

# Wiener Festwochen: an invitation to threading a calendar of labyrinth events

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Posters displaying a labyrinth or a ball of string have been showing up for a couple of months around the Austrian capital. Thus, with each admission ticket purchased, symbolically speaking, spectators choose their own path through the programme maze of Wiener Festwochen 2015. Organised by Executive and Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser and Stefan Schmidtke, Head of the Drama Department, it covers 20 countries and four continents. For five weeks, from 14 May until 21 June, 39 productions are shown, including 5 world premieres. According to Hinterhäuser, „this programme is a joint, cross-genre undertaking, collaborative also in the sense of collective coming into being“.

Acclaimed director Kirill Serebrennikov brings a marvelous adaptation of Gogol's novel ***Dead Souls*** to life. An all-male ensemble of Moscow's Gogol Centre performs in a spacious, unadorned, slightly backwards narrowing cube made of press boards. All the characters are played by nine actors in a tour de force of disguise, impersonations and breathtakingly rapid costume changes. Turning in no time at all into a pack of dogs or slipping into women's clothes, they cleverly make use of the scarce set items: three big old car tires, three tables and a few chairs (Serebrennikov is also costume and set designer). Furthermore, Gogol's known textual „lyrical digressions“ are transformed by composer Alexander Manotskov into ballads and songs played mostly on a piano on the left edge of the stage. The production spans an impressive array of scenes full of slapstick, exposing profiteering, fraud and corruption. Pavel Ivanov Chichikov, the main character of the novel published in 1842 who is collecting taxes for the deceased, seems amazingly contemporary.

Unquestionably modern is ***Heroes like Antigone*** presented by the Teatro El Público from Havana. And once again, it is the 19th century which has served as source of inspiration for the Cuban production. Besides being a cherished poet, José Martí is considered a national hero even among the country's younger generation. Two centuries ago, his verses led to a rebellion against the then superpower Spain, hopeless like Antigone's revolt against inhumane laws. Author Rogelio Orizondo, born in 1983, was awarded in 2013 with the Cuban Critics' Prize for „Antigone“. He teams with director Carlos Díaz, founder of Teatro El Público in 1992, to put Martí's work into a modern context. In quite a number of

exceedingly „packed“ short scenes, five actors narrate a labyrinthine tale of Cuban history, creating a kaleidoscope of absurd encounters. It all starts with four naked bodies moving silently about the stage, embracing each other, falling together and finally heaving themselves up again. The choreography of Xenia Cruz and Sandra Rami alone has the potential to carry the evening. But then the quartet starts dressing up, changing a large amount of costumes alternating between catwalk haute couture, military uniforms and contemporary streetwear. On top of this stunning aesthetic challenge, Díaz adds singing, dance scenes and an abundance of allusions, double meanings and metaphors. For the spectator without knowledge of Spanish, the German translation is even for the fast reader almost impossible to process. Towards the end, projected video images of the Revolution's dead are combined with images of the Cuban flag. In only 80 minutes a brief epic picture of the Latin American country with all its contradictions, entanglements and utopias takes shape. Despite the strong performance, the rebellion against socialism and the love declaration for the homeland turns to information overload for the European audience slightly acquainted with Cuban history.

Love and rebellion are also the themes of *Farewell, Paper*. In his new solo piece, Russian author and director Yevgeny Grishkovets comments on today's flood of information and means of communication. By using a minimal set consisting of a desk crowded with books, an old typewriter, a globe, drawing sheets, a box full of letters and a Mac PC, the focus stays on the narrator. For two hours the Russian artist brings a tender homage to anything handwritten, with Schmidtke acting as consecutive translator. Like no other, Grishkovets manages to captivate the audience from the very beginning. Recounting some of his childhood experiences, he reminds us that „only 25 years have passed since we were writing with a fountain pen“. We are witnesses of an irreversible cultural transformation as words like „telegram“, „inkblot“ or „piece of blotting paper“ become more and more obsolete in the era of the Digital Age. Because „nothing can be done today without special effects“, from time to time the five doors situated on stage in the wall behind him are opened, alternatively, revealing a birch forest, a bookshelf or a corridor overloaded with heaps of paper. „Paper endured for 2,000 years. A century ago, a telegram was the equivalent of vital information, whereas nowadays the overabundance of SMS is mostly without relevance“, says Grishkovets in a final appeal to our fantasy which also seems to be disappearing. A touching and enchanting performance, full of humour and tenderness.

Speaking about Digital Age, the Flemish group BERLIN proposed a journey through a form of art which came into use fairly recently: an installation. Allowing only a reduced number

of thirty spectators at a time, Bart Baele and Yves Degryse, founders of BERLIN in 2003, invite the participants to ***Perhaps All the Dragons. Horror Vacui (#3)***, a storytelling session around a conference-like oval table. Only this time, the seats are placed at the inside of the table, thus creating an own „performance room" with a „roof" made of red oilcloth. The exterior of the table is equipped with thirty screens on which thirty people from just as many places worldwide tell their stories, some of them really enticing. These vary from tales with a scientific or philosophic background to press reports and anecdotes. There is the story of a painting counterfeiter or of a pianist who realized only on stage that she had rehearsed the wrong concert or of a Russian meteorologist who reveals how the spot where rain falls can be moved to another place. Sometimes the narratives unfold over adjacent screens, causing the viewers to change their focus and to communicate with their neighbours. It is during the fourth story that the audience learns about the theory of six degrees of separation, which claims that every person on earth is linked to another one, with only five other individuals acting as intermediaries. But how does each spectator know which seat to choose next? For that, Baele and Degryse designed a clever concept: at the end of the first story, each viewer is summoned by his „digital partner" to take out an envelope carefully hidden in the table. The piece of paper in the envelope reveals the other four seat numbers, thus showing the thread through this labyrinth of stories. At the end of the multilingual show (translation subtitles are provided on each screen), the envelope can be exchanged with another one containing the link [berlinberlin.be/perhaps](http://berlinberlin.be/perhaps) and an access code for watching all thirty stories quietly on the pc at home. The additional short line hinting that „29 of them are true" arouses curiosity for further exploration.