

## Salzburger Festspiele, the power of images

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Eight operas, five stage productions and numerous concerts. Thus was the 98th edition of the renowned Salzburg Festival that took place from July 20 to August 30. Passion, desire and ecstasy were its central themes. World-famous artists like Mariss Jansons, Riccardo Muti, Cecilia Bartoli, Romeo Castellucci, Johan Simons and many more gathered in the picturesque city on the river Salzach.

Jan Lauwers staged an opera for the first time. Known for his multidisciplinary artworks, Lauwers signs direction, choreography and set in Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. Images of naked bodies, reminiscent of a Renaissance painting, cover the stage floor. Singers as well as dancers from Lauwers' Needcompany and from the Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance walk over them. The latter mirror the amorous gambles. Quite intriguing, the conductor's desk remains empty – William Christie withdraws to Les Arts Florissants orchestra which is engrossed into the stage. And in the middle there is always a dancer who turns endlessly clockwise. In the centre of the immoral love story is Sonya Yoncheva as Poppea. While she acts both feminine and avid for her grip on power, Kate Lindsey achieves a remarkable performance in her role as Emperor Nero who adores Poppea. The female Nerone is another surprising feature in this depiction of Monteverdi's erotic saga. Lauwers' opera directorial debut is a Gesamtkunstwerk.

The urge for absolute domination is also the theme of *The Bassarids*. Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012) composed this opera in 1966 deliberately for the Felsenreitschule. Euripides' drama *The Bacchae* served as basis for this important work of the 20th century. Krzysztof Warlikowski, director of the current production, emphasises the political aspect, relating it to the present tendency for right-wing populism. Thus, he moves the action from ancient Greece into today's nowhere. Still, Dionysos drives up the masses to excesses, so that finally Agave kills her son Pentheus, only to notice the next morning whose head she holds in her arms. Sensitive, displaying wonderful lyrical passages as well as great choirs – that was the sound of the new production performed by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra with Kent Nagano as conductor.

Politics was featured also in stage productions. Director Frank Castorf tested as usual the endurance limits of the audience. *Hunger* got to a six-hour marathon. It was a typical Castorf evening, full of associations and repetitions, but still with thrilling moments. Castorf adapts for the stage two novels of Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun: "Hunger" published in 1890 and "Mysteries" written two years later, both with autobiographical traces. As the Nobel laureate of 1920 was an ardent supporter of the Nazis, Castorf overlaps the literary texts with references to Nazism. Aleksandar Denic's revolving stage offers several venues: on the one hand, it is a wooden hut of the starving artist and, on the other, a McDonald's restaurant. Many scenes evolve invisible to the audience in the stage background. They are recorded live by video and projected onto the set. Everyone slips into several roles. A challenge that the ensemble masters with brilliance.

One of the highlights was Ulrich Rasche's staging of Aeschylus' *The Persians*. Known for his love of machines, the 49-year-old director uses huge constructions. Two disks with diameters of 7.5 and 13 meters are located in the stalls and on the stage of the Landestheater. Rasche separates the world of the men from that of the women. The Council of Elders is played by two actresses. They act on the disc in the stalls together with Queen Mother Atossa. Their facial expressions remain rigid, as if they would be wearing masks. The second disk is a technical masterpiece. Multifunctional, it turns in two different directions. A hydraulic system can tilt it threateningly. Sixteen performers, belted as on a galley, represent the army. They chant and stomp, turning the report about the battle between Persians and Greeks into tremendous images. The coproduction with Schauspiel Frankfurt is overwhelming. The music of Ari Benjamin Meyers, reminiscent of Philip Glass, performed live by five musicians seated in the proscenium boxes and in the parquet sides plays a crucial role. Along with the vocal parts of Guillaume François and Arturas Miknaitis, they increase the declamation of the choir. The music never stops, neither do the disks. One soon finds himself involuntarily giving in to the hypnotic rhythm.