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Searing Revival of Kraus Monumental Masterpiece

Burgtheater, 12.09.2025 [ENA]

In staging Die letzten Tage der Menschheit, the Burgtheater, in eager co-production with the Salzburg Festival, has realized what many deemed unperformable: Karl Kraus's vast, scathing drama of the First World War. Through director Dušan David Parízek's radical condensation—preserving the satire, moral ferocity, and linguistic brilliance—the production emerges as a theatrical event of extraordinary power.

The nearly three-and-a-half-hour evening (with intermission) distills over two centuries' worth of absurd vignettes into a concentrated, relentless ensemble tapestry that both devastates and enlightens. Kraus's original text—written between 1915 and 1922—unflinchingly dismantles the machinery of propaganda, political delusion, media manipulation, and public apathy that enabled the war's horrors. Traditionally forgiven as literature rather than a production candidate, Kraus's work here becomes living, breathing theatre. Parízek's staging is anything but traditional or documentary; instead, he embraces Kraus's concept of a "Marstheater," producing an ensemble dystopia rich in satire, urgency, and insight.

The design—sparse yet striking—creates a churning, claustrophobic world where language and image collide. I sense the weight of the original text without litheness being lost. The staggering expansion across over 200 scenes is rendered coherent through kinetic pacing and tonal clarity. The effect: the vortex of war—its absurdities, ideologies, and human betrayals—resonates not as historical relic, but as deeply contemporary critique.

Parízek's adaptation is both respectful and fearless. Where Kraus's text sprawls, Parízek focuses: using fewer actors, sharper transitions, and visual economy to amplify the emotional and rhetorical stakes. Reviews from the Salzburg staging underline this: "a version for seven actors… scenes are collaged, positions represented" with a spotlight on linguistic complexity rather than historical realism.

The result is a production that recognizes the inherent theatricality of Kraus's absurdism and delivers it as a fast-paced, endlessly revealing commentary on power, complicity, and collective madness. It refuses sentimentality. Instead, it confronts the audience with our capacity for denial. This is theatre reimagined as collision rather than comfort. Kraus's characters—reporters, politicians, actors, patriots, clergy, field sergeants, and "the naysayer"—are sketched as archetypes sharpened to grotesque clarity.

The ensemble is tight, skilled, and fearless:

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Dörte Lyssewski commands attention as war correspondent Alice Schalek, a conduit for the crushing immediacy of front-line reportage.
Michael Maertens slices through with icy precision as the politician Sigmund Schwarz-Gelber, embodying the opportunism and moral schizophrenia at the center of power.
In a master stroke, Branko Samarovski, Felix Rech, Elisa Plüss, and Peter Fasching animate the spectrum of public sentiment—from nationalist clamor to cynical dereliction—with searing detail.

Moments of raw emotional fallout cut through the satire: Branko Samarovski's portrait of the shattered patriot is heartbreakingly human. Critics spotlight a single scene: "a still, powerful moment … his son's conscription broke him, and he cannot even weep." This delicate yet forceful ensemble pulls Kraus's intellectual intensity from the page and into the heart.

A striking stage design—often described as featuring a large, mutable cube—is part metaphor, part machinery. It unfurls into different dimensions, populated with historical projections, framed as both memory device and architectural absurdity.

Live music and video—crafted by Peter Fasching—underscores the absurd rhythms of militarism and media sensationalism. The lighting, by Reinhard Traub, furthers this kaleidoscope of tone: at once garish, hallucinatory, and barbed.
The production resists the pull of nostalgia. There's no trench realism, no sepia journalistic gloss. Instead, visual elements serve as distortions, reflections, warnings—how quickly reality warps under propaganda, how appearances lie.

This is relevance amplified. Kraus satirized the war's architecture, and this staging reveals its echoes in our contemporary absurdities—media framing, political spin, sanctioned violence, collective numbness. In an era where disinformation and spectacle reign, the production's urgency feels not only justified, but prophetic.
Audience reactions, while measured, are undeniably moved. The applause, strong if not fanatical, reflects a society unsettled—not gratified—but awakened.

Die letzten Tage der Menschheit at the Burgtheater is a monumental artistic achievement. It takes a towering, unruly text and renders it urgent, piercing, and theatrically electrifying. Through precision casting, inspired direction, minimalist yet potent staging, and unwavering thematic bravery, the production invites urgent reflection without pandering comfort.
For theatre as a form that can still carve meaning from chaos, this production stands as proof that daring adaptation—and confronting absence of political clarity—gives birth to collective revelation. For viewers, it demands attention, reflection, and perhaps the hardest task of all: remembering that humans do not

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learn—unless someone forces us to stare into the abyss.

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