

## It's all about fiction against conformism

Irina Wolf

Christophe Slagmuylder, the new artistic director of the Wiener Festwochen, placed the question of the contemporary in the focus of the festival which ran from 10 May to 16 June. By striving to be an antidote to any form of censorship and populism, this edition presented the most recent works conceived by major figures of the international dance (Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker, Marlene Monteiro Freitas, Francois Chaignaud), film (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Béla Tarr) and theatre scene (Angélica Liddell, Krystian Lupa and Milo Rau, among many others).

### Socio-political paradigms

By envisaging Austria's capital as a pulsating place, the opening weekend got off to a start in the northern part of the Danube. Of all Viennese districts, the 22<sup>nd</sup> one has the highest population growth and the lowest average age. Several artistic projects were developed here by involving the inhabitants. But the central piece was *Diamante*, a fictional city brought to life by Argentinean author and director **Mariano Pensotti** and his Grupo Marea. The work developed for the 2018 Ruhrtriennale has a complex narrative style, being at the same time strongly cinematographic. About 100 years ago, a German businessman built Diamante for German workers employed in his mining company Goodwind in northern Argentina. Pensotti's more than five hours and logistically very complex three-act epos depicts the decline of this utopian Silicon Valley. Ten houses and a car are in a huge hall. By moving from one house to the other and peering inside through large glass walls, spectators follow the inhabitants. Despite some lengths, Pensotti's intricately layered story probes many topics – power struggle, adultery, generation conflict, lack of morality and ethics. Surtitles mingle with philosophical quotations from Engels and Deleuze. The 27 episodes are a powerful parable of our times.

Amid days of political turmoil in Austria over the "Ibiza video" scandal that led to the overthrow of the government by a vote of mistrust in the Viennese parliament, **Krystian Lupa's** *Proces* gained a deeper significance. Based on Kafka's novel "The Trial", the show creates strong analogies to Poland after the PiS right-wing party assumed power. The more than five-hour theatre marathon consists of three acts. But Lupa does not stage only Kafka's text. In the second part he moves away from the novel and introduces Kafka's biographical aspects as well as personal visions of his actors for saving the world. However, the artistic value of this adaptation is questionable, as dialogues are

cumbersome and the story becomes blurred. The offstage murmuring voice, which belongs to the director, intensifies the atmospheric density. Lupa makes subtle use of video projections in an impressive set designed by himself to illustrate a depressing world. Videos showing violence to the last detail interlock with live play in **Milo Rau's** *Orest in Mosul*. By creating this production in a crisis area, the Swiss artist respects his last year's NT Ghent Manifesto. Rau identifies the events of Aeschylus' tragedy with the situation of the people in the midst of Iraqi ruins. His Belgian ensemble rehearsed in the former IS stronghold and organized a workshop for Iraqi male drama students who play the choir in the performance via video recording. The personal references of the actors are central. In the focus of the production lies the question of whether it is possible to break the cycle of violence. Rau virtuously operates his fragmented story on several narrative levels. What one should not expect is a reinterpretation of the ancient classic. Rau only takes the "Oresteia" as a quarry for a clever political collage.

### **Machines, Riddles and #MeToo**

The role of culprit vs. victim, dominance vs. obedience preoccupies many artists. Swedish visual artist **Markus Öhrn** deals in *3 Episodes of Life* with cases of power abuse in the workplace related to the #MeToo debate. Actors wearing masks with inflatable dinghy-shaped lips act in a surreal aesthetic with live music accompaniment. The silent film form used would be interesting if the exercise of power would not end in a mudbath of sperm, excrement and menstrual blood. **Angélica Liddell's** newest work draws on Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* to explore the present forms of prudery in the context of the #MeToo debate. For her, the A no longer stands for Adultery, but for the Art that resists the imposition of constraints. In the midst of eight naked male bodies, Liddell places women's suffering in the foreground. Besides a misogyny tirade directed against women over forty years old, her dramaturgy is complemented by quotes of Sartre, Derrida and Foucault. But most of all, wonderful pictorial images prevail.

A tribute to art was brought also by **Romeo Castellucci** who presented two performative works. Both connect bodies and machines, mysterious images and text (by Claudia Castellucci) to investigate the present. *La vita nuova* recaptures discarded artistic territory. In a huge hall in southern Vienna about 30 cars covered with white tarpaulins are parked under rows of flickering neon lights. Five black men dressed in white priest's robes perform a mass. Castellucci reverses the order. He starts from modern times to arrive at Christ's birth. A car is turned upright. By rotating it, the passing of centuries is revealed through different objects placed on the base plate. In the end the car lands on the roof. The rituals

are followed by the Liturgy of the Word. According to the speaker, the parable of the upturned car stands for the revolt of the craftsman, the one of decorative art against free art. However, the text is the weaker part of this "Mass". The show convinces through its atmospherically strong images.

Visually disturbing is *Le Metope del Partenone* which turns unheralded blows of fate into sculptures. Six actors, ambulances, nurses, prostheses, fake blood, medical instruments – all in an empty hall, in which the spectators are allowed to move freely. The six scenes of failed rescue attempts narrate a procession of human pain. But there is a counterpoint consisting of a series of riddles projected onto the wall. Following the metopes of ancient friezes that render mythical battles in stone, Castellucci deliberately violates taboos and turns viewers into voyeurs. This play with death and fate premiered in 2015 in Basel. It exposes the fleeting nature of life versus the perennial nature of art. Both works reconfirm the position of this festival edition as a multidisciplinary art event.

### **Magical highlights**

One of the absolute festival highlights was Isabelle Huppert as Mary Stuart in **Robert Wilson's** *Mary Said What She Said*. The three-part monologue written by author Darryl Pinckney is based on Stefan Zweig's novel and on Mary's original letters. In his usual minimalist staging and with perfectly chosen music (Ludovico Einaudi), Wilson proves again a master of light and shadow. There is a bright white high heel shoe on stage. It disappears into a hole located in the floor. White is also a chair surrounded by rays and fog, whereas a devastating falling curtain is black. But above all the French star lies in the focus of attention. Huppert expresses her feelings and thoughts in such rapid pace and with unprecedented precision that she leaves the audience in amazement. She sketches Mary's moving life mercilessly in a flow of thoughts, with laughs, cruel repetitions and stylized movements, staggering across the stage. An absolutely captivating show.

A fascinating tenderness characterizes *Sopro* – breath in Portuguese. By creating a play centered on Cristina Vidal, the prompter at Lisbon's Dona Maria II National Theater for the past 41 years, **Tiago Rodrigues** praises theatre's backstage without ever falling into demagogy. He reverses the roles by entrusting the prompter with the keys of the staging: she manipulates the five young and very good performers who become her tools of expression. Cristina is not a "character", she does not play. She is herself. She murmurs, goes from one actor to another, never leaves her booklet containing the text. Balancing fragments of classical texts (for example, by Racine, Chekhov and Sophocles) and anecdotes collected from Cristina, the deeply emotional and at times funny piece is driven

by a desire to represent the invisible. *Sopro* is a moving homage to a vanishing profession that conjures up the spirit of theatre and keeps memories alive.