

A spectacular display of political theatre puts the finger on the pulse of our time

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A strange kind of image unfolded before my eyes at four o'clock on a sunny Sunday morning, as dozens of spectators were sleeping on camp beds in the foyer of Vienna's MuseumsQuartier. Jan Fabre's 24-hour marathon *Mount Olympus. To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy* (n. 4.2015) was for sure one of the highlights of this year's edition of the Wiener Festwochen held between May 13 and June 19. "The ancient myths show how cruel societies can be. Only that nowadays the world is much more brutal than the one in the tragedies", says the Belgian creator of "the theatre event of superlatives". Besides Fabre, the programme included other famous artists: Christoph Marthaler (*Isolde's Dinner*), Simon McBurney (*The Encounter*, n. 4.2015), Oskaras Koršunovas (*The Lower Depths*) – to name just a few. In Martin Hinterhäuser's final year as festival director, Vienna's largest cultural festivities provided a reflection on the current socio-political developments as well as offering possibilities for dialogue.

Questioning our identity

Two works reminded of Utopian wishes. In a highly acclaimed opening night, Frank Castorf presented an adaptation of one of the most important books about the Russian revolution of 1917: Andrei Platonov's novel *Chevengur*. Another performance from Germany brought to the stage the failed attempt to export the values of the French revolution to Jamaica. A tape recording of 1980 with Heiner Müller's reading of his play *The Mission. Memory of a Revolution* was used in Tom Kühnel's and Jürgen Kuttner's glamorous visual show, which brought together circus acts with human poodles, historical characters represented as cartoon figures punching each other in videos and actors dressed as communist ideologues displayed via a camera on a transparent screen. History was repeating itself as farce.

Considerably more aggressive were all four premieres co-produced by Wiener Festwochen: Falk Richter's *Città del Vaticano*, Kornél Mundruczó's *Látszatélet/Apparent Life*, Oliver Frlić's *Our Violence and Your Violence* and *Us Dogs* by Danish-Austrian artist duo Arthur and Signa Köstler, who created an installation with humans behaving as dogs in a whole building of a Viennese district. Both Richter and Frlić chose to make strong

political statements, keeping more than ever the finger on the pulse of time. Church homophobia was in the focus of *Città del Vaticano*, which started as a workshop during the Theatre Biennale of Venice in 2015. Male performers who were abused choirboys win the European Song Contest for the Vatican State. Thus, the Pope has to moderate next year's competition. Despite this original idea and the gorgeous team of international artists, the performance lacks homogeneity and profundity. Monologues interchange with dance sequences, as **Falk Richter** collaborates once more with Israeli choreographer Nir de Volf. However, at some point, the typical provoking Richter rage-monologue breaks out, lashing against the closed Balcan borders, European fences and right-wing extremism. Although it is meant to emphasize intolerance and invoke humanity, in the end, Richter's performance turns out to be sententious.

The same fate overtook the work of **Oliver Frlić**. Claiming to be inspired by Peter Weiss' historical novel "The Aesthetics of Resistance", the director tried to analyse the reasons of recurrent rise of fascism in Europe. The work commissioned by Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer theatre turns to a furious scene collage. Torture and execution, rape and humiliation are carried out in front of a wall built of fuel canisters, reminding of daily news watched on television. *Our Violence and Your Violence* commemorates victims of the Paris attack as well as the four millions of dead caused by Western imperialism – a condemnation to Europe's crimes done in its former colonies. However, Frlić's show lacks the poetic qualities and witty moments of Richter's performance. The attempt to mock and insult the comfy Western audience with bestial images by bringing the reality on stage falls into a trap. Frlić ends up confirming the stereotype patterns that he wanted to smash.

Director **Kornél Mundruczó** and his group Proton Színház founded in 2009 invent a story in which a young Roma denies his origins. But light-colored hair and a bleached skin do not offer the sought after escape in a society where the rescue agency fails to come to the Roma district. *Látszatélet* is based on a real event about a Roma that was attacked on a bus in Budapest in May 2005. The attacker, himself a Roma, turned out to be a member of a radical right-wing organisation. The award-winning director uses video projections, which offer detailed insight into the emotions of the protagonists. Nevertheless, the coup of the performance is the set design. On central stage, Márton Ágh has built a cube-like dilapidated flat, which rotates once fully around its axis. An amazing sight! Chairs, cushions, a table and clothes dryer fly impressively through the air. Eventually, the phone, the radio and the microwave hang from cables on the walls. All things gathered during a person's life turn into a heap of debris. A vivid metaphor about chaotic times, conveying the impression of a world turned upside down. By far the best production of the quartet.

Astounding aesthetics from Russia

The search for identity and the desire for security are themes also found in Pippo Delbono's *Orchidee* (n. 3.2013) and Motus' *MDLSX* (n. 4.2015), as part of the festival programme. Installations, concerts, operas, a freak-cabaret, theatre of all kinds (object, image, miniature and music-theatre), a film series dedicated to Susan Sontag, exhibitions, debates and more than a dozen performances represented a very particular selection done by theatre theoretician Marina Davydova, who was responsible for the drama programme. Her choice of some exquisite Russian creations delighted the public.

Chekhov's famous *Three Sisters*, a production of the Novosibirsk State Academic Drama Theatre Red Torch was something of a rarity. Young director **Timothy Kuljabin** constrains the characters to converse only in sign language while the text is shown as surtitles. The usual dialogue is absent, being replaced by a strong acoustic universe: rattling plates, clattering highheels, shuffled slippers and brother Andrej scratching on the violin. Kuljabin's silent Russians have also discovered hi-tech gadgets: selfies are shot, songs are heard from iPhones. Despite all the noise, the actors proved to be up to the big challenge: to ignore all sounds and use new means of orientation, keeping continuously a direct visual contact in order to be able to "communicate" with each other.

A diametrically opposite approach was given by **Konstantin Bogomolov** in his adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. The explosive production of Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre included parts from Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and scenes from works by Chekhov, Goethe and Shakespeare. The main theme of this "satirical encyclopedia of modern Russia" was the forbidden homosexuality. A priest slips into the role of Mephistopheles and seals a pact with red wine, uncorked with the bottle opener-cross on his chest. Romeo and Juliet are, among others, made fun of. As opposed to Kuljabin's three sisters, Bogomolov's ones have finally managed to get to Moscow, where they are talking about starting to work. The show was easily enjoyed by any spectator, not least thanks to the various, most agreeable musical inserts, which ranged from Lana Del Rey and Frank Sinatra to Russian pop songs performed live. Bogomolov's political theatre proved to be strongly condemning, but in a humorous, light way. In Moscow, all representations were sold out six months in advance. No wonder that the Russian culture minister personally asked the artistic director of the theatre to prohibit all Bogomolov productions from being scheduled. Fortunately, he hasn't succeeded.