

## The Universal Empire

Mikołaj Sobczak

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“Utopia that – as always – turned into dystopia. We fought for the world without private property. Without money. Everything is shared. Everything is common. This is when they started to burn us at stakes.”

- Sulfur

Mikołaj Sobczak's musical *The Universal Empire* is set in a 17th-century Anabaptist commune, where poet William Blake mysteriously arrives from the 19th century. His presence disrupts the early capitalist endeavors of the commune, sparking tensions that lead to a clash with the oppressive "Universal Empire." Together, the characters envision a social and economic utopia. Yet, emerging nation-states render such a vision unattainable. By drawing on historical events, but also fictional narratives such as legends and myths, Sobczak expands the narrative patterns of traditional, canonized and instrumentalized history.

Mikołaj Sobczak's diverse artistic practice – spanning painting, installation and performance – gives visibility to forgotten histories and marginalised identities. Based on extensive research into social persecution and queer resistance, Sobczak's work contributes to a necessary and ongoing multiplication of history.

*The Universal Empire* is directed and conceived by Mikołaj Sobczak with composition and lyrics by Mira Thompson, choreography by Adam Russell-Jones, script writing by Aleksander Kmak and Mikołaj Sobczak, and costume design by Samir Duratović. In Berlin it is performed by Adam Russell Jones, Mira Thompson and Sara F. Tompkins, with piano accompaniment by Caleb Salgado.

*The Universal Empire* is programmed by Juliane Bischoff.

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## Characters

*Salt* – a head of an anabaptist commune in Amsterdam, which she runs effectively

She's more preoccupied with the group's material livelihood than spirituality.

Economical and political strategies - it's her thing.

She is the main manager of a fraudulent practice of insuring ships that supposedly sank while being assessed, but actually did not sail anywhere.

*Salt* is reminiscent of the intellectual element. Precise, reserved and disciplined.

She also embodies the birth of capitalism and its omnivorous nature: she's a fervent communist criticizing capitalism, but also uses it for her advantage.

She represents the past.

*Sulfur* – a member of the anabaptist commune

In contrast to *Salt*, she's very spiritual and religious. With her senses being extremely sensitive, she has a supernatural insight into what is happening around her – at times, she's able to see future events in her dreams or visions. She often speaks in ambiguous, riddle-like terms.

*Sulfur* represents the sensual element and utopias capitalism aims to commodify. She represents the future.

*William Blake / Mercury* – an English artist and poet who miraculously traveled to Amsterdam on board of a non-existing ship for which *Salt* wants to receive compensation

*William* is reserved, introverted, sociopath. *Mercury* is a full opposition of that: violent, charismatic.

Once *William Blake* joins the anabaptist commune under a new name, *Mercury*, his spiritual transformation begins and he becomes an avid dancer. He quickly becomes something of a messiah in the commune. In fact it is the "Universal Empire" speaking through him.

*Mercury* represents the binding element that unifies intellect with senses.

He represents the present.