

Rising to beauty out of war's ashes

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Whether in Vienna or in Lower Austria, war and migration continue to be crucial topics of theatre productions. Famous names can be found among the creators, like Milo Rau or Yael Ronen, but also those of newcomers such as Mokhallad Rasem and Ibrahim Amir.

Born 1981 in Baghdad, **Mokhallad Rasem** is an actor. After having fled his war-torn country, Rasem found refuge in Belgium where he now works as director at Toneelhuis in Antwerp. No wonder that war is a recurrent theme in his works. In ***Mother Song***, a co-production between Lower Austria, Antwerp and Bolzano, he looks upon the consequences of war from the perspective of women. The text was developed after a research conducted in Baghdad, Syria and in refugee camps at the Lebanese border. Rasem combines stories of women who have lost everything with fragments of antique dramas like Euripides' *The Trojan Women* and Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. The resulted show features an international cast of five actresses. Video images of buildings in ruins reveal the impact of war. But the production concentrates on life in the refugee camp. Common rituals help the women to cope with their pain. Rhythmical movements of their bodies bending over on a rug are accompanied by Arabic chants performed live. Objects play a key role: carpets symbolize home, empty picture frames recall the lost ones, washing basins are used for body hygiene. They all contribute to creating poetic scenes. "I believe in poetry", says Rasem, who signs responsible not only for the concept and directing, but also for the stage and costumes. His aim is to transform ugliness into beauty. With *Mother Song* this goal has been achieved.

Interrogating freedom and security: the false home

For his part, Kurdish author **Ibrahim Amir** gives refugees in Austria a voice. Born 1984 in Aleppo, Amir had to leave his homeland in 2002 for political reasons. He now lives in Vienna, holds a doctor's degree and is also a successful playwright. His plays are black comedies which offer his view on current political topics. "Home" is a recurring theme, as well as the issues of identity, freedom and security. His dialogues are full of humour. The year is 2037 in ***Homohalal***. A quarter-century has passed since the refugee protest campaign in the centre of Vienna. In the dystopian future some of the protesters enjoy a life of well-being. Thus, they meet around a pool for the commemoration ceremony of Abdul who committed suicide by throwing himself off the bridge.

A real pool is on the stage at Werk-X theatre. The show under the direction of artistic

manager Ali M. Abdullah underlines the comic aspect of the play. Several slapstick moments (all actors repeatedly fall into the water) intermingle with video scenes filmed in real-time behind the pool. These provide flashbacks on the protest campaign. But then the action takes an unexpected turn: dead Abdul reappears in flesh and blood. In order not to be expelled, he pushed an Austrian from the bridge and stole his passport. Now is the time for revenge. Abdul threatens his former friends armed with a gasoline canister and a box of matches. In the end he is shot dead by one of the actresses. Fear has been overcome. Freedom means security.

Amir's second play ***The way back home*** shown at Volkstheater's small hall explores the phenomenon of migration and its psychological consequences. Old Hussein, a resident of Vienna since the early 1970s, wants to die in his native Syria. He is accompanied on his way back home by his nephew, by an Austro-Turkish doctor and his girlfriend, a transsexual nurse. But Hussein dies before reaching Aleppo. At the Syrian border, two Turkish guards suspect them to be terrorists, all the more so since Hussein and his nephew are Kurds. In order to continue their journey, a death certificate is required. But it cannot be released until it is proven that Hussein wasn't a Turkish citizen. The document is not issued. Turkish bureaucracy wins. And to all this absurd situation, the chaos created by the 2016 Turkish coup d'état attempt is added.

Young German-Turkish director Pinar Karabulut accentuates the grotesque side of the characters. The ghost of Hussein keeps wandering among the living, narrating episodes of his past, among others about the Arab-Israeli war and about the fact that in Vienna people talk more often with dogs than with their neighbours. The story alternates continuously between past and present. And although at Volkstheater normally a wide range of surtitles are used, this time they are completely lacking. Many passages spoken only in Turkish create a big discomfort. It is a deliberate directorial idea, meant to induce the feeling of "strangeness" among the spectators.

Good people's efforts

But not all refugees get the occasion to settle down in Austria. There is for example Iraqi Yousef Ahmad, a protagonist of **Yael Ronen's** new show at Volkstheater. ***Good people*** is intended to be a continuation of *Lost and Found*, a great satire about people eager to dedicate their lives to helping refugees. A big red plastic bull dominates the stage background. Pieces of furniture with red wings are mounted on the set made of inclined black glass. "Red Bull gives you wings". The Austrian energy drinks producer is sponsoring

a reality show to be broadcast on its own television channel. Its purpose: the introduction on the market of an ecological product for the so-called “good people”. But the making of the show is adjourned. The negative asylum response received by Yousef becomes the main topic.

Like all her productions, Ronen’s stories are based on reality. Yousef really exists, his cousin is an actress at Volkstheater. Razor-sharp wit and sparkling dialogues fly as if being driven by the energy drink. Humour is Ronen’s way of “making people listen”. The scene meant to prove how well Yousef has integrated in Austria is delightful: a video shows him reading from Thomas Bernhard's *Old Masters* as part of his volunteer service in a home for the elderly. But despite all the good people’s efforts, the refugee is not allowed to join the group on stage. He doesn’t have a work permit, so he is detained by a guardian in a dressing room. After long deliberations Yousef is finally allowed to cross the scene only for thirty seconds and provided no one interacts with him. The best proof of exclusion.

The refugee crisis provoked to a great extent by “good people” is also one of the topics of **Milo Rau's** new play ***Compassion. The History of the Machine Gun***. Known for his preoccupation for the African genocides, Rau's text has its origins in a thorough research. Interviews done with clericals, victims of African wars and NGO personnel mingle with biographical fragments of the two protagonists of the Berlin premiere directed by Rau himself: Consolate Sipérius, a black actress originating from Burundi and Swiss artist Ursina Lardi, herself active for an NGO in her youth. *Compassion* consists of two monologues. In the first one Consolate recounts how she was adopted by a Belgian couple after having witnessed the killing of her parents. But the “white woman” dominates the scene. Lardi speaks about violence, women abuse and about the tragedy of the refugees on the Balkan route, on which she accompanied Rau during the research period. Rau's tone is provocative, strongly criticising the NGO activity.

The show of young director Alexandru Weinberger-Bara at Volkstheater's small hall brings a surprising innovation. Both monologues are interpreted by the same actress. Due to her darker skin colour, Anja Herden can easily impersonate Consolate. A blond wig and the *whitening* technique achieve the transformation for Lardi's character. Herden manages to convey with brilliance a stunning array of states by modulating only the pitch of her voice. Weinberger-Bara consciously plays with ambiguities. At the beginning, curtains of gauze seem to be hanging at all the sides of the stage. Soon the backstage wall turns out to be a video screen showing Consolate quietly sitting on a chair. Still, in the end she appears on stage from behind the screen. Similarly to Shoshanna Dreyfus from Tarantino's movie

Inglorious Basterds who took revenge on the Nazis by gunning them down, she holds a machine gun in her hand. Although the director told her to use it on the audience, she doesn't do it. This is Milo Rau's call to humanity, as his projects are meant to “transform fatalism into solidarity and beauty”.