

The politics of theatre/the theatre of politics: Remaining vital during pandemic

Irina Wolf

Tradition has it that Austrian theatres start their press conferences presenting the plans for the next season in April. Not even the pandemic could change this ritual. Although in spring it was still uncertain whether theatres will be allowed to reopen in autumn, the directors announced the repertoire 2020/2021. However, there were some slight changes. The Burgtheater season normally opens with a co-production created together with the Salzburg Festival. But during the lockdown it had become clear that a staging of Schiller's "Maria Stuart" directed during the summer by Martin Kušej would involve a far too large number of actors. Thus, it was postponed for 2021.

The season bearing the motto "The Politics of the Body" opened instead on September 11 with *Life is a dream*. Pedro Calderón de la Barca's philosophical allegory about human freedom fit in perfectly with the current situation. Known as one who favours classical texts, it is not surprising that **Martin Kušej** selected this 400-year-old play. The story of Prince Segismundo, imprisoned in a tower by his father, King Basilio, following a dire prophecy that the prince would bring disaster to the country and death to the King recalls the first lockdown due to the pandemic. The staging, which lasts more than three hours, bears the mark of the director: the setting is gloomy, the transition between the scenes is done by blackout, the brilliant actors speak without microports. However, the ending is modified, with Kušej adding a fragment from Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Calderón*. Freedom is invoked again, but this time not the one of the individual, but the one of the collective as Rosaura dreams of being detained in a Nazi concentration camp. An ending that metaphorically reminds of refugee camps around the world.

Most appropriately, the opening premiere at the Akademietheater was dedicated to migrants drowned while trying to cross the Mediterranean. In *antigone. a requiem* Austrian author Thomas Köck "recomposes" Sophocles' play, bringing to the fore the failure of the current European migration policy. While in Greek mythology Antigone argues that the law of God is superior to the law of the state, Köck considers that human law is the most important. As in most of his plays written in iambic verse, the main theme intertwines with harsh accusations against capitalism, neoliberalism, technocratic politicians. Dialogue scenes alternate with choral passages accompanied by suggestive music in **Lars-Ole Walburg's** staging. From time to time videos showing a water surface are projected on the back wall. The show is quite static, but homogeneous and convincing.

The dark sides of the Austrian soul

At Theater in der Josefstadt **Claus Peymann** manages a real coup! Not Viennese people might not know that when Peymann took over in 1986 the Burgtheater's directorship he declared Vienna to be old fashioned and himself the only savior. His staging of Thomas Bernhard's "Heroes Square" sparked one of the biggest theatre scandals in the history of post-war Austria. At some point Peymann left to the Berliner Ensemble and now he is not welcome at the Burgtheater. Theater in der Josefstadt, on the other hand, long considered the most conservative of all Viennese theatres, albeit with excellent actors, received Peymann in 2020 with open arms for a successful reviving of Thomas Bernhard's *The German Lunch Table*. The play written at the end of the 1970s consists of seven cabaret scenes from everyday life in the Federal Republic of Germany. The characters are committed to Bernhard's childhood world: church-goers who think of migrants' death by gasification, old Nazis celebrating their acquittal of war crimes. Most significantly, Bernhard's portrait is hanging in the theatre hall above the stage portal, the writer having glowing pinpoint eyes and torturing innocent baroque angels with murderous hands. The show works well in some scenes, less in others, which is not owing to Peymann or the wonderful actors, but rather because the sketches are of different quality.

Meanwhile, at Werk X-Petersplatz, an intimate theatre located in the basement of a building in the city center, the season opened with *The Jelly Man*, *The Future at my Fingertips*. The new play by Iranian author Amir Gudarzi focuses on an Iranian asylum seeker held in pre-trial detention in a Viennese penitentiary. He is accused of raping a woman. The newspapers portray him as a monster. The "jelly man" is so called by the media because he anoints himself with an oily solution, designed to help him get rid of his followers. Yet, he does not consider himself a murderer, but a poet. Amir Gudarzi's text is both political and poetic. It expresses the desire of closeness and the need to be heard. Several local political issues repressed in the past by the Austrian government are added to this central theme. Director **Maria Sendlhofer**'s intelligent staging keeps a good rhythm. Gudarzi's provocative play fits well into the programme of this small theatre which occupies a unique position in Vienna's scene: it offers a place for experimentation especially for artists at the beginning of their career, the emphasis lying on contemporary texts and intercultural perspectives.

Shortly before the lockdown

The Automatic Buffet by Anna Gmeyner was the last premiere before Austrian theatres were again forced to cease operation due to a second lockdown. Gmeyner's rediscovered play written in 1932 was quite successful at its time. In a small town, Adam "fishes" a young

woman about to commit suicide from a pond. He has big plans for his town: he wants to transform the pond in order to provide the population with healthy food and clean water, to create jobs for a future cannery. But his own wife, who is the owner of the automatic buffet and some important town members stand in his way. Eve, the young woman, will help Adam, despite being foremost identified as a sexual object by men, an “advantage” that Adam will make use of. The staging at the Akademietheater is grotesque and full of humor. Director **Barbara Frey** and set designer Martin Zehetgruber have found an ingenious solution for the buffet. Even the pianist is a living automaton: he sits quietly in a small room shaped like a box, which he is allowed to leave only when someone inserts a coin at the door.

Although *The Welkin* by Lucy Kirkwood premiered at the end of September, it made headlines on November 2, the last evening before the lockdown and at the same time of the terrorist attack in Vienna. In her newest play, Kirkwood, one of the currently most successful British authors, deals with questions of feminism. *The Welkin* is a thriller whose action takes place in 1759 in a small village in Norfolk. A couple is accused of having killed a girl. The man is hanged, but the woman, Sally Poppy, claims she is pregnant. Thus, she cannot be executed, only deported. A jury composed of twelve matrons has to determine the pregnancy. As the women deliberate, an angry crowd gathered outside wants to see Sally hanging. Lucy Kirkwood wonderfully portrays the paradox of women's situation, being on the one hand a guarantor of respectability and morality gained through their motherhood, on the other hand victims of male violence. The show directed by **Tina Lanik**, which lasts more than three hours, is distinguished by a brilliant all-female acting ensemble. On November 2, after intermission, while the jury was judging Sally Poppy, cell phone screens flashed in the hall, whispers of “police” and “barricades” were heard. Some spectators thought it was part of the show. When Martin Kušej appeared on stage after the applause, he should have talked about the Coronavirus, but his speech was completely different. He explained that several shootings had occurred in the city center and as danger persisted, according to police instructions, the Burgtheater will close its gates. At 10:20 pm about 500 spectators were stuck in the building. Half an hour later the management organized a spontaneous discussion with the public. It was only after midnight that the evacuation began under police protection. For many spectators this will remain an unforgettable evening, not only due to the terrible attack, but also thanks to the remarkable socialization experience inside the cultural institution turned into a place of maximum security during pandemic.