

Reflections on our troubled times

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For its 101st edition, the **Salzburg Festival** presented mostly works that could not be realised in 2020. Shakespeare's dramas "Henry VI" and "Richard III" were interwoven by director **Karin Henkel** and dramaturge Tom Lanoye into *Richard the Kid & the King*. First of all, the text deals with Richard's childhood. Are lust for power and lack of empathy the result of a blighted infancy? The best example would be the horse scene. Richard wished for one before he could have given a kingdom for it. And he got it. He is riding the rocking horse when the chopped off heads of his father and brother Rutland, packed in nylon bags, are slammed down to the floor. A traumatization that Richard takes on motionlessly. The second part turns to the political environment surrounding the infamous ruler. It's about fear and the desire to stay in power despite lies. Spheres representing planets are floating above the stage designed by Katrin Brack as an inclined disc. Smoke and light create strong images. No video and no machinery are used. Above all, there is a brilliantly coordinated ensemble. The main part is played by Lina Beckmann, actress at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg. Few actors take on many roles in this royal drama. Kristof van Boven is not only Henry VI, but also Queen Margaret, Prince Edward and Lady Anne – a multi-gendered hodgepodge of apparently weak figures. Both Kate Strong and Bettina Stucky play double male-female roles. Above all, satire and self-reflection break into the tragedy in this impressive staging.

After more than 700 performances in a century, *Jedermann* is still the central component of the Salzburg Festival. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's drama was conceived as a renewal of the English medieval morality play "Everyman". At the core, Jedermann poses this question: what happens when death enters our lives? And today this topic is more acute than ever. After **Michael Sturminger's** first staging in 2017, this year the director proposed a new production thanks to the fresh casting of the leading roles: Lars Eidinger shines in the title part, Verena Altenberger is the one he is courting. The show has never been so feminine. Death, faith, God and the devil are played by women. Additionally, Sturminger wanted to break up "male dominant thought patterns", which is why some characters are gender fluid. This is especially evident in the costumes designed by Renate Martin and Andreas Donhauser. They are stylistically located across the ages – from the Renaissance to the 21st century. Although

Hofmannsthal's original text is spoken, the production reveals many comical scenes, for example the dispute between Jedermann and his debt servant, which turns into a boxing match in the ring.

Tracking Global Political Hot Spots

The beginning of the Salzburg Festival on July 17th marked the end of the first part of the **Wiener Festwochen**. There, too, some productions were presented that could not be shown in 2020, such as *Catarina or about the beauty of killing fascists* by **Tiago Rodrigues**. The show built as a psychological thriller honors the memory of Catarina Eufémia, a peasant woman killed in 1954 by Salazar's dictatorship. In order to do justice, a rural family engages in an annual ritual of killing a "fascist" politician. Many have already been executed, but this time, while the abducted individual is awaiting execution, the united front of the family begins to fall apart. The one who should shoot him according to tradition, refuses to do it. A generational conflict arises. Rodrigues turns the dialogues into a debate on issues of freedom, justice, loyalty and guilt. The artistic director of the National Theatre in Lisbon examines the global renaissance of right-wing populism. All seven members of the family are carrying the name of Catarina and are dressed up in identical traditional skirts. Only the prisoner is wearing a business suit. He will await his execution in silence. For reasons I will not reveal here, the fascist is eventually released. And he begins to hold a long speech that perfectly resembles the ones of the far-right. During fifteen minutes he succeeds in provoking to such an extent that part of the audience seems to forget that there is only an actor on stage. While some spectators get up and leave, others start booing or singing songs like "Bella Ciao". The public's involvement went so far that spectators continued to comment long after the end of the show.

In addition to such established names, the festival also opened up to new generations of artists. The aim is to create an international space that will bring contemporary pieces from around the world to the forefront, as well as examine the positions of the so-called "young" generation. The specialty of Thai artist **Wichaya Artamat** is to put banal meetings on stage that directly reflect political issues. In *Four Days in September (The Missing Comrade)* the setting is of foremost importance. There are a lot of swimming aids on stage. They symbolically represent the yellow rubber ducks which the protesters used in 2020 to protect themselves. On the other hand, the outdated

ceiling fan, which also serves as a lighting device, depicts the king (in the Thai anthem, he "keeps the citizens' heads chilly"). The show is marked by four dates: September 1 (1990), September 11 (2001), September 19 (2020) and September 21 (2032). Two of them represent significant moments in Thai history. Except for the unusual sound of Thai language, the humorous staging is aesthetically no different from contemporary Western theatre, whether it's live videos or projections of newspaper photos.

British director **Alexander Zeldin** showed *Faith, Hope and Charity*. The first part of his acclaimed trilogy "The Inequalities" tells of a group of different people who meet in a run-down community center for having a warm meal and singing together in a choir. Austerity has ravages England. On stage it looks accordingly dreary and it is raining through the ceiling of the community center. Behind the kitchen counter there is the somewhat crisp, but warm-hearted cook Hazel. Everybody is socially exposed to the bone – the stuttering choir director, the sensitive raven mother, the young autistic person, the Sudanese refugee woman. The real strength of the piece, however, lies in its metaphorical and allegorical structure. Zeldin, a child prodigy who was already staging at the age of 16, carefully blurs the invisible line that separates what is happening on stage from the audience. He stages his own text very realistic with an ensemble of amateurs and professionals. The figures develop depth and multidimensionality. Music is the central motif of the evening, it is supposed to symbolize the hope that still exists in all the rampant hopelessness. However, the plot leaves no illusion of salvation or recovery.

After a short summer break, and while the Salzburg Festival was still going on, the second part of the Wiener Festwochen began on August 24. For its new production, the performance group **Nature Theater of Oklahoma** set up 25 years ago by Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška has turned to deconstruct the opera format with a ghost story after a climate apocalypse. In *Burt Turrido. An Opera* a shipwrecked man is saved from drowning by the water spirit Emily and washed up on the beach of a once flourishing island that has become almost uninhabitable. The man is baptized with the name Burt Turrido and becomes a slave of Queen Karen and King Bob who govern this Banana Kingdom (the former Greenland). Burt should also act as sperm donor to ensure the continued existence of the dynasty. In the libretto based on Richard Wagner's "Flying Dutchman" there is a wild mix of themes like migration, climate change, authority and colonialism. The authenticity of the production lies in the aesthetic which is reminiscent

of amateur plays with sliding curtains and manually movable cardboard crests. The plot is unusually sung to country music, brilliantly implemented on stage by an acting quintet who also performs to *line dances*. This shamelessly cheerful social criticism is original and funny, but the duration of four hours becomes tiring due to the endless repetition in music and choreography. Nevertheless, one is reconciled in the end when a baby, the product of an alien abduction, rides into the future on a narwhal as the only surviving human being, laughing and babbling.