

## **Vienna's festival scene: Torn between rejecting new theatre forms and embracing contemporary dance**

**Irina Wolf**

A Colloseum like building featured in the stage backdrop turns first into a several stories parking garage and later into a desolate prefabricated block of flats. This world created by stage designer Paula Wellmann is populated by people resembling rats. They have pointed noses, long mustaches, fleshy tails and red eyes. It is **Ersan Mondtag's** interpretation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Born 1987 in Berlin as child of a Turkish guest-worker family, theatre director Mondtag (who changed his surname Aygün to Mond-tag, meaning Moon-day) is known as “master of the uncanny”. His pictorial worlds reflect the fears of our present day. His *Oresteia* is a rat hole where the citizens are guinea pigs and democracy is an utopia. The musical compositions of Max Andrzejewski are reminiscent of Gregorian chants. They form the perfect pendant to Mondtag's choral arrangements. The director revives the lost art of oratory creating a powerful show of the ancient Greek tragedy.

The production of the Hamburg Thalia Theater was (together with Susanne Kennedy's *The Virgin Suicides – Hystrio 2/2018*) undoubtedly one of the highlights of the **Wiener Festwochen**. Performance, visual arts, film, theatre, music theatre, dance, music, discourse. These were the items on the programme agenda put together for the second year in a row by artistic director Tomas Zierhofer-Kin for the greatest Viennese cultural event held this year from May 11 to June 17. The focus was on topics such as fear, violence, power abuse and the fragility of democracy.

### **Can we bring about change together?**

**Christiane Jatahy's** performance-installation *The Walking Forest* borrows its title from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Only this time Birnam Wood is summoned to get up and march to fight the evil of our war-torn world. While the stories of four politically persecuted people from Syria, Congo and Brazil are shown in a loop on different video screens, several spectators are invited to a bar-like venue to perform strange activities – for example entering the hand in a purse, just to notice that it is full of blood which cannot be wiped off. When suddenly the screens move together to form one wide cinemascope video wall, a woman who kept fainting starts talking about European values and modern slavery. She turns out to be actress Julia Bernat.

Jatahy's work combines, as usual, theatre and film, constantly questioning the border between the actor and the public, the fiction and the documentary. *The Walking Forest* is testing the viewers' willingness to take action. As each of us is part of Birnam Wood.

Another call for more tolerance and against violence was featured by *La Plaza*. The Barcelona duo **El Conde de Torrefiel** established in 2010 by Swiss director Tanya Beyeler and Spanish author and director Pablo Gisbert transforms a public place – thus the title of the performance – in a reflection of ourselves. Faceless and nameless people keep crossing different spaces suggested on the stage such as city squares or museums. They walk in silence, without interacting. Their thoughts are never spoken out loud, are instead projected in Spanish as well as in German on the back wall of the stage. *La Plaza* requires a lot of reading from the audience. This compensates for the lack of action on the stage. *El Conde de Torrefiel's* show is a perfect mirror of the contemporary world, in which loneliness characterizes the human being.

Despite the new esthetic forms put forward by this festival edition, a large part of the spectators rejected the innovations proposed by Tomas Zierhofer-Kin, among others, Gisèle Vienne's dance performance *Crowd* or Kornél Mondruczó's music theatre production of Schubert's *Winter Journey*. Thus, the artistic director was forced to resign only two days after the conclusion of the Wiener Festwochen.

### **Dialogues between visual arts and dance**

For another five weeks Vienna celebrated contemporary dance. Like every year, from July 12 to August 12, thousands of dancers, coreographers and artists from all over the world came together in the Austrian capital for **ImPulsTanz** 2018. At eleven locations (even a sausage booth was transformed into a performative venue) the focus was on two interdisciplinary themes: on the one hand the connection with music and, on the other hand, the proximity to visual arts. Thus, the cooperation of ImPulsTanz with mumok (Vienna's Museum of Modern Art) stood out.

In the stables behind the mumok, **Chris Haring** equipped eight dancers with iPods and Bluetooth speakers, from which different languages and sounds – often

deliberately incomprehensible – emerged (Andreas Berger signs responsible for the compressed polyphonic composition). In the performance series *Foreign Tongues* the Austrian choreographer and his dance company **Liquid Loft** deal with *Babylon (slang)* similar to the confusion of the Tower of Babel. The gripping show starts in the courtyard. Twitching and winding on the asphalt the performers dressed in black clothes set the sounds coming out of the electronic devices in motion. In the second half of the evening, the event shifts into the dark hall of the stables where the dancers are confronted even with nursery rhymes. The performers move between the audience, seek eye contact and also mutely address the viewers. Haring's world is one in which the body has overcome the individual language. Where it matters to pay attention to expression and leave the semantic level behind.

In the museum itself, **Ivo Dimchev** gave *A Selfie Concert*, appropriate to the museum's summer exhibition *Double Lives (Doppelleben)* which focused on visual artists who produced or performed music in public. Since 2014, the Bulgarian-British artist has developed to an ImPulsTanz superstar. This festival edition included two workshops and four shows of the undaunted and radical performer. Dimchev played a concert for three quarters of an hour, while people were invited to take selfies with him. Otherwise the vocal artist would stop singing – thus his threat to the audience. At one point about thirty people stood up at once and gathered around Dimchev playing on his keyboard. Only a critic of the daily newspaper tried, to the general amusement, to hide his face in front of the cell phone camera. Dimchev is a charming performer who really has a great voice.

### **Choreographic dissections of insects and a hollow knight**

It is a knight without a body that turned **Louise Lecavalier** into a dancer without emotion. At least in her piece *Battleground*. The 59-year-old Canadian was inspired by Italo Calvino's novel "The Nonexistent Knight" to a dancing battlefield between solos and duets. Despite unbearable temperatures in Vienna's Odeon Theatre, Lecavalier wears a black hoodie and long shiny black pants. With the hood deep in the face, her head immobility is reminiscent of a knight's armor. In stark contrast, she then hops across the stage back and forth, with her torso bent or straight, her arms and legs whirling, often trembling. Nine scenes long, accompanied by techno-sounds performed live by composer Antoine Berthiaume. Later, another black hooded figure

joins the arena conceived by light designer Alan Lortie. It is her dance partner Robert Abubo. The two move forehead to forehead or roll on the ground. At times Lecavalier jumps Abubo onto the arms and he instantly lifts her in the air. It is a furious duet with a vast movement repertoire.

ImPulsTanz ended with a performance dedicated to the limits of the body and its representation in relation to nature, more specific to bugs. In *Insect train* four female dancers in ballet lace shoes mutate to hybrid beings. Several episodes follow one another in the show of coreographers **Cecilia Bengolea and Florentina Holzinger**. Pop music singing and ballet episodes merge to a bombastic representation. Artistic acrobatics alternate with synchronised dance steps. Although dressed in opulent costumes equipped with several tentacles, the dancers manage magnificently to simulate sexual acts. Using her forelegs for catching and gripping her prey, a Praying Mantis devours an ant (or is it a bee?). Meanwhile, an insectarium is displayed on a video screen. "Hell is on earth and nowhere else". The *Insect Train* is witty as well as reflective. It is an appeal to love, just as the statement of the final tune sung by Valeria Lanzara.