

## Reinventing the Burgtheater

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“Searching for new directions and aesthetics, leaving the mainstream and exposing myself to a certain risk” – thus the intentions of Martin Kušej as new Burgtheater director. The Slovene from Carinthia who until recently ran the Munich Residenztheater promises the Viennese audience an “adequate, contemporary program” that would do justice to the diversity of the city.

Despite the tradition, the launch of the new directorial era was not accomplished by Kušej, but by **Ulrich Rasche**. The fifty-year-old German artist who designs his own décor is known as “director of machine theatre”. Six conveyor belts are on stage. Each measures ten meters in length and can be moved to different positions and inclination angles. They are the only elements of *The Bacchae* after Euripides. All actors, including the chorus, walk for more than three hours on the belts. They declaim the text in a special way dictated by a percussionist placed at the right side, while at the left six musicians play string instruments. Sound, body, light, text – Rasche's work is an example of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Both director and chief dramaturg Sebastian Huber enrich Euripide's text with passages from Nietzsche, Elias Canetti, as well as quotes from politicians of the far-right Austrian Party. “We want to raise this country out of mediocrity”, chants the chorus at one point. Rasche transforms Dionysos' cult into a right-wing populist movement. The roles are reversed: Pentheus is the one who loves democracy. He embodies the voice of reason, while Dionysos is a seducer of the masses. Rasche's production impresses with both its political message and formal approach.

### How beneficial is multilingualism?

“Austria is a mix of many cultures and is defined by this diversity”, says Kušej. Multilingualism is one of his main goals. Four languages are announced for the first premiere at the Akademietheater: German, English, Hebrew and Arabic. Shown is a play written by Lebanese-Canadian author Wajdi Mouawad and staged by Israeli **Itay Tiran**. The family drama *Birds* discusses topics of cultural, national and religious identity against the background of the Middle East conflict. The plot is similar to the story of Romeo and Juliet. The tragedy is reflected in the story of an Arab diplomat of the early 16th century which exemplifies the ordeal between the Muslim and the

Christian world. This figure is the subject of a doctoral dissertation by Wahida, an Arab-born student living in New York who wonders if people can actually be cut off from their roots. In a university library, Wahida meets the Berlin geneticist Eitan, whose family is Jewish. It is love at first sight. However, his parents, Jews living in Germany, disagree to the idea of an Arab daughter-in-law, especially the father. The couple travels to Israel to explore its past. But Eitan is hurt in a bomb explosion. As a result, all family members meet in Jerusalem. Family secrets, repressions and injuries are revealed. The conversation escalates on a passover table which, like all other episodes – hospital, border control, etc, is performed between movable screens. The canvases serve also for surtitles and video projections. The 39-year-old Itay Tiran, a celebrated theatre and television star in Israel, is new to the Burgtheater ensemble. He succeeds to stir strong emotions with a great ensemble. About eighty percent of the evening is spoken in English. But in the end, multilingualism turns out to be a problem for several spectators. Among the newcomers is also the Estonian couple **Ene-Liis Semper and Tiit Ojasoo**, well-known by the NO99 Theatre. At Akademietheater they show their version of Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*. The duo calls its production for which they share the directorial work as well as the set design, costumes and videos a “social poem”. The staging seems artificial with the stage design strongly contributing to this. It shows a series of gray office cubicles separated by glass walls. Behind them there is a long corridor which is often zoomed in to a giant screen placed above. Hardly anything remains on stage from the book magic and power. There is no black cat Behemoth, no bewitched apartment, no frightening madhouse. A straitjacket and some swivel chairs do not create an atmosphere. The dramaturgy follows the structure of the novel. However, Semper and Ojasoo are much more interested in exposing the current human behavior and misconduct, such as greed and mass hysteria triggered by media reports. One of the few shrewd ideas is to portray Jesus Christ degraded to a cleaning woman continuously using a mop. With the exception of Woland who has his grandiose moments, all other characters get lost. As Margarita, Annamária Láng has a strong charisma, but her Hungarian accent is so thick that her words are partly unintelligible. Another goal of the new Burgtheater director is “to engage new directors whose work is unknown in Vienna”. One such name is the Icelandic **Thorleifur Örn Arnarsson**, born in 1978 in Reykjavik. As a first task, he showed his production about the collection of Icelandic deities and heroic legends from the 13th century *The Edda*. The show which premiered in 2018 at Schauspiel Hannover is adapted for the Burgtheater. The

work is conceived in two parts, with the stage being under continuous transformation, while in the middle rises the immense mythical tree Yggdrasil. For the first part, spoken partly in Icelandic, strange creatures crawl under a whole system of moving fluorescent tubes. A bear guides the audience through the partly humorous story of giants, gods and dwarfs. But the legends are contemporarily updated by the use of sketches about walls and political correctness. In the second part, a ship-like construct revolves uninterruptedly. The story changes almost entirely, concentrating on autobiographical traits about the relationship of author Mikael Torfason with his alcoholic father. It takes some time to correlate this with the Norse cosmology. Despite too much fog, which renders the view partly impossible, particularly delightful are the stunning costumes, wonderful songs and the strong acting performance of the whole ensemble.

### **Takeovers from Munich**

**Martin Kušej** also transferred some of his own five year old productions from Munich's Residenztheater to Vienna's Burgtheater. For Edward Albee's **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** a jetty runs across the stage. It is sharply separated by a white wall behind, while below there is an abyss full of shards of emptied glasses. The allegedly most famous marriage excess of drama history opens with a giant green neon sign "Fun and Games" projected on the wall. But as Albee's protagonists clash violently, Kušej separates them brutishly by using blackouts. The text is thus clearly separated into tableaux. Surprisingly, this does not spoil the emotional intensity. Bibiana Beglau as Martha distinguishes herself above all the grandiose actor quartet. In the blink of an eye she can switch from tyrannical seduction to gagging sadness or to a spiteful woman. It is Kušej's way of introducing the new actors of the ensemble to the Viennese public.

Bibiana Beglau is undoubtedly at the center of **Martin Kušej's** idiosyncratic **Faust** interpretation, also transferred from Munich to Vienna. She is Mephisto. In Albert Ostermaier's text version, the first and second parts of the tragedy tumble together. Goethe's monologues are chopped to catchwords, quotes are changed, the dramaturgy is turned upside down. A sacrilege, but also a bold undertaking. The fragmented material depicts a fragmented society, people under the spell of Youtube, Twitter, Instagram and mobile phones. A black platform rises on the stage. A huge crane as well as a female silhouette of a cigarette advertisement jut darkly into the night. Welcome to Fortress Europe! Faust experiences Walpurgis Night as a deafening

techno-rave. At one time he is shot in the belly, but Mephisto wearing a butcher's apron makes up for the lethal mishap. Kušej's Faust drives even the devil to despair. Apparently half the world peace seems to depend on him. Masked freedom fighters and juvenile suicide bombers accompany his actions. None of them survive Faust's power games. By using lots of pyrotechnics, an inferno of episodic violent excesses is released. All in all, a promising start of a new directorial era.