

# TABOO

By Karin Schmid



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## Plot



TABOO is a fictitious talkshow with a live audience. The show features a moderator and a guest from the afterlife. Impossible? Maybe exactly as impossible as the image of the ideal woman, a topic that the play seeks to address.

The highlight of the evening: Käthe Petersen. A social worker, and seemingly selfless provider who was active between the years 1932 and 1966 in Germany. Behind the facade of medals lies a bottomless pit...

We are interested in the double standards of society, back then as well as today. Against the backdrop of the historical figure of Käthe Petersen, we put concepts such as sexual self-determination and of the ideal woman up for discussion, which lands us in an active exchange between the audience and the team. Are women always victims? Has the image of women really changed over the past 70 years? How many societal roles are women expected to fulfil?

## Goal



Käthe Petersen had a vision: all women had to be pure. The only reason for sex, was conception. Women who did not live up to that idealised picture of ether motherhood or saint were hunted down, re-educated and worse. As Käthe Petersen pursued her goals to purify the female gender the state of Germany built brothels for soldiers at the front and for forced labourers in the concentration camps - to enhance productivity. Actions which portrait the double standards of society and Sexism.

Different perspectives and dramaturgical levels are drawn and set in opposition to each other. The theatrical experience is intended to encourage the audience to think and question existing moral standards and prejudgements.

## Concept



Taking place against the backdrop of a fictional talk show, Käthe Petersen is invited to the studio from the afterlife and tries to explain why her work was so important, and why it is lacking today.

The audience is invited to reflect upon the various contexts experienced and question their own point of view of the topic. Following the performance there will be an open discussion.

The one-woman show is easy to adapt for various spaces. Käthe Petersen is the main character of the play. Historical time witnesses are introduced via audio recordings. A link is drawn between the past and the present by a string of commercials from the 1950s to the 1980s. These ads show the changing role of women.

The performance space is preferred to be intimate and the performer is in direct contact with the audience.

## Background



### War and Brothels

To ensure the entertainment and hygiene of the soldiers during second World War, special brothels were built and controlled by Nazi Germany. Also in concentration camps brothels were opened as a reward system for the inmates of the hard labour camps. The women did not work there out of their own free will. Working there offered a possibility to escape the deathly conditions of the concentration camps, since the living conditions in the brothels in the KZs were slightly better. They had no means to refuse. Their choice was prostitution or death.

These methods were deeply contradictory, considering that at the same time, women who were thought to show promiscuous behaviour were hunted down and interrogated by the same state. Forced sterilization, imprisonment and forced labour were mass processing procedures.

## **Käthe Petersen**

Käthe Petersen became head of the Hamburger welfare institution in 1943 and was responsible for such “cases”. Until the end of the NS regime in May 1945 Petersen had collective guardianship over 1450 women. Typical targets of these brutal actions such as undocumented prostitutes, women with illegitimate children and the sick were known as ‘asocial’. These ‘mentally challenged women’ or ‘community hazards’ were incarcerated, 600 of them were forcibly sterilized. Many were sent to concentration and death camps. The institutionalization was justified by the goal to re-educate the females in strict discipline, hygiene, punctuality through hard labour.

During the Second World War Käthe Petersen also had soldiers’ wives spied upon in case they were being unfaithful to their husbands at the front.

## **Time Parallel**

The re-socialising of “fallen women” is not a phenomenon restricted to Nazi-Germany. It was not until 1974 that these methods were declared violations of fundamental human rights. Also the catholic church has built similar institutions called “Magdalena Asylums” in Ireland, Scotland, England, United States, Canada, Australia and Sweden, where women labelled as “anti-social” had to endure forced labour and inhuman treatment. The last of these asylums was closed in 1996 in Ireland.

The play shows how quickly you can belong to the minority. How fear can cause a split through society. Fear builds hate and hate builds the motivation to create exclusion, torture and pain by trying to protect what is known and familiar. The example of persecuted women in the NS-time brings the double moral of society and sexism into focus, alongside the fear of the other.

## The Team



**Nora Dirisamer**

Born in Linz, studied acting at the Anton-Bruckner-Privatuniversität Linz. Professional milestones: directing assistances at u/hof, Landestheater Linz and many wonderful years as a member of the ensemble of u/hof, theatre for young audience (Linz), guest at the Theater der Jugend (Vienna), summer theatre (Theaterspectacel Wilhering, Schloss Weitra Festival, Theater in der Kulturfabrik Helfenberg); Directing for Landestheater Linz, Theater for Toleranz, Theater an der Rott and many more.



**Karin Schmid**

born 1977 in Linz. State diploma in acting 2012. As a clinical and health psychologist, she had worked as an alcohol counsellor before pursuing her artistic career. 2003 – 2017 she was a member of the improvisational theatre company „Die Impropheten“ and worked in various theater- und filmprojects. With the „Theaterkollektiv IRIDEN“ she writes and produces her own shows like „gerührt und geschüttelt“ and „TABU“. In 2016 she trained and worked with the Ward Theatre Company in North Carolina, USA . Since 2017 she is the artistic director of the theatre company „Treibgut“.

**Audiodesigner: Sebastian Six** is a multidisciplinary artist. Acoustic experiments in connection with items of everyday life, sculptural assemblages and the physical element of sound are the main aspects of his musical and visual compositions. In his performances he works with different ways to generate sounds, from everyday objects and self built instruments to typical sound equipment. He creates delicate improvised experimental music which oscillates between experiment, session and concept. He is co-founder of the artist-run-gallery bb15 in Linz.

## Audience responds



“The play could not have been more intense – closely entangled with my own family history: I am the grandson of a Wehrmacht soldier and a 14 year old girl, who even though she was married got disinherited during the Second World War. She then had to fight to survive, met a Turkish circus artist at the end of war and had another 10 children with him. My stepmother was forced sterilized in 1981! So this specific topic is not restricted to the Nazi-time! The after-effects of this time stayed alive as long as the decision makers and their trainees stayed in office. They were awarded and decorated. This topic had been crystalized by the play TABU, as a 1000 pages could not have better done. Chapeau, chapeau!”

“TABU is a very impressive play about the German National Socialist, Käthe Petersen. The play gets under your skin not only by dealing with topics like human and female abuse, but also lives through the extraordinary performance. – Great!”

### Review: Upper Austria News

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„...due to its satirical sharpening the evening does not drown in dismay. Seemingly fleet-footed, advertisement recordings from the 50s invite the audience to reflect on stereotypical female clichés. While your laugh might get stuck in your throat ... That the compatibility of work and family is still a female question, makes this entertaining evening even more memorable...”

...richten SAMSTAG, 18. NOVEMBER 2017

# UPF kämpft eine „gegen turkahlenschlag“

...anten Kürzungen im Lan-  
rbudget wirbeln Staub auf.  
szene bangt um ihre Exis-  
tik minus 33 Prozent, Bil-  
st minus 31 Prozent, Li-  
nus 34 Prozent“, listet  
esenreiter, Geschäfts-  
kulturplattform KUPF,  
Initiative „Rettet das  
9“ setzt letztere Ta-  
Oktober sammelt sie  
site Unterschriften  
hlschlag“. Bis ges-  
4 Gleichgesinnte  
www.kulturland-  
n. Die Liste soll  
budgetlandtags-  
am 4. Dezem-  
ben werden.



Karin Schmid kratzt als Käthe Petersen an Tabu und einem scheinbar längst überholten Frauenbild. Foto: Reinhard Winkler

## Selbst ist die Frau - vor allem meist selbst schuld

Karin Schmid zeigt ihr neues Stück „Tabu“ im Cinematograph Linz

Von Karin Schütze

Einen speziellen Gast begrüßte das Publikum in der „Live-Talkshow“ „Tabu“ am Donnerstag im Linzer Cinematograph: eine Frau, die „es geschafft hat“, was drei glänzende Orden an ihrer Brust belegen. Käthe Petersen. Nie gehört? Sie sind gewiss nicht allein. Umso spannender war die Begegnung mit der Hamburger NS-„Sammelpflegerin“ (1903-1981), Karin Schmid in ihrem Stück „Tabu“ zum fiktiven Dialog bittet. Als Wächterin über „Ordnung an der Heimatfront“, die sittliche Moral der Frau wie 2475 Mündel „Ich habe getan, was jeder getan hätte“, betont eine von ihrer Mission Überzeugte. Von ihren Taten erfährt das Publikum aus ihrem stolzen Mund und durch Einspie-

lungen von Band, teils in Originalzitat und nach (realen) Zeitzeugenberichten. Von Demütigung, Einweisung in geschlossene Anstalten, Zwangssterilisation berichten „Fürsorge“ wider den - im NS-Jargon und ausschließlich weiblichen - „moralischen Schwachsinn“, den man heute selbstbestimmte Sexualität nennt. Karin Schmid lässt ihre Käthe Petersen mit aufrechem Blick über jeden Selbstzweifel erhaben sein. Nur manchmal, wenn die Moderatorin (aus dem Off) nachhakt, unglaublich zwischenfrägt, scheint sie kurz irritiert innezuhalten. Um, die Hände resolut zur Merkel-Raute formend, fortzufahren. Dass der Abend in der Regie von Nora Dirisamer ohne Be-troffenheitspathos auskommt,

liegt auch an seiner satirischen Zuspitzung. Scheinbar leichtfüßig ebnen Werbeeinspielungen stereotype Frauenklischees über Weg. Wobei einem das Lachen im Hals stecken bleibt. Männer kommen an diesem Abend nicht zu Wort. Der „moralische Schwachsinn“ war Frauen vorbehalten. Dass heute Fragen, etwa nach der Vereinbarkeit von Familie und Beruf, immer noch vor allem weibliche zu sein scheinen, macht diesen kurzweiligen Abend umso denkwürdiger.

**Tabu**: Stück von und mit Karin Schmid, Regie: Nora Dirisamer, Cinematograph Linz, 16. 11., 25., 11., je 18 Uhr, Karten: 0680/4420218, [cafecinematograph.at](http://cafecinematograph.at)

Karten unter Tel. 0...  
oder per Mail unter  
[rung@theatersommer](mailto:rung@theatersommer)  
cher-Rabatt bis 31. Dez  
Höhe von 10 Prozent.



Regisseur: ...

## Review by Aditi Bhonagiri

May 24, 2019

Brighton and Hove Community Radio

"I was extremely moved by Karin's performance and the character Käthe Petersen, a social worker active during and post-Nazi Germany. Through Käthe, Karin explored the societal contradictions when it comes to controlling female sexuality and also, reminded me how women act as vehicles of the patriarchal state. The performance invoked feelings of anger, disgust, shock, sorrow but also, surprisingly, curiosity. When I profoundly disagree with someone, I rarely want to understand the psychology behind how they think or see the world. So this was a cleverly interactive and powerfully intimate piece. It triggered many of my own challenging experiences of other women who have tried to regulate my choices and body as a woman. Towards the end of the piece, I started to pity Käthe - her humanity was totally eclipsed by her duty toward the state. It takes a skilful performer to evoke such feelings and an artful storyteller to deliver a compelling message - that's Karin for you. Highly recommend *Taboo* - do give it your time, it's an important story that needs to be heard."



Fotos Peter Williams, Brighton Fringe 2019

## Review by Chris Neville-Smith

Brighton Fringe 2019 – as it happens

<https://chrisontheatre.wordpress.com/2019/05/03/brighton-fringe-2019-as-it-happens/>

May 3, 2019

**Wednesday 29th May:** And I've got through the seventeen shows I saw and all are accounted for. Just one outstanding review, and that is *Taboo*. I'm glad I saw this, because this play, I think, has fallen under the fringe radar and is very under-rated.



*Taboo* is a solo play of Käthe Petersen, a respected German social worker in the mid-20th century. In a different period, she might have gone down in history as a hero. But much of her career took place under *that* period of 20th century German history. Although she personally was cleared of any crimes after the fall of the Nazi regime, and allowed to continue her work, her reputation never recovered. And worst of all – which this play captures so well – it seems a lot of what she did began with good intentions.

To understand how someone like Käthe Petersen went the way she did, one needs to remember how the Nazis came to power. The Nazis did not win elections by promising to kill everybody and invade the whole world – it was the promises of a better life for ordinary people, of which wholesome family values played a large part. And that's where there was a crossover with a cause dear to Petersen's heart – caring for "vulnerable women". Karen Schmid plays very convincingly a woman genuinely believing she was doing the right thing. She did at least stay consistent in her beliefs for moral fortitude – the Nazi government's own moral stance on prostitutes, vulnerable or otherwise, was swiftly overlooked when it came to their own army brothels. But when it came to corrective action for wayward women judged in need in moral correction – well, the places they were sent to treated them the way those sorts of places always do. And – somewhat cynically – the denazified German Government set up after the war didn't seem to have too much of a problem with that.

Karen Schmid presents this play as Käthe Petersen coming back from the afterlife and talk about her life on a TV interview. There's a mixture of monologue, clowning, and – eventually – questions increasingly point the finger at what she'd done. However, I wasn't sure this interview format was the best way to do this. I can see a good reason to do it this way – when you are taking a subject as thorny as the actions of government officials during Nazi rule, I can understand why you'd want to leave no doubt in the audience's mind that the play is giving the message that what Petersen did was bad. But there's no need to be that cautious – audiences are better at picking things up than many people think. The one thing I would definitely keep, though, is the testimonies of the women who endured the worst of the centres for moral correction. That, when juxtaposed with Petersen trying to justify her way out of it, was the most powerful part of the play.

So here is the paradox: I actually suspect Karen Schmid does not realise the strength of her writing here. The production currently plays it safe and spells out the rights and wrongs of Petersen's life, but she doesn't need to do that – the character she has written and performed is strong enough to carry this on its own. If it was me, I'd forget about the interview format completely and have just Petersen's words contrasted with the testimonies of the people who ultimately suffered at her hands. This play is going to the Edinburgh Fringe, and what I have in mind is probably too drastic a change to do between now and August, but as it stands, this play has stuck in my mind the most. History from the first half on the twentieth century is often viewed in the comfort of black and white moral absolutes. This shows very well how easy it is for moral absolutes to astray.