

Immersive theatrical experiences in current socio-political issues

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Human exploitation and climate change, wars and terrorist attacks. Sounds like headlines of weekly magazines. Yet these topics mark the beginning of the theatre season in Vienna. In Akademietheater, ***Paradise flooding*** by 30-year-old Austrian author **Thomas Köck** critically analyses nature and human exploitation from the plundering of raw materials in the Brazilian jungle at the end of the 19th century to today's precarious working conditions. Generation conflict and rising sea levels are other themes dealt with in Köck's "confused symphony", so the subtitle of paradise flooding. Director Robert Borgmann builds up a dystopian future. A huge cloth sail which is part of the imposing stage design created by Thea Hoffmann-Axthelm lifts protagonists to incredible heights. But the show is overloaded with drastic images, accompanied by banging noise and a great amount of stage effects, such as sharp flashes of light which persistently shoot through the room. Borgmann lets the ensemble bathe in mud and rain, splash with theatre blood, glide on the slippery floor, so that it really looks like the end of the world.

Causes and effects of war

Still at Akademietheater, director Michael Thalheimer stages the 2500-year-old Greek tragedy **The Persians** and proves that **Aeschylus'** drama is not outdated. Well known for his minimalist theatre, Thalheimer relies on Durs Grünbein's textual version in which the choir is represented by a single speaker. Falk Rockstroh plays the Persian Council of Elders. With black circles around his eyes, he recounts the warlike adventure of king Xerxes. Only Atossa is sharing the stage with him. Christiane von Poelnitz sovereignly plays the queen-mother, standing immobile for almost all the show at the forefront of the stage, all in gold, face and hair, with a long train which reaches to the back wall.

But the biggest surprise is the spectacular stage effect designed by Olaf Altmann. At each change of scenery, the concrete ceiling swings back and forth in its entire width, so close to Atossa's head that it seems to crush her. This is repeated three times, thus drastically pointing to fate suddenly breaking in and changing everything. Thalheimer's extraordinary show reveals parallels to today's politicians, which display the same desires of grandeur.

Power and war are also the topics of the original show directed by Volkstheater's manager Anna Badora. *Iphigenia at Aulis/Occident Express* is a production made up of three parts. The first tells Iphigenia's story. Based on **Euripide's** masterpiece, Soeren Voima creates a text which includes choral passages performed by five girls. They represent a society that both demands and glorifies war against Troy, which "is conceived during intermission in the spectators' heads while they enjoy a glass of wine". Finally, **Stefano Massini's** Occident Express tells the odyssey of Iraqi migrants along their route to Sweden.

Badora's Iphigenia displays a comical side highlighted by Irina Bartel's grotesque costumes. Agamemnon turns to a cartoon figure. Boots with very thick orthopedic soles are the only ones that provide him with supremacy. Dressed in an elegant red evening dress, Clytemnestra steps defiantly through the pool of water that covers the scene almost entirely. The aesthetics of the third part is totally different. The image of a guinea pig in a glass cage placed in front of a video camera is projected on screen. While he is searching for an exit, the migrants wearing only underwear cram together into a glass cube representing a narrow pipeline leading from Iraq to Turkey. Their adventurous journey is not a kitsch. Quite the contrary, the third part proves to be more intense than the first one.

Tight security vs. liberal values

Another work dedicated to the exploration of evil's banality is *Building the Wall* by Pulitzer and Tony winner **Robert Shenkkan**. In an interview with an Afro-American history professor, a white Christian male named Rick recalls events spanning from President Trump's victory through 2019, when the play is set. Following a terrorist attack in Times Square, martial law was declared and Homeland Security arrests led to rapid expansions of the private prison system. Rick was a guard at such a prison that devolved into a death camp. In the facility meant to hold detainees for deportation, unchecked health issues resulted in mass casualties, while everyday men like Rick continued to follow orders. Step by step, Shenkkan reveals the way the collapse of institutions leads to the collapse of morality.

In the small, but intimate room of Theater in der Drachengasse, a table and two chairs are placed in front of a two-way mirror – a clever addition whose presence introduces additional tension. Director Joanna Godwin-Seidl, founder in 2006 of

Vienna Theatre Project, is also the producer of the show. While the dystopian play provides a shocking story, the audience can take comfort in the fact that in the end Rick wound up in prison and presumably our battered democracy remains intact.

Yet fear of terrorists keeps our society constantly alert while imperceptible dismantling of democratic freedom has reached a serious level. In **Daniel Kehlmann's** thriller ***Christmas Eve*** the tranquility of the homonymous evening is sacrificed to the need for security. A philosophy professor with left-subversive views sits in an interrogation room. She is supposed to have planned a terrorist attack precisely at midnight. The police allegedly found burdensome material on her hard drive. The commissar has only an hour and a half left to get a confession out of her. But the hero of the show directed by Herbert Föttinger is the clock, as Kehlmann was fascinated by the Western classic *High Noon* who ran in real-time. Similarly, the digital clock in Theater in der Josefstadt shows 10:30 pm and counts down an hour and a half. Set designer Walter Vogelweider uses a box for the interrogation room with a real translucent fourth wall. Thus, the viewer is placed in the position of the agent who monitors the interrogation, without being noticed by the interrogated. But is Judith really the cool fanatic or is she an innocent victim of a no longer controllable monitoring machine? Kehlmann's cleverly written play is ambivalent in this point.

The intimate sphere of individuals and their conscience are explored in ***extrêmophile***. According to Wikipedia, extremophile refers to "organisms that can survive under extreme conditions, being easily adaptable to very hot, acidic environments that are toxic to more complex organisms". Comparable adaptation skills are shown by the three protagonists of **Alexandra Badea's** homonymous play. There is a politician who is father of two children, but who leads a double life: he has sex with men in Dark Rooms. Then there is a scientific researcher looking for reusable raw materials at the bottom of the ocean and who, in excess of zeal for her work, abandons her life partner. And finally, an American soldier hunting terrorists in Pakistan from thousands of miles away, navigating killer drones on computer screens in a container in the Nevada desert.

"But the three winners of the system are at a point where they are questioning their lives", says 30-year-old director Paul Spittler. The anonymous characters in Badea's play are very lonely matching the minimalist set design of Constanze Stahr at

Volkstheater's small hall: a metal scaffolding emanates coldness and inner void, giving the artists at the same time the required space for motion. Perfectly choreographed movement sequences alternate with self-critical monologues. Paul Spittler's work is rigorous and the acting of the actors is convincing. Although the show begins in a tone that is too comic, gradually it gains incredible dynamics, thanks also to the soundtrack of Johannes Kerschbaummayr. The connecting link between the protagonists are the words, like those in Dalida's song *Parole, Parole, Parole* with which the show begins and ends. A trace of hope still exists.