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Champagne in Motion

Vienna State Opera, 11.12.2025 [ENA]

Roland Petit's Die Fledermaus returns to the Vienna State Opera like a glass of perfectly chilled champagne: sparkling on the surface, sophisticated underneath, and irresistibly moreish. Revived for the Strauss Year 2025, this ballet—freely adapted from Johann Strauss Jr.'s beloved operetta—shows the Vienna State Ballet at its most stylish, witty and theatrically alive.

At the heart of the evening is Petit's deliciously non-literal take on the operetta. Instead of retelling the familiar Eisenstein–Falke plot, he spins a new story around Bella, a glamorous society woman; Johann, her errant husband; and Ulrich, the dangerously charming "family friend" who engineers an elaborate lesson in marital fidelity. The twist is pure Petit: when the lights go out in the couple's bedroom, Johann sprouts wings and literally becomes the bat of the title, flying off into the night and into trouble. Bella's subsequent journey—from bewildered wife to brilliant strategist who traps her own wayward "Fledermaus"—is the dramatic spine of the piece, and the dancers make it completely compelling.

On 27 November 2025, that story is carried by a finely balanced principal cast. As Bella, Ketevan Papava embodies exactly the blend of glamour and emotional intelligence the role demands. Her first appearance in the elegant Austro-Hungarian apartment establishes an ideal of poise and classical line; as the plot unfolds, she moves through suspicion, hurt, mischief and triumph with wonderfully clear physical phrasing. Partnering her, Masayu Kimoto's Johann is pure Petit-hero: suave, slightly decadent, with a feline jump and a seductive port de bras that makes it easy to believe he spends his nights at Maxim's chasing illusions.

Their duets trace a sly arc from routine bourgeois politeness to a rediscovered erotic charge once Bella has "taught him a lesson", and the chemistry they generate feels completely organic. As Ulrich, Eno Peci is the production's secret weapon. Petit writes Ulrich as a kind of Mephistopheles in white tie—the man with the trunk full of costumes and a manual on how to handle faithless men—and Peci leans into the ambiguity with relish. His solo "lesson" for Bella, in which he demonstrates allure, irony and the art of disguise, becomes a miniature ballet within the ballet: part comedy routine, part masterclass in Petit's famously articulate upper body work.

Laura Nistor's quicksilver maid and Devin Eatmon as the onstage tenor add vocal and theatrical sparkle; the latter threads Strauss melodies through the evening like an audible ribbon of champagne bubbles. Musically, the evening is a Straussian feast. Petit's long-time collaborator Douglas Gamley not only draws

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on the operetta Die Fledermaus, but stitches together a ravishing bouquet of Johann Strauss Jr.'s waltzes and polkas—including Leichtes Blut, Unter Donner und Blitz, Wo die Zitronen blüh'n, Neu Wien, Künstlerleben, Wiener Bonbons, and more—plus Josef Strauss's Dorfschwalben aus Österreich and Sphärenklänge, and the famous Pizzicato-Polka by both brothers.

Under Luciano Di Martino, the Staatsoper orchestra responds with playing that is both idiomatically Viennese and crisply theatrical: rubato is generous but never schmaltzy; the rhythmic engine in the polkas has real bite; and tuttis are shaped to support, not swamp, the stage. Visually, the production is a model of stylish economy. Jean-Michel Wilmotte's sets move from the chic, almost abstract geometry of Bella's apartment to the dazzling chessboard and topiary of the garden, and finally to the scarlet world of Maxim's and the mask-ball, crowned with the glowing "Maxim's" sign that has already become an emblematic image of this revival.

The clean architectural lines give the dancers space to draw Petit's often complex group patterns in crisp outline. Luisa Spinatelli's costumes are a constant pleasure: sharp black tailcoats and impeccable gowns for the society world, witty exaggerations for Maxim's revellers in red and bordeaux, and a sleek, slightly mysterious look for Bella's changing personas as she toys with her unfaithful husband. ean-Michel Désiré's lighting completes the picture, shifting from champagne-gold warmth to nightclub reds and cool prison greys as the story darkens and then resolves.

What makes Die Fledermaus such an ideal vehicle for the Vienna State Ballet is the way it demands both pure classical technique and razor-sharp theatrical instincts. Petit's choreography is laced with épaulement, off-axis balances and unexpected musical accents that challenge the dancers to think like actors even at the height of virtuosic steps. Reviews of earlier performances in this run have noted how "quirky" and "high-spirited" the evening feels, with the company relishing the French chic and playful sensuality in Petit's style; that same energy infuses the 27 November performance.

The corps de ballet, in particular, shines in the Maxim's scenes and in the final waltz, managing to look simultaneously impeccably drilled and joyously spontaneous.
The dramaturgy of the evening is surprisingly tight. Petit's scenario moves briskly through seven scenes: from Bella's unease in her luxurious apartment, to the revelation of Johann's nocturnal metamorphosis; Ulrich's "lesson" in seduction; the nightclub, where Bella appears and disappears in ever-changing guises; the climactic masked ball, with Johann pursuing the "Unknown"; the comically stark prison, where the bat ends up caged; and finally the restoration of domestic harmony, sealed not with moralising but with another irresistible waltz.

It's a clever balance of narrative clarity and the kind of light-hearted, almost surreal touches—Johann's

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wings, Ulrich’s trunk, the almost cartoonish policemen—that are Petit's signature.
One of the great pleasures of this revival is how clearly it situates itself in Vienna’s current dance landscape. Under artistic director Alessandra Ferri, the company’s repertoire now ranges from 19th-century classics to Balanchine, MacMillan and Neumeier; Die Fledermaus sits amongst these as the unabashed “tanzspektakel”, the piece that celebrates sheer pleasure in movement and performance. It also speaks directly to local identity: Strauss’s music, the echo of old Austro-Hungarian elegance, the waltz as both symbol and lived stage experience.

For Viennese audiences, there is a special joy in seeing their own musical heritage refracted through Petit's distinctly French sense of chic and humour.
Ultimately, what lingers after the curtain calls is not just the charm of the story or the brilliance of the dancers, but the feeling of a perfectly judged evening of dance theatre. Petit's Die Fledermaus does not pretend to be a philosophical essay; yet within its laughter and spectacle, it offers a quietly affectionate portrait of love rediscovered, vanity punctured and freedom re-negotiated. In the hands of the Vienna State Ballet, it becomes exactly what a Strauss-year celebration should be: elegant, effervescent and utterly, disarmingly, fun.

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