

Six ways to dealing with the demons within oneself

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During the 2015-16 theatre season a play written by an American playwright of Pakistani heritage has seen more than 20 productions nationwide in Germany. **Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*** which won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize (also designated "Best Foreign Play of the Year" by the magazine Theater heute) opens up a discourse on Islam in the post-9/11 world, addressing topics such as identity crisis, assimilation pressure, ethnic prejudices, racial discrimination. Akhtar tells the story of Amir Kapoor, a successful New York attorney working for a Jewish firm. He is an apostate Muslim, who has done everything possible to adapt to Western society. Then, in the course of a dinner, he breaks out with his hatred of Islam. His wife Emily, a liberal white artist, is, ironically, an Islamophile. Isaac, a Jewish curator, and his African-American wife, Amir's co-worker Jory, form the other pair attending the dinner. The simmering tension explodes when Amir finds out that Jory will be promoted instead of him, a direct consequence of the fact that he offered moral support to an imprisoned imam suspected of raising funds for terrorist groups.

Visuals vs. text: Exploring Islamophobia

For the Austrian premiere at the Burgtheater director Tina Lanik respects Akhtar's text in a scrupulous manner. The (much too long) 100-minute staging of the one-act play is accurate, but missing rhythm and dynamics. There is a clinical coldness to the characters portrayed in the show, right down to the setting: a square white platform with IKEA-like furniture extended until the first rows of seats on the ground floor. However, the actors' performance is outstanding. Lanik emphasises Amir's "brutish trait". The escalation of the nerve-racking dinner feels natural, especially when the protagonist spits in the face of Isaac and professes pride in the 9/11 attacks. But the memorable scene of the opening night is definitely the one in which Amir finds out that his wife has had an affair with Isaac and repeatedly hits Emily's head against the bookshelf – a climactic scene which caused a muffled collective cry to be heard among the public. In dealing with his roots, Amir fails miserably, losing everything: his work, his apartment, his wife, and especially his self-esteem.

Only ten days later, Schauspielhaus Graz presented a completely different production. Director Volker Hesse and his longtime collaborator Stephan Mannteufel reduce the setting to a white proscenium with parallelepipeds of different sizes fixed on the rear wall. Crawling and climbing both horizontally and vertically among them, the actors seem like

rats trapped in a cage. This effect is amplified by video projections of the artists' facial expressions delivered by several cameras in real-time. The mise-en-scène is engaging, rife with ideas. The image of a naked Amir, crouched in a very narrow space, is superimposed upon projections of ruins of bombed buildings. A suggestive way to depict his inner torment. As if the explosive constellation of the quartet isn't enough, Akhtar adds a fifth character: Amir's nephew Abe Jensen, alias Hussein. He is the one who ultimately ends up becoming the voice of Islamic fundamentalism. In times of crisis, the teachings of the Quran are scrupulously respected even by the ones who vehemently denied them a short while ago.

Theatre vs. film: Visconti's Renaissance

"You'll be amazed by what will still be possible." This statement of Austria's far-right candidate Norbert Hofer during the recently held presidential elections aroused strong controversy. When delivered on the stage of Theater in der Josefstadt by an actor impersonating a Nazi SS officer, it receives a frightening connotation. But not just because of this has Elmar Goerden's stage adaptation of **Luchino Visconti's** movie ***The Damned*** (the first of the "German trilogy" which also includes *Death in Venice* and *Ludwig*) been such a big success. Given the continuous rise of the far right in Europe, the staging based on the dramatization of Ulf Stengl (who is also responsible together with Silvia Merlo for the stage design) is of a frightening actuality. Strong scenes depict the division of a society and its inevitable consequences. Black steel pillars delimit the vast space occupied only by a few tables and chairs. In this hostile area intrigue and hatred prevails. The director's accurate work with the whole cast is impressive. Andrea Jonasson, among others, makes a memorable role. Her Sophie von Essenbeck is compelling. She is all in one: "grande dame", vamp, businesswoman who can kill in cold blood and treacherous mother. Like Lady Macbeth, she would denounce her own son, Martin. Newcomer Alexander Absenger, as Martin, delivers a strong performance. His final transformation from spoiled son to a Nazi killer is outstanding. The theatrical version of Luchino Visconti's film convincingly recalls the demons of a bygone era.

"Theatre can compete with the movie only if it lives down to it," says Elmar Goerden. But Bastian Kraft seems to disagree. The young German director stages at Akademietheater an adaptation of **Visconti's** ***Ludwig***. Actor Markus Meyer plays Ludwig II, but embodies all other characters as well. Recorded videos depict him in half a dozen roles. Meyer is both priest, Ludwig's mother, the king's friend, minister and adviser, even his unpopular wife. Notable exceptions are only two movie characters: Richard Wagner and Elisabeth of

Austria are played by two other leading Burgtheater actors. Set designer Peter Baur builds a striking installation. A huge, semitransparent mirror, in which all characters will be reflected or projected, hangs diagonally across the empty stage. Kraft's production evokes, likewise to Visconti's movie, the historical period of the King of Bavaria. The body of Ludwig becomes the image of the whole epoch, from his coronation in 1864 until committing suicide in 1886 by drowning in a lake (in the show by descending into a small trap in the floor filled with water). Towards the end, the mirror is lowered, reflecting, among other things, the ground floor and the spectators. It is then that the relationship between art and politics is questioned. However, the staging confirms Elmar Goerden's theory. Instead of using Ludwig's narcissistic reflections in excess, it would have been wiser if Bastian Kraft would have focused on other aspects of the enigmatic nature of the king.

OFF-scene highlights

Among the many proposals of the season, the absolute hit is ***No play about Syria*** (*Kein Stück über Syrien*). The production of the theatre group **aktionstheater ensemble** from Vorarlberg, Austria's westernmost province, won the 2016 Nestroy Theatre Prize for "Best OFF Production". By making use of "interviews" done with the actors, merged with newspaper articles, the founder of the company Martin Gruber and his playwright Martin Ojster create an original text, replete with humour. Four characters (all use the actors' surnames) narrate their experiences during the flow of refugees. In the articulate concept of director Martin Gruber, monologues alternate with perfectly choreographed dance scenes, while the a band provides the live musical performance on the otherwise totally empty stage. Gruber's production presented in Vienna at Werk X theatre leaves it up to each viewer to decide with which of the four different characters he wishes to identify.

Werk X was also host to ***PSYCHIATRY !***, a production of **Einmaliges Gastspiel**. The ensemble consisting of five artists brings to the stage a largely unknown method, introduced by psychiatrist Gerhard Lenz twenty years ago in Austria. The project in use at Vienna's General Hospital brings medical students in front of actors who impersonate people with mental disorders. All artists have several "diseases" in their repertoire. One by one, they take the role of student and patient in front of the public arranged in a semicircle. From time to time, the sessions are interrupted either by video projections or by passages read from medical books. In addition, viewers are encouraged to assume the challenging role of student. In this highly immersive mixture of documentary theatre and performance directed by Jan-Christoph Gockel, the boundary between fiction and reality is constantly blurred. The "cases" presented (a total of five) seem extremely authentic, delivering an

amazing exploration of the human condition.