. She takes interest in a lot of sports, as a dancer and choreographer. She had an interest in skating, so she learned it last year, and was already pretty good. She started with roller skates, but then she switched to inlines. They were easier for her, and she just liked them better. She started skating with Netti (Nüganen), who's another performer that's been working with her for a long time. She wanted to incorporate a ramp as the Holy grail in the piece.

Has skating as a job now changed your relationship to roller skating?

It definitely has. At some point, roller skating became more like a job, if I didn't hone my passion and remember why I love skating so much. Sometimes I felt like I was skating to work, you know? And a lot of people would say, 'Oh, but that's like a dream!' It was a little difficult to create the synchronized skating scene with Flo and Netti on the ramp because we weren't synching up sometimes. But we definitely made it work in the end. I also thought, 'I really need to be good on the ramp.' There's no room for bailing in the piece. And skating a two-meter ramp on stage in front of hundreds of people, in lights and smoke, made it really different for me to naturally just do my own thing on the ramp. I had to keep it simple, but make it look elegant and just make it look really cool to people who don't skate. After a few months of the creation period, it inspired me to great heights, knowing I can do anything. I wanted to be better and evolve my skating.

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So it was probably like a development that you went through from getting the job, being excited, training, losing the fun, and then finding it again.

Yeah. The circle closed in the best way over the summer, because it just made me want to take my skating to the next level. I feel a lot more confident. I see that in my skating now, because I'm shooting tricks I've always wanted to do, but have just always been freaked out about them.

So you could imagine to continue with this show? I read that Sancta will be staged in Stuttgart again next fall.

Oh yeah. We already have a tour planned for September 2025. And then we have more tours happening in Munich, Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Amsterdam for the next couple of years.

Thank you, Sara. See you at the opera next year.

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