

# Power Control, War and Violence: Causes and Effects

by Irina Wolf

The refugee crisis is a constant preoccupation with German speaking theatres. It's hardly surprising that the majority of the proposals for 2016-17 focus on flight and migration in different ways. For the second season in a row, **Yael Ronen** staged one of her performances at **Vienna's Volkstheater**. Only recently has the highly acclaimed Israeli-born in-house director of Berlin's Gorki Theatre been awarded the Austrian Nestroy Prize for Best Play for her refugee drama *Lost and Found*, produced at Volkstheater in 2015.

In her newest performance, Ronen brings together an international cast of actors, as she has accustomed us lately. Actually, *No man's land* is a production of 2014 which has been moved from Schauspielhaus Graz to Vienna in an updated version. In Ronen's usual manner, the play has been developed collectively, based on the actors' own experiences. The starting point was the fate of the Israeli-Palestinian pair of artists – dancer Jasmin Avissar and sculptor Osama Zatar. After desperately looking for a place to live together, they found refuge in Vienna. Most interestingly, they represent themselves on stage. The characters featured include, among others, a Bosnian war refugee whose daughter goes to Palestine as an activist, a Serb actor who realizes that the revered father is a war criminal, an alcoholic war correspondent who is wandering through the Middle East in search of a Syrian blogger, a lawyer who becomes a TV star due to his war commitment. Theatre turns out to be the safe place for discussing terms like guilt and forgiveness, while stereotypes and prejudices collide. Ronen's favourite method is black humour used in the framework of historical conflicts. On the bare stage is the best example of a functional minimalist set design: a one-storey skeleton of a building which facilitates fast scene changes between Vienna's different districts, from there to Ramallah and back again. Among the conflicting narrative sequences, dance moments where five men surround one woman seem to induce a touch of poetry. But as the movements become more and more aggressive, one realizes that the choreography (from Avissar herself) is a mass rape. *No man's land* is a masterfully built piece with many twists, dealing with the harshness of life and its fleeting existence.

## The demagogy of fear

Another aspect of the refugee crisis is Europe's radicalization. The rise of right-wing extremism and populism is most noticeably in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. Together with dramaturg Éva Zabezsinszkij, **Árpád Schilling** staged at **Vienna's Burgtheater** *Ice wind*,

a bilingual (German-Hungarian) psychological thriller in which two lifestyles collide. On the one hand, there is a German family who leads a comfortable life: he is a university professor (originally from former Eastern Germany), his wife a chief magazine editor and their son an actor. The Hungarian family, on the other hand, is not so wealthy, but much more determined: he a policeman, she a cleaning woman who has fled from home two months ago. Their son is studying at a “high-school for national defense against people who want to occupy the homeland by deeds or thoughts”, as he himself claims in a Skype video call.

The re-emergence of nationalism, the manipulation of people by suggesting “dangers”, the lack of core values in Western European societies as well as traditional machismo are brilliantly packed into the play. An elegant hunting lodge raised on stilts located in a forest near the Austrian-Hungarian border is the place of the showdown. With five great actors – three from the Burgtheater and two from his own company Krétakör –, Árpád Schilling creates grandiose situations.

As a pack of invisible wolves seems to sneak around the hut like refugees around European borders, disaster begins to infiltrate. According to a Hungarian folk song, the emerging stormy “ice wind” is a bad omen. “*Work sets you free*”. This symbolic wording, similar to the well-known slogan located over the entrance of several Nazi labour camps, is used by the Hungarian troublemaker to take over the command in a resolutely manner. Live music and a lot of can rattling coming from under the hut underline the tension. Suddenly, all characters undergo a radical transformation: fear destroys all rules, order turns to chaos, actions become irrational. Before one realizes what is going on, a wire-fence is pulled around the hut turning it into a “fortress”. But it is too late. The enemy is already inside ones own house. In the end the son kills his father, while his mother washes the powerful naked body of the Hungarian occupant before cutting through his neck with a kitchen knife. Only the Hungarian woman left outside the house as bait “for the greedy predators” finally escapes. In this puzzling outcome many questions remain unanswered.

### **The decay of an imperium**

“Fortress” Europe is analysed in a similar way in *Empire*. Likewise, the last part of the European Trilogy by Swiss director **Milo Rau** is asking questions about war and power control. In front of the backdrop of a kitchen-like living room, the “imperial” aspect of Europe is reproduced through the biographies of Greek Akillas Karazissis and Romanian Maia Morgenstern. Both of them act as advocates of the “old” continent, whereas Syrian Rami Khalaf and Kurd Ramo Ali are representatives of immigrants who have fled to

Europe with fake identity cards. In a five-act drama, the four protagonists narrate their own experiences. Personal life stories about discrimination, pain, flight, loss, torture, grief and death unfold in an almost imperceptible voice, by using long pauses.

The production of the International Institute of Political Murders, in co-operation with the Zürcher Theater Spektakel, the Schaubühne Berlin and the **festival steirische herbst Graz** makes use of the actors' native languages. The impassive face of each storyteller is filmed by a video camera and projected on an oversized screen at the top of the stage. Music plays a significant role. Composer Eleni Karaindrou combines traditional and classical elements to link the intimacy of the stories and to create a poetic atmosphere. However, the narration gets more and more shocking. While images of people tortured to death by Assad's brutal regime are displayed on the video screen, Rami Khalaf recounts how he searched on the internet among 12,000 photos for his missing brother – all in vain. Milo Rau leaves it to each viewer to decide how he relates to the true stories. Finally, a brief scene from Medea creates a link between the European “empire” and the ancient Greek myth. It poses the question of “the origins of guilt and, with it, the history of violence”. In fact, where precisely does the tragedy begin? This is one of the issues that will preoccupy the audience for a long time after Milo Rau's refined documentary theatre has ended.