

#wienerfestwochen@groundzero

Irina Wolf

With a tradition dating back over 65 years, the Wiener Festwochen unveiled a new look in 2017. For his first edition as artistic director, Austrian cultural manager Tomas Zierhofer-Kin opened up Vienna's greatest festival to pop culture, subculture, club culture, counterculture and queer culture. The aim was “to present and allow things not yet seen and not yet heard”.

#operaredefined

This statement was already confirmed by the opening production. Inspired by the Hindu epic “Bhagavad Gita”, **Ishvara** was a stunning mix of genres. In seven scenes, Chinese shooting star Tianzhuo Chen unfolds a story about the eternal life cycle. The stage is overloaded with objects, among others, a cartoon-like face of a man, a Buddha-statue, an inflated puppet, a pond filled with water. And up above a red neon cross dominates the scene. Ear-deafening music accompanies the chaotic action which unfolds on stage as well as on a catwalk-like platform placed among the front-row seats. Yet the story is unclear. Amid the many bombastic visual scenes, there are two passages spoken in Chinese. The two pages with the translation handed out to the audience before the beginning of the show led to the comic effect that some spectators tried to decipher the text by using the light of their mobile phones. Chen's supreme God Ishvara turns to a genuine “happening”.

Likewise, German visual artist Jonathan Meese and Austrian composer Bernhard Lang transformed Richard Wagner's “Parsifal” into the futuristic production **MOONPARSIFAL ALPHA 1-8 (ARCHMATRIARCH OF ESPIONARCHY)**. Known for his provocative works, Meese – who is responsible for the direction, costumes and set design – creates a collage of film projection, slogans displayed as surtitles, SciFi and autobiographical elements. Characters from Star-Trek and the “Zardoz” film, James Bond, SpongeBob mingle with mythical figures (Kundry appears as Barbarella). In the new sound universe, Wagner's motifs are altered, slowed down or mixed with jazz – the Klangforum Wien performs phenomenally under Simon Young. Each sung sentence is repeated at least three times, in German, English, French or Ancient Greek. Meese's work is about the right of A.R.T. to freedom. Whether thrilled

or annoyed, spectators witness a groovy novelty. In a similar manner, the German-Ivorian ensemble of Gintersdorfer/Klaßen deconstructed Mozart's opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* creating **Les Robots ne connaissent pas le Blues**.

#politicsreinterpreted

Still in the area of innovative performance, American artist Derrick Ryan Claude Mitchell and his group Saint Genet addressed our power-hungry society. Based on the migration tragedy of the Donner Party in which a group of settlers who crossed the US had to endure unimaginable horrors, **Promised Ends: The Slow Arrow of Sorrow and Madness** depicts an alarming atmosphere. In its centre (in effect, in the middle of the stage, beneath a neon tube installation) lies King Lear – personified magnificently by the paraplegic painter Baso Fibonacci. Jean-Luc Godard's and Akira Kurosawa's cinematic interpretations of the tragedy are used to portray a dying kingdom. While fantastic dancers perform around the lonesome figure of the King, words from Shakespeare's text as well as politicians' names scroll on side walls. Large amounts of fog, spilled honey and red wine, confetti and balloons induce an orgiastic party mood. A string ensemble is performing live on stage. Like a real conductor, Mitchell gives clear instructions over a microphone from the back wall. A surreal environment of rebellion against the current political situation is outlined. "Power vs. Virtue". Which will prevail?

Today's world, torn by conflicts and wars, was also the topic of "old" festival acquaintances like Romeo Castellucci (**Democracy in America**) and Peter Brook (**Battlefield**), but also of the Syrian duo Omar Abusaada and Mohammad Al Attar. In their drama **While I was waiting**, the hospital room as twilight zone between life and death becomes a symbol of their country. But the festival scheduled amusing interactive performances as well. Both productions of the Canadian group Mammalian Diving Reflex offered the rare opportunity to a stylish headdress done by a child (**Haircuts by Children**) or to listening to the sexual experiences of six seniors (**All the Sex I've Ever Had**). Similar to previous years, the programme included well-known names like the Australian Back to Back Theatre (**Lady Eats Apple**) or Ivo van Hove's Toneelgroep Amsterdam. His stage adaptation of Visconti's **Obsession** featuring Hollywood star Jude Law was definitely the highlight of the festival.

#cultureread

For five weeks, from May 12 to June 18, Wiener Festwochen displayed a wide variety of topics and styles, combining fine arts, performance, theatre, dance, music, workshops, discourses and participatory projects throughout the city, quite a lot for free entry, though navigating through the hashtag loaded programme wasn't an easy task.

The absolute novelty of this year's edition was the **Performeum**, a temporary museum for performative arts opened on the former premises of the Austrian Federal Railways in the tenth district. Considered the “heart of the festival”, it comprised exhibition halls, meeting places, the **Academy of Unlearning** and the **Hamamness**. With its wide range of classes, the former taught the art of breaking rules and opening one's mind, while the body was cleaned in three inflatable rooms of the latter provided with wash zones and relaxation areas. In the Performeum's unique setting, four curators delivered a kaleidoscope of contemporary art productions, introducing marginalized artists from the African continent or showing queer ecstatic practice as resistance.

Finally, a new festival format was proposed. During four nightly sessions, **HYPERREALITY** scheduled electronic music in the context of global club culture. Undergoing a radical rebirth, Wiener Festwochen became “an experimental field for a future society”.