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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## A Vibrant Exploration of Dreams, Doubts, and Determination

Vienna Volksoper, 04.12.2024 [ENA]

Few musicals capture the spirit of creative struggle, the anxiety of unfulfilled potential, and the relentless pursuit of dreams as viscerally as Jonathan Larson's tick, tick... BOOM!. In this Volksoper production, directed with remarkable sensitivity and innovation, the semi-autobiographical work of Larson is given new life, delivering a performance that is both emotionally compelling and artistically striking.

With its seamless blend of English and German, this production captures the universal themes of the original while grounding it in a local context, resonating deeply with its audience. Jonathan Larson, best known for his groundbreaking musical Rent, was a visionary who reshaped the landscape of musical theater. His work reflects the struggles of a generation caught between societal expectations and personal aspirations. tick, tick... BOOM! is no exception. Written initially as a one-man show and later adapted for three performers, the piece delves into the psyche of a young artist, Jon, on the cusp of his 30th birthday.

Torn between his passion for creating transformative art and the pressures of stability, Jon's journey is one of existential questioning and relentless hope. The Volksoper's decision to stage this deeply personal work is both ambitious and inspired. Known for its classical repertoire, the theater demonstrates its adaptability and willingness to explore contemporary narratives with this production. By doing so, it not only broadens its artistic horizons but also introduces Larson's genius to new audiences.

The Volksoper's staging is a masterclass in minimalism and creativity. The set design, understated yet evocative, mirrors Jon's internal struggle—cluttered with symbols of his chaotic life, yet structured to accommodate moments of clarity and revelation. The use of lighting plays a significant role, shifting from warm, nostalgic tones during Jon's reflections to stark, cold hues in moments of doubt and conflict.

The decision to incorporate multimedia elements—such as projections of New York City skylines and snippets of Jon's handwritten notes—adds depth to the storytelling. These visuals not only situate the narrative firmly in Jon's world but also underscore the universality of his experience, allowing audiences to see their own struggles reflected in his. Central to the production's success is the trio of performers who embody Jon, his girlfriend Susan, and his best friend Michael. Their chemistry is palpable, and their ability to switch between moments of humor, tension, and vulnerability is nothing short of remarkable.

The actor portraying Jon delivers a tour-de-force performance, capturing the character's frenetic energy and

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boundless passion. His voice, rich and expressive, soars through Larson’s challenging score, bringing every note to life with precision and emotion. His monologues are particularly affecting, as he navigates the fine line between self-doubt and determination, drawing the audience into his inner world.

Susan is portrayed with a blend of warmth and frustration, her longing for stability and love clashing with Jon’s relentless drive. Her solo moments are poignant, her voice carrying the weight of unspoken compromises and dreams deferred. Michael, Jon’s pragmatic yet supportive best friend, brings humor and heart to the production. His transformation—from an artist who shares Jon’s dreams to a corporate professional seeking security—is handled with nuance, and his big number, “Real Life,” is a standout moment, both musically and thematically.

Larson’s music is the beating heart of tick, tick... BOOM!. The Volksoper orchestra, under the baton of a conductor who clearly understands Larson’s unique blend of rock, pop, and traditional musical theater, delivers a performance that is both dynamic and sensitive. The score, which features standout numbers like “30/90,” “Come to Your Senses,” and “Louder Than Words,” retains its raw energy and immediacy, drawing audiences into Jon’s turbulent world.

One of the production’s most impressive achievements is its bilingual approach. The seamless integration of German and English lyrics adds a layer of accessibility without compromising the emotional integrity of the songs.

For instance, the transition between languages in “Why” highlights the universality of Jon’s struggles, allowing the message to resonate across cultural boundaries. While tick, tick... BOOM! is rooted in Larson’s personal experiences as a young artist in 1990s New York, its themes are timeless. The questions it raises—about the pursuit of dreams, the passage of time, and the sacrifices required for success—are as relevant today as they were when Larson first penned them.

This production does an excellent job of connecting these themes to the present day. The pressures of balancing passion and practicality, the fear of failure, and the longing for meaningful connection are experiences that transcend generations. By situating Jon’s story within a broader context, the Volksoper invites audiences of all ages to reflect on their own lives and aspirations.

The direction of this production strikes a perfect balance between honoring Larson’s original vision and introducing fresh, innovative elements. The pacing is tight, ensuring that the narrative never drags while allowing moments of introspection to breathe. The choice to emphasize the interplay between the personal and the universal—through both staging and performance—creates a production that feels both intimate and expansive.

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The director's ability to draw nuanced performances from the cast is particularly commendable. Each character feels fully realized, their relationships authentic and layered. This attention to detail ensures that the emotional beats of the story land with maximum impact.

By staging tick, tick... BOOM!, the Volksoper has demonstrated its commitment to innovation and its willingness to take risks. This production is a testament to the power of musical theater to tell deeply personal stories that resonate on a universal level. It is a celebration of Larson's legacy, a tribute to the resilience of artists, and a reminder that the pursuit of dreams, no matter how daunting, is always worth the effort.

For fans of musical theater, this production is a must-see. For those unfamiliar with Jonathan Larson's work, it is a compelling introduction to one of the most influential voices in the genre. And for anyone who has ever questioned their path in life, it is a deeply moving exploration of what it means to follow one's heart.

The Volksoper's tick, tick... BOOM! is more than a performance; it is an experience—one that leaves the audience inspired, introspective, and profoundly moved. Bravo!

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