

Austrian Festivals during the Pandemic

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On May 25, on a knife-edge, when just about everything else had been cancelled through summer, the **Salzburg Festival's** management decided to go ahead. The announcement that the edition celebrating the festival's 100th anniversary would take place at all raised eyebrows. But a serious package of safety precautions for artists and the audience was worked out. The COVID-19 pandemic forced organisers to cut the available seats from 240,000 to 80,000 and to reduce the programme. Instead of the originally planned 200 events over 44 days, a total of 110 performances were shown during the month of August. Venues and times were adjusted and intermissions excluded to prevent mass gatherings. Otherwise, the city of Salzburg appeared as in any other year: narrow streets and coffee houses filled with people – unlike in Germany, only a very few wearing protective masks. There weren't any buffets or receptions, yet despite restrictions, the festival managed to stage two opera productions, three plays and 53 concerts with top musicians.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal vs. Milo Rau

Theatre performances included two world premieres. **Zdenek Adamec** by controversial Nobel Literature laureate Peter Handke is based on a real-life incident: In March 2003, 18-year-old Adamec publicly set himself on fire on Wenceslas Square in Prague to protest against the state of the world. Handke's text is more an essay than a play. Director Friederike Heller divides the sentences to seven characters managing to highlight the poetic quality of the text. Adamec himself does not appear, being present only through the stories told by the others. The dialogues constantly oscillate between historical case research, personal emotional outbursts, musical reminiscences, literary references and subtle hints to the present.

Another world premiere, **Everywoman** by Milo Rau and Ursina Lardi is a reworking of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's morality play "Jedermann" (Everyman) – the latter is one of Salzburg's enduring traditions. Rau intended initially to develop a dramatic monologue that would take a globalized, postcolonial perspective on Jedermann's themes from the Amazon forest. Due to the Coronavirus outbreak he had to settle for something local. At the center of Everywoman is Helga Bedau, a 71-year-old retired teacher with terminal pancreatic cancer. Rau and Lardi met Bedau in a Berlin hospice and filmed

her discussing her life while seated at a table that recalls the banquet scene in *Jedermann*. Bedau is speaking to the audience, yet she also directly addresses Lardi, who interacts with the video which is projected behind her. Lardi's performance is mostly stripped of sentimentality. Yet it fails to convince.

Jedermann remains the festival's core. In times of the pandemic, the existential question of Hoffmannsthal's play – what happens when death enters our lives – is more acute than ever. Following the tradition of the medieval mystery plays, Hoffmannsthal's text dating 1911 was first performed on August 22, 1920 under the direction of Max Reinhardt right on the square in front of the Salzburg Cathedral. The allegorical drama (in rhyming couplets), subtitled "The Play About the Death of the Rich Man", centers on *Jedermann*, whose callousness and appetite for money and women have offended heaven. When Death pays an unexpected visit, *Jedermann* scrambles to find a companion for his journey to afterlife. Deserted by his friends and lover and confronted with the paucity of his good deeds, he turns to faith in God and dies happily. At the festival that defied expectations by going ahead this year, *Jedermann* felt like business as usual. Up to 1,250 people wearing masks only when entering and leaving were allowed to gather for this outdoor event on allocated fixed seats. Masks were not compulsory during the show, even if recommended. However, about 20% of the audience kept them on all the time. Tickets were personalised and upon entering each ID was checked, to enable contact tracing. As a peculiarity, I would mention that handbags were also examined because hand-held fans were forbidden. Once again, the production was Michael Sturminger's effective 2017 staging, with the charismatic Tobias Moretti in the leading part.

Giving meaning to people's lives through art was a tenet of the Salzburg Festival when it was founded after the catastrophe of World War I. Its 100th anniversary will go down in history. Due to the strict precaution measures, by its end on August 30 there had been no known infection.

Wiener Festwochen Reframed

This edition of the Salzburg Festival played a decisive role for the cultural events that followed. After considerable efforts, the organizers of the Wiener Festwochen, initially scheduled for May 15 - June 21 and canceled for the first time since 1951, managed to offer a live compressed version. Fifteen of the 46 originally scheduled productions were included in the program of **Wiener Festwochen Reframed** held from August 26

to September 26. Indoor performances in the Museum Quarter halls were followed by discussions with the audience. There were also unusual outdoor events, such as a conversation of German artist Thomas Geiger with the statue of Ludwig van Beethoven.

The opening show selected by festival director Christophe Slagmuylder starred Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. **The Golberg Variations, BWV 988** was born during the pandemic isolation as a declaration of love for Vienna where she had her first performance outside Belgium twenty-seven years ago. The new two-part solo is actually a duet with Russian-born pianist Pavel Kolesnikov who masterfully performs Johann Sebastian Bach's "Goldberg Variations". De Keersmaeker's masterpiece was very touching, all the more so when after the final applause the choreographer thanked the audience in a low voice for its presence in the hall.

The work of dancer and choreographer Marlene Monteiro Freitas stood in stark contrast. **Mal – Embriaguez Divina** refers to the "divine intoxication" of a life leaning towards evil. The starting point for this work is George Bataille's essay entitled "Literature and Evil". The staging consists of a collage of performative miniatures built with great attention to detail and a finely nuanced humor. Freitas presents evil as a military unit, courtroom or school. Of the nine characters, one is missing both legs. However, Mozambican dancer Mariana Tembe moves confidently, delivering an impressive physical performance. Evil is above all a blank sheet of paper that is used for various purposes. The choreography is impeccable. The rhythm is sustained, developing in some places an absurd dynamic.

Some theatre performances such as Guillermo Calderón's "Dragón", Toshiki Okada's "Eraser Mountain" and Susanne Kennedy's "Ultraworld" had to be cancelled on short notice due to pandemic travelling restrictions. Only a few artists made it to Vienna. As the central theme of this year's edition was meant to be the anthropogenic phenomenon, Philippe Quesne's **Farm Fatale** is one of the best examples of our damaged relationship with nature. Quesne, who is responsible for directing, concept, set design and costumes, created a funny theatrical event with philosophical depth. The farm actually doesn't exist anymore. Even the birds have disappeared. Only the scarecrows survived the apocalypse. They wear white masks, wigs and rubber boots. Their costumes are filled with straw, so the artists' movements are restricted. The voices are distorted. Farm Fatale overflows with a clumsy activism. Cardboards around a bale of straw display words such as "No Nature / No Future". The scarecrows also

play live music and operate a pirate radio station that includes an archive of nature sounds. The narrative highlights the message that pesticides, turbo cows, genetically modified carrots must be combated. The show abounding in slapstick proves to be an intelligent pastoral urging for a better world. But it is a universe devoid of people.