

## Exploring the violent effects of neoliberalism

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Novels that enjoy a positive international reception arrive on the stages of Austrian theatres sooner than one expects. Adaptations of valuable prose works seems more attractive than contemporary plays, often complex in terms of language. This was already the case of Michel Houellebecq, as it is now with Édouard Louis and Virginie Despentes. German speaking theatres seem to have a weakness for contemporary French writers.

Virginie Despentes' "Vernon Subutex" has been described as a literary sensation. The trilogy published between 2015 and 2017 shows how neoliberalism abuses human relations, leading to the rise of radical populists. The hero, Vernon Subutex, runs a record store in Paris. But the negative changes in the music industry lead him to bankruptcy. He can no longer pay the rent, couch-surfs with various acquaintances before finding himself living on the streets at the end of volume one. But as homeless person, Vernon gathers groups of admirers around him because of his DJ abilities. The trilogy presents a large social fresco, for which the 50-year-old French writer has been compared to Balzac. Unscrupulous millionaires, disillusioned porn actors, homosexuals, transsexuals, drug dealers, radical right-wingers and ultra-religious Muslims. Despentes lets a polyphonic chorus talk over a thousand pages.

At Schauspielhaus Vienna, director Tomas Schweigen and playwright Tobias Schuster create a concise version of the first two volumes. The ensemble of ***The Life of Vernon Subutex 1 + 2*** consists of six actors which play several roles. All deliver a great performance, above all the British Jesse Inman as Vernon. Monologues, dialogues and video episodes alternate, merging into a skilled presentation of the characters. However, the two parts of the evening are uneven. For viewers who have not read the books, Vernon's transformation in the second part into a musical guru is inconclusive. This is due to the live music played by Jacob Suske which doesn't convey the mystic-ecstatic atmosphere created by Vernon's playlists. The four-hour show includes a meal served during intermission. There is either a free bowl of soup offered on the street or a menu of three courses that can be enjoyed indoors for an additional fee of 18 euros. The two proposals highlight perfectly the socio-economic gap in society and thus reveal the main theme of the novel.

The same duo Schweigen-Schuster adapt also Édouard Louis' latest novel. Since the publication of his first book in 2015, Louis, 28 years old, has become one of the most important European voices. ***In the Heart of Violence*** tells the story of a man who was

brutally raped and robbed. Early in the morning on Christmas day, Édouard meets young Reda on the streets of Paris. They go home to Édouard, get closer and have sex. Reda tells how his father escaped from Algeria to France. When Édouard discovers his smartphone in Reda's coat, the situation changes. Reda threatens Édouard with a gun and rapes him. Édouard is traumatized, flees to his sister and recounts her his experience. Louis tells a complex story about sexual violence, racism, homophobia and cultural identity. By describing the incident over long distances from the sister's perspective, the novel has a specific theatricality.

Stephan Weber designs a rotating stage similar to a peep box with changing room insights, which generates an atmospherically dense and realistic implementation. This time, Jacob Suske's congenial music evokes powerful, almost cinematic images. The book is not adapted chronologically, yet the staging remains true to the spirit of the novel. Director Tomas Schweigen adds to the tragedy a kind of absurd gallows humor. But above all there are three great actors.

### ***Thyestes Brothers! Kapital - The anatomy of a revenge***

While public funded theatres deal with novel adaptations, independent companies turn to mythology. Founded in 1996 in Berlin, the group “theatercombinat” led by director and choreographer Claudia Bosse presents Seneca's tragedy “Thyestes” from several perspectives in an unusual space choreography. There are no chairs in the “Casino am Kempelenpark”. Spectators are invited to move around or to sit on the floor of the hall of the former canteen of the Siemens company. From the very beginning a community is created between actors and public. The international ensemble made up of five Austrian, Singaporean and British actors, dancers and performers undress, remaining naked for the whole show, except for their shoes. They are the interpreters of Tantalus, Thyestes, his brother Atreus, the Fury and a Messenger. Gradually their bodies, faces and hair are painted in different symbolic colors. Due to the direct approach to the actors, the public can feel the breathing of the artists. In a macabre scene where Thyestes is called upon by his exiled brother to “make peace”, the words are transmitted from one to the other by mouth-to-mouth breathing. Each act of the performance ends with a chorus. The vulnerability to which the bare bodies are exposed is daunting. They form a live organism that moves through the hall, modifying each time the public space.

But Claudia Bosse's choreography is not only visual. Words also play a significant role. ***Thyestes Brothers! Kapital*** contains extracts from Karl Marx's book “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy”, thus tracing the legacy of the tragedy to the present. A sixth

actor recites Marx's paradox of consumable production and productive consumption in a loop. Meanwhile, Thyestes greedily devours the real (!) raw meat of his sons murdered by Atreus. It is one of the most terrifying scenes. Equally haunting is the image of a large tongue of beef with which Thyestes has a conversation. Finally, when the lights go out, the bodies of both spectators and actors form a community from which there is no escape. We are all Atreus and Thyestes at the same time, culprits and victims alike.