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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

In the Heart of the Reactor

Akademietheater, 17.12.2025 [ENA]

Stefano Massini's Manhattan Project in Stefan Bachmann's production at the Akademietheater is one of those rare evenings that feels both intellectually formidable and theatrically gripping. Nearly three hours of talk about physics, politics and ethics sounds like a hard sell, yet in practice the performance races by with the tension of a thriller and the moral weight of a Greek tragedy. It is a hugely impressive calling card for Bachmann's tenure as Burgtheater director.

Massini's text – translated into German by Sabine Heymann – zooms in on the iconic figure of Robert J. Oppenheimer and the team around him, but it does so from a fresh angle. Instead of starting with the famous "father of the bomb", the first half centres on the group of Hungarian-Jewish physicists who fled Nazi Europe and ended up as key minds behind the American nuclear programme: Leó Szilárd, Jeno Wigner, Edward Teller and Paul Erdos. Their exile stories, their scientific obsessions and their fear of Germany winning the atomic race build a dense, human context long before the bomb itself takes shape.

Their exile stories, their scientific obsessions and their fear of Germany winning the atomic race build a dense, human context long before the bomb itself takes shape. Only in the second part does Oppenheimer step forward, and by then we understand that his personal torment stands on the shoulders – and compromises – of many others. What Bachmann does with this material is remarkably clear and confident. This is his first new staging as Burgtheater director, and he leans into the play's epic narrative rather than trying to "update" it with extraneous gimmicks. Much of the text is delivered frontally, addressed to the audience, and yet the evening never feels static.

Bachmann shapes Massini's long arcs into a series of sharply etched chapters: the refugee scientists arriving in the United States; the political calculus in Washington; the feverish race to build a weapon before Hitler; and finally the spiritual and ethical fallout once success has been achieved. Olaf Altmann's stage design is, quite simply, spectacular. Set far downstage is a massive black wall with a single circular opening at its centre; within that ring sits a segmented, slowly rotating structure divided into four cells, like a giant, metal hamster wheel. The actors climb into this cage, balance on it, are carried round and flung out of equilibrium as it turns.

It is at once turbine, centrifuge, accelerator and prison – a visual metaphor for the chain reaction the play describes. The dramaturgical brilliance of the set is that it never becomes mere spectacle. As the physicists

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pace their narrow sectors, calculating, arguing and joking, they look like particles trapped in an experiment of their own making. Later, when Oppenheimer confronts his conscience at the edge of the stage, his colleagues continue to circle behind him, like ghosts pulled by centrifugal force.

The image of men in immaculate suits, forever walking inside a slowly revolving cross, captures the sense of history grinding forward, indifferent to individual doubt. Barbara Drosihn's costumes root the evening firmly in mid-20th-century America—three-piece suits, hats, ties—yet there is an almost ritual quality to the uniformity of the look. It underlines how these seven men, despite their individuality, become a single machine serving the state. Bernd Purkrabek's lighting is equally crucial: harsh beams carve the wheel into quarters, throwing the scientists into stark relief or turning them into silhouettes, echoing the shadows burned into the ground at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Sven Kaiser's music and sound design, together with the precise body work coached by Sabina Perry, give the production a pulse – a low, insistent vibration that keeps the dramatic tension taut. The ensemble of seven actors is outstanding, and the production is conceived very much as a true ensemble piece. As Robert Oppenheimer, Max Simonischek delivers a performance of great intensity and nuance. He only emerges fully in the second half, but when he does, the focus narrows to an almost unbearable point. Simonischek's Oppenheimer is neither a cool genius nor a simple tragic victim: he is a brilliant, vain, frightened man who sees too late what he has unleashed.

In his long monologues at the front of the stage, weighing revenge, responsibility and the meaning of guilt, he holds the room in absolute silence. Around him, the four Hungarian scientists become a kind of chorus of reason, panic, humour and denial. Thiemo Strutzenberger's Leó Szilárd has a fragile restlessness that makes his early warnings about nuclear weapons feel heartbreakingly prescient; he is the one who cannot stop imagining the consequences. Felix Rech's Jeno Wigner, by contrast, is portrayed as more pragmatic, focused on the logic of staying ahead of Germany rather than on moral hypotheticals.

Markus Meyer, as Edward Teller, suggests both the intellectual appetite and the cold edge of the man who would later become a key advocate for the hydrogen bomb. Justus Balamohan Maier's Paul Erdos, buzzing with nervous energy, introduces flashes of almost clownish physicality that nonetheless remain grounded in character. Michael Wächter as Alexander Sachs and Jonas Hackmann as Vannevar Bush complete the constellation, stepping into multiple guises of political power and scientific bureaucracy. Together, this group constantly re-configures within the wheel: sometimes individualised, sometimes fused into a tight block speaking almost as one.

In several key moments, Bachmann arranges them like a modern Greek chorus, their voices overlapping in a layered textural pattern while Kaiser's sound design thickens around them. What is particularly

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impressive is how the production handles Massini's dense, allusive writing. The play is full of scientific detail and biblical references – the two acts are framed as a "Book of the Patriarchs" and a "Book of the Prophets", explicitly evoking Old Testament structures. Bachmann and dramaturg Lena Wontorra do not try to simplify this into an easy narrative; instead, they trust the audience to follow the intellectual stretches while ensuring that every scene has a clear emotional temperature.

Even when we do not catch every technical term, we always understand the stakes: these men are calibrating the end of the world. The topical relevance of the piece needs no underlining. In an era once again haunted by nuclear rhetoric and wars on the edge of escalation, Manhattan Project inevitably resonates as more than a historical drama. The production is careful, however, not to reduce its characters to mouthpieces for contemporary positions. These are highly specific individuals at a very specific moment in time, caught between the terror of Hitler's potential atomic bomb and the horror of what they themselves are building. The moral paradox – that the "right" side of history can still unleash unspeakable destruction.

Bericht online lesen: https://culture.en-a.eu/kunst_kultur_und_musik/in_the_heart_of_the_reactor-92591/

Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:
V.i.S.d.P. und gem. § 6 MDStV: Dr. Nadejda Komendantova

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