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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Exploration of Legacy, Isolation, and Human Connection

Schubert Theater, 22.10.2024 [ENA]

Der schlafende Wal, a gripping collaboration between Paulus Hochgatterer (text), Simon Meusburger (direction), and Manuela Linshalm (performance), offers a thought-provoking reflection on the legacy of Anton Bruckner without ever bringing the composer directly on stage. The production manages to explore the looming influence of this Austrian musical titan through an intimate, moving, and unsettling narrative.

This narrative contrasts two women from vastly different walks of life. It's a quietly powerful and brilliantly crafted piece that interlaces themes of isolation, generational conflict, and the weight of history. The story centers around a young punk woman, sentenced to community service for various minor crimes, who must assist an elderly lady bound to her room due to mobility issues. From the outset, we see the stark differences between the two characters. The punk woman embodies youthful rebellion, disdainful of the past and indifferent to the cultural touchstones that the older generation holds dear. Her energy is raw, untamed, and rebellious.

In stark contrast, the elderly woman represents a lifetime of quiet reverence toward Bruckner, whose presence permeates her every action, thought, and feeling, even though he himself is never physically present in the play. One of the most remarkable aspects of the production is its exploration of how music – specifically Bruckner's symphonies, and particularly his Seventh – becomes a conduit for both connection and conflict. The older woman's devotion to Bruckner seems absurd to the young punk, who dismisses the music as repetitive and lifeless. But this discord is what sets the stage for the relationship that gradually unfolds between them.

The performance by Manuela Linshalm is nothing short of mesmerizing. She portrays both women with astounding nuance, seamlessly shifting between the gruff irreverence of the young punk and the fragile dignity of the elderly woman. Her ability to embody such opposing characters – each struggling with their own isolation – is a testament to her versatility and depth as a performer. Through Linshalm, the audience witnesses a subtle but profound transformation, as both women confront their own limitations and assumptions.

At the heart of this production lies a deep investigation of how people cope with their lives being shaped by forces beyond their control – forces like history, culture, and societal expectations. The older woman's obsession with Bruckner, rooted in her estrangement from her absent husband, points to a life consumed by

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longing and displacement. Bruckner's music, with its complexity and grandeur, becomes both her escape and her prison. For her, the composer's symphonies are a guide to a "correct" life, a life lived according to certain principles of order, humility, and transcendence.

Yet, as the audience soon discovers, there is an underlying sense of dread – a quiet horror lurking beneath her reverence for Bruckner's music, as if it serves to suppress an unspeakable accusation or grief. This undercurrent of unease is expertly conveyed by Soffi Povo's puppet work, which introduces figures from Bruckner's life in strikingly imaginative ways. These puppets, with their exaggerated features and eerie movements, become haunting representations of the composer's colleagues and contemporaries, adding a surreal layer to the narrative. The puppetry serves as both an extension of the older woman's inner world and a reminder of the broader, almost mythic, stature of Bruckner within Austrian culture.

Simon Meusburger's direction is brilliantly understated, allowing the tension between the characters to build naturally and organically. His use of space is especially effective – the confined setting of the older woman's room reflects the psychological confinement both women experience. The sparse, claustrophobic environment is broken only by moments when the music seems to expand beyond the physical limits of the stage, filling the space with its emotional intensity. These moments are particularly striking, as they juxtapose the immensity of Bruckner's work with the deeply personal and intimate struggles of the characters.

Thematically, *Der schlafende Wal* is rich with complexity. On the surface, it is a story about the intergenerational clash between a young woman who rejects the cultural heritage of the past and an older woman who clings to it as a lifeline. However, the play deftly avoids simplistic conclusions. As the young woman grows increasingly frustrated by the older woman's obsession with Bruckner, we see that her frustration is not just with the music itself, but with the constraints of a worldview that glorifies an unattainable ideal. The young woman's initial dismissal of the older woman's tastes and values gives way to a begrudging respect, and eventually, a fragile bond emerges between them.

This relationship is perhaps the most compelling aspect of the production – it is a slow-burning, emotionally charged dynamic that never feels forced or contrived. The young woman's resistance to being "converted" to the older woman's worldview is palpable, yet there is a moment when the audience realizes that the music is having an effect on her, even if she doesn't fully understand it. In this way, Bruckner's music becomes a metaphor for the forces in life that shape us, often without our consent or awareness.

In the final scenes, the production leaves us with a sense of unresolved tension. There is no neat reconciliation, no grand epiphany. Instead, *Der schlafende Wal* reminds us that the past, with all its cultural weight and emotional baggage, continues to haunt the present. The play leaves the audience to ponder how

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we engage with history and legacy – whether we embrace it, resist it, or find some tenuous way to coexist with it.

In sum, Der schlafende Wal is a masterful exploration of human connection, isolation, and the inescapable influence of the past. It's a production that challenges its audience to think deeply about how we navigate the legacies we inherit, and how music, as an art form, can simultaneously elevate and confine us. With stellar performances, incisive writing, and haunting direction, this piece stands as a fitting tribute to Anton Bruckner on the occasion of his 200th birthday, while also offering a timeless reflection on the complexities of human relationships.

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