

Entertaining political parables for our troubled times

Irina Wolf

“I have the impression that nowadays certain themes are better to be found in the plays of the absurd than in those of Brecht or Heiner Müller”. Thus **Claus Peymann**, ex-manager of the Burgtheater. With Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs* the 81-year-old director pays homage to outgoing manager Karin Bergmann, as starting with September 2019 Martin Kušej will steer the most important Austrian theatre. This production is also a premiere. For the first time in his long directing career Peymann dedicates himself to a piece of the absurd. However, senility is not to be found in his staging, for the two elders interpreted by the accomplished comedians Maria Happel and Michael Mertens are comparatively young. Peymann transforms the piece into a kind of entertainment theatre, for example, three clones assist Semiramis in bringing the chairs faster on stage. But above all, powerful poetic images give a lasting impact on spectator's memories.

Mass media as symbolic power

Still at the Burgtheater, Maria Happel is a rather youthful “old lady” in Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*. **Frank Hoffmann**, outgoing manager of the Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen, creates an accurate, but unremarkable co-production. Together with dramaturg Florian Hirsch, he crosses out a large part of Gullen's characters (including the children of the ill couple). The abstracted piece is a slapstick posse which deals mainly with bourgeois behavior. Hoffmann remains very close to Dürrenmatt's text, but fits into the production an additional level of interpretation, in which Claire Zachanassian's wealth and her ruthlessness are equated with the mechanisms of turbo-capitalism. In the performance marked by great ensemble acting, the full moon over Gullen is a backwards running railway station clock. An indication that the village suddenly makes a leap into the past with the arrival of the old lady. In another scene, the stage is equipped with a massive metal hook hanging from the ceiling. Eventually, it will fall to the floor with a crash as the back wall moves to the edge of the stage marking the condemnation of Alfons III.

Dürrenmatt's parable about money and morality is staged in this season also at Theater in der Josefstadt. Director **Stephan Müller** fittingly makes use of mass media criticism. Several screens include Gullen in the digital image spectacle. Every step of the visit of the old lady is accompanied by Society-TV. Two young actresses act so well as reporters in their flattering sensationalism, as if they were zapping from real life. In foreground shots

Güllen's characters are mercilessly revealed. But the set designed by Sophie Lux is more complex. As if by magic, rooms or forests are called into existence on a transparent screen separating the hall from the stage. Andrea Jonasson plays the multimillionaire Claire Zachanassian, an ideal cast for this insidious revenge drama. Müller's staging proves that *The Visit* is relevant today. Only the end which shows Ill's assassination in a most drastical way via live video is unrelenting.

Hungarian directors make clear statements

A return to classic authors is found also at Vienna's third major theatre. **Viktor Bodó** stages Max Frisch's *The Arsonists* at Volkstheater. Although faithfully respecting the text, the Hungarian director, known for his highly absurd projects, creates a burlesque show, distant from any political interpretation. The acting of the whole ensemble is brilliant. Still, the staging seems to be at times too much of a parody. Slapstick scenes dominate the performance. A collage of several sport games supported by a cheerleader team illustrates the wishes and nightmares of the characters. The choreography is impeccable, the rhythm is particularly alert. There is also shadow theatre and a scene from the classic Casablanca movie. Symbolically, a wind repeatedly keeps opening the doors. And nobody ever knows from which direction it blows. Bombastic opera music contributes to the mysterious atmosphere. The interphone for internal use emits alien sounds when it comes to communicating with the maid in the kitchen. In spite of pure entertainment, at the end there is a harsh awakening to reality. Biedermann advances to the ramp and asks the audience: "Have you known that the three are arsonists? What would you have done if you had been in my place? And at what point, exactly?"

At the small Drachengasse Theatre director **Árpád Schilling** and his co-author Éva Zabezsinszkij use an episode from the political and social upheavals of Hungary in recent years as starting point for their play *Day of Wrath* (Tag des Zorns). The duo tell the true story of nurse Mária Sándor, known as "Sister in Black", who dared to exchange her obligatory white work clothes for the color of mourning to protest against the prevailing conditions at Hungarian nursing homes. With the result that the colleagues let her down. The nature of the explosive subject is turned to a crashing satire. In the co-production with neubuehnevillach, actress Mercedes Echerer gives her directorial debut. She is known to have gained political experience from 1999 to 2004 as member of the European Parliament for the Greens. Echerer provides the one-and-a-half hour performance that deals with depressing existential fears also with wit. The evening is based on movement

and rapid scene changes. This calls for two of the five ensemble members to play several roles. But Day of Wrath not only describes a country that has fallen from communism into a nationalism with increasing social ills, and is moving swiftly towards totalitarianism. The successful destruction of social solidarity, its division by sowing political discord, and in particular the sickness of the health system, also happens elsewhere.