

## Criss-crossing the deluge of premieres and festivals

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Since performing arts venues in Austria began reopening on May 19 – after their longest shutdown since World War II – Vienna has seen an avalanche of live cultural offers. Paradoxically, just four days before the opening, the Burgtheater announced the beginning of its renovation. Better seating facilities and a new air conditioning system will be installed until the new season starts in September. However, although the big theatre hall is closed, the institution showed a large number of premieres in its three other venues.

### A philosopher among classics

The post-lockdown "season" opened at the Akademietheater with *Miss Julie*. The space and the way it works are the starting point in **Mateja Kolečnik's** production. In her heavily shortened stage version (a brisk 70 minutes), the Slovenian director operates with the (in)visibility of scenes. While in the original text Kristin sleeps through the main act and can only draw her conclusions from the feast, here she is "locked up" in the bathroom, an ear witness of the rendezvous. Once she even gets a bare butt cheek served on the glass of the door. The sound level is pivotal, lifting suspense out of ambush: steps are heard intensely, wine bottles are effectively uncorked, water gurgles into the sink, into the bathtub and through the toilet flush. Kolečnik succeeds in staging an exciting power study of Strindberg's "Miss Julie". For their part, the British-Irish duo Dead Center set out to fathom Ludwig Wittgenstein's "Tractatus" with theatrical forms. But this is only the framework of *All that is the case*. The core of the show is the rampage that happened in the city center of Graz in 2015, in which three people were killed and 36 injured. **Ben Kidd and Bush Moukarzel's** performance cleverly changes between crime scene inspection and "Macbeth" bloodlust. The protagonist (Wittgenstein) performs magical transformations on a tiny stage model. He builds forests to scale by pushing twigs around. The theatre model aims to provide clarity of what was going on in the Bosnian speedster. The black box helps to transform "frozen dummies" into people made of flesh and blood. The other five actors act in front of a green screen set. Pre-produced images are cut into it. Amazingly, it all makes sense. The in-depth investigation leads down to the post-Yugoslav civil war in 1993. From there, the script changes again to Macbeth, teeming with witches and bloodied victims. The murderer's conscience is turned against itself, until there is nothing more to say. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent", said Wittgenstein.

My favourite of the premieres is *Bunbury*. **Antonio Latella** lets the lights in the audience

stay on and gives the excellent eight actors a lot of space. In the minimalistic stage design of Annelisa Zaccheria – two theatre seats at the edge of the stage, a portable ballet bar and a floor hatch – the locations of the plot are marked through boards on a music stand. The rest can be imagined by the audience. The performance is anything but “earnest”. Cabaret and slapstick prevail, broken by moments choreographed by Francesco Manetti. Scenes are often repeated in a playful way, fast forward and rewind. At the end, the audience is encouraged to read the original text of the play aloud from boards lifted up by the butler. But the quality of this production lies in the details, in the many small hints, like a green carnation that Wilde's counterpart wears on the lapel. Graziella Pepe's costumes make for a wonderfully superficial high society. The show captures Wilde's spirit of play and is highly entertaining.

In contrast to the Burgtheater, the Volkstheater celebrated the reopening after its renovation. **Kay Voges** called the start of his tenure as artistic director "Housewarming". He did not take any risks and put two successful productions from his former position on the program: Thomas Bernhard's "Histrionics" and Beckett's *Endgame*. The latter premiered at Schauspiel Dortmund in 2012. Voges cuts the four-person play down to two protagonists. The parent figures Nagg and Nell are deleted. Clov and Hamm are called Lum and Purl. They actually originate from the play "Some Messages to Space" of German author Wolfram Lotz. Hardly a scene does without slapstick, clever sound effects add even more to the diabolical situation. Every step of Lum is loud and threatening. It is accompanied by a flicker of the light bulb hanging from the ceiling. All appears even stranger in the compact black peep-box stage design. Costumes are also black and white, reminding of the era of silent films. Beckett's text is recognizable despite the refrain-like repetitions and reinforced sound.

### **Acts against the lack of perspective**

At about the same time, the Wiener Festwochen commenced. Normally, the festival which is turning 70 this year happens in May and June. Due to the pandemic and the late relaxations, the programme is divided in two parts, with the second programmed for August and September. Artistic director Christophe Slagmuylder focused on interdisciplinary approaches by choosing productions in which music and words are in a constant dialogue. A large number of the works are produced or co-produced by the Festwochen. One of these is *The Mother. A learning play*. The staging procedures of the legendary **The Wooster Group** are well known. The focus lies not on the interpretation of a work, but on the method of representation. The production of Bertolt Brecht's revolutionary drama "The Mother" (1932) exemplifies this elaborate art. In his didactic play based on a novel by Maxim Gorky, Brecht

describes Pelagea Vlasova's career from frugal working woman to militant communist. In addition to the usual objects – samovar, red flag, tsar's image, etc – director Elizabeth LeCompte offers an artistic soundtrack. Compositions by Amir ElSaffar, including Hanns Eisler's original music, are used throughout the evening. The dialogues are largely synchronized, which emphasizes their automatism and results in a formalized play. Occasionally the spoken word ends up in a chant. But the 80-minute performance has a hard time wearing its patina. The big question in the background remains whether the time of revolutions is not already over as a whole.

In addition to such recognized figures, the festival also opens up to new generations of artists. One of them is the Turkish duo **Melis Tezkan and Okan Urun**, who collaborate under the name "biriken". Their show *Sahibinden Kiralık* (which means "For Rent") is based on the eponymous text published in 2002 by author Özen Yula. It is another co-production with the Festwochen. The play is about five men and one woman who sell their bodies. It mercilessly reveals relationships of dominance and exploitation that exist in the shadow of bourgeois society. Homophobia is addressed as well as the economic hopelessness of those at the bottom. The duo get along with only a park bench and two screens. The spartan scenes are enriched by live video recordings of a table from which the protagonists repeatedly grab props: lighters, razor blades, etc. The direction relies largely on the expressiveness of the acting. In two video monologues, an older actress embodies the young woman in old age. She philosophizes in retrospect about her first great love who was murdered, making it clear that the hope that everything will get better at some point is a lie. The show seems particularly explosive against the political background in Turkey. The need for resistance to oppressive circumstances is also the topic in *Quasi*, a co-production between Wiener Festwochen and Kaserne Basel. In her new play, director and playwright **Azade Shahmiri** lets three characters tell of life in Iran today. Their stories remain incomplete, like the unfinished, quasi-documentary film of director Hamid Jafari projected in the background. The poetic scenes filmed in a coffee house illustrate the fragmentary nature of the three people who act live on stage. Their stories are interwoven, underscoring the permeability of identities. No plot, no dialogues, no set design. For almost two hours one struggles to put the narrative fragments together to a halfway coherent whole – in vain. Conventional storytelling has been undermined. Despite several lengths, the combination of language, movements and images is intriguing. Only towards the end there is a special effect. And yet, everything remains in suspense.