

German singer Isabel Neuenfeldt talks:

“A servant to each concert”

SHE travels to many of her concerts on the bicycle – she refers to her accordion (named George) as her ‘musical partner’ – she is on tour all year round but takes time to fly to Ireland for just one appearance – the largest room in her Berlin – apartment is her practice – room.

From her balcony, overlooking the Prenzlauer Berg area in the east of Berlin, one of Germany’s most amazing artists talked to the County Derry Post.

In September you are coming to Ireland for the second time. 2,000 km one-way, just to appear at the 24th Flax – Mill – Yard – Fest outside Dungiven; financial gains can’t be the motive for this move – what drives you?

The place is one of the most beautiful ones I have visited. As an artist you get around many places – this one draws me like no other one. I think it’s the combination of people and place which makes it so unique.

I was at the Yard – Fest two years ago, wanted to come back last year but couldn’t get out of a festival-commitment. To have been invited again this year is pure joy for me. I am very excited about my gig on September 9th.

The singer, accordionist, the actress Isabel Neuenfeldt – even on the huge and very diverse German arts – scene your career stands out as a very unusual one. Geographically to start with – after the unification of Germany when millions of people moved from the east, chasing the bubble of the “golden west”, you went the other way, from your home Hannover to Rostock – why?

It was a coincidence – a great one I would say now, 25 years down the line. My mother had made an appointment with a career – advisor for me. She was worried – as mothers are – about my future. I seemed to know exactly what I didn’t want to do in life but never said what I wanted to be. The reason behind it – I was simply too shy to say “I want to be an actress and a singer”.

The career advisor noticed soon that there was what he called an underlying desire and I finally told him. He saw nothing wrong with that and handed me a long list of all colleges and universities where acting is taught. At least I believed that until I noticed there wasn’t a single contact in the east. I investigated and found the school of drama in Rostock.

So – in the summer of 1991, 19 year old Isa travelled by train to the east, knowing nobody there, not even knowing where to stay. In Rostock I met a couple who were amazed about my intentions. They directed me to the school plus I ended up staying overnight on their sofa. When I got to

the large old house which was the school there where 15 other women waiting to be interviewed, all of them appeared to be actresses already. I wanted to go home – all hope to get one of the two places vanished.

A couple of hours later the director had me called to his office – I had been accepted.

My parents commented: “...You are going to the east, what will you do if they rebuild the wall?”

Looking back this was one of my best moves ever, my career, my whole way of thinking, my political outlook – all were shaped through my time in Rostock. I often think the huge changes in society at that time went parallel to the big changes in my life.

Would you call yourself a songwriter? If not – how would you describe yourself as a musician?

A very good question, I do write songs but they are mostly about very personal aspects and I rarely sing them in concert. During a special event like the Yard – Fest I might chance one of them. I often develop poems – many of them political ones – into songs and I often translate songs from other languages. A songwriter – not really, you may describe me as a servant to the gigs I do and a servant to the audiences at them.

To make a concert successful, memorable for me and the audience, I have to serve them, I always go to the venue before the gig, try to find out what sort of people, what atmosphere I will find there.

Are you telling us you go twice to every place you play at, before the gig and to actually perform there?

Yes, wherever that is possible at all, time- and distance – wise.

There’s much talk about artist’s “roots” nowadays. Does that mean anything to you – where do you come from, where do you think you will go as a musician and an actress?

Roots don’t mean a lot. I know that from very young I had a wish to be on stage. I wasn’t confident enough though. When I did go, I soon discovered that lyrics, words of a song or poem are more important to me than



Isabel Neuenfeldt will perform at a gig in Dungiven in September.

Picture: Wolfgang Siesing

just melodies. I am not an instrumentalist although my musical partner George (the accordion) and I get on well.

The meaning of what I sing is certainly the centre-piece for me.

Where will I go? During my studies I was never able to say: “this is the objective I want to achieve” – the path always seemed to be equal the final destination. Now I know one thing for sure: I want to take the audience with me – any audience anywhere I perform. I want to communicate, want

to find out what is in people’s heads.

To touch an audience and to be touched by them – that’s the final aim, if there is one!

Your host in Ireland is not just a textile maker. Marion Baur has been a trade unionist from a very early age, she is politically involved, outspoken against the inhumane conditions which dominate the textile industry nowadays. Are you comfortable with that?

Yes – very much so! She

doesn’t just shout about change, she lives and works in tune with her thinking, in tune with nature and with her fellow human beings. This personal level of politics if you want to call it that is the only one I can see bringing real change about.

What do you expect from Yard – Fest number 24? What can your audience – which will be a capacity one – expect from you?

I expect to meet many good people, meet many friends

who lift my mind.

I have many ideas for the performance will bring a few surprises with me which have to do with the people and the place I am looking forward to going to. And of course I will be very happy to re – unite with unique artists like Willie Drennan, Cherith Boyle and Dearbhla McTaggart to name but a few. They are artists who have touched me.

Questions and translation from German: Hermann Glaser-Baur