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Fortune?s Two Floors

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Bastian Kraft's new production of Johann Nestroy's Zu ebener Erde und erster Stock at the Burgtheater is that rare evening which feels at once irresistibly entertaining and intellectually precise, a revival that honours the classic while making it gleam with contemporary resonance. Nestroy's "verkehrte Welt" – where the speculator Herr von Goldfuchs in the upper floor loses his fortune just as the poor copyist Adolf.

Adolf Schlucker lives on the ground floor becomes rich through an unexpected inheritance – is staged as a buoyant, meticulously composed portrait of a house turned upside down, and of a society defined by the perpetual oscillation between plenty and lack. Kraft embraces the famous two-storey concept that made the play a sensation at its 1835 premiere – two levels of action, simultaneously visible on one stage – and turns it into a living diagram of social and emotional upheaval. The ground floor and first floor are not simply architectural locations; they become states of being, visible markers of who is "up" and who is "down" in the merciless economy of chance, speculation, and sentiment.

As Goldfuchs's financial world collapses above, we see Schlucker's fortunes rising below, a permanent visual reminder of how arbitrary the "Launen des Glücks" really are. Peter Baur's set design is central to the evening's success. He gives us a house that is at once concrete and emblematic: sturdy enough to support parallel streams of farce and melodrama, flexible enough to accommodate swift tonal shifts. The vertical split is crystal clear, yet Baur avoids any static diagrammatic quality; stairs, doors, and sightlines allow characters and glances to criss-cross the social border between "ebener Erde" and "erster Stock", so that the audience constantly registers how closely entwined the two worlds are.

In the best moments, the set seems to breathe with the rhythm of the ensemble, expanding to accommodate chaos and tightening around moments of emotional exposure. Inga Timm's costumes sharpen this social topography with wit and precision. The ostentatious elegance of Goldfuchs and his milieu, slightly exaggerated in cut and detail, contrasts delightfully with the more modest, workaday clothing of Schlucker and the tenants on the ground floor. Yet Timm avoids cartoonish simplification; as the fortunes of the characters shift, so too do their sartorial markers, revealing that clothing here is a language of aspirational identity as much as of economic reality.

One feels, in each jacket and dress, a careful balance between historical flavour and contemporary readability. Sound and music play an unusually vivid role in Kraft's reading of Nestroy's "musikalische

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Satire". The live band – Alexander Xidi Christof or Lukas Leitner (keyboard, piano, accordion), Anna Tropper-Lener or Margit Gruber (violin, e-bass, guitar), Roland Hanslmeier or Teresa Müllner (percussion) – functions as both pit and onstage commentator, stitching scenes together with sly musical commentary and rhythmic propulsion.

Christof's musical direction picks up on Nestroy's own instinct for mingling spoken theatre with song, using brief interludes, underscoring, and ironic musical quotations to highlight the volatility of the characters' fortunes. The result is a sonic texture that energises the performance without ever drowning it in sentiment. Robin Gillard's sound design and Jasmin Kruezi's video work further intensify this layered atmosphere. Gillard's subtle acoustic choices – from the creak of floorboards to the resonant swell of crowds and offstage life – make the house feel porous, as if social and economic pressures were literally pressing in from beyond the visible walls.

Kruezi's video interventions, never gratuitous, supply a contemporary visual vocabulary for Nestroy's critique of speculation and spectacle, at times echoing financial tickers, at times framing the house in images of an endlessly shifting city. Together, they ground the 1835 text in a visual and sonic present without distorting its core. Kraft's direction shines above all in his work with the ensemble. The traffic of bodies between ground floor and first floor, the overlapping dialogues, the carefully orchestrated misunderstandings – all are paced with an almost musical sense of crescendo and release.

He understands that Nestroy's comedy depends not only on verbal wit but also on a finely calibrated sense of rhythm, and the cast respond with performances that are crisp, generous, and full of detail. The children's appearances – CHRISTL, NETTEL, RESI and the other youngsters – are handled especially deftly: never sentimental, they function as a kind of innocent chorus, reacting to adults' follies with disarming directness.

Sabina Perry's choreography and body work give the production a physical vocabulary that matches the textual agility. Characters' postures and movements subtly evolve with their changing circumstances: swagger gives way to collapse, hesitancy blooms into newfound confidence. In group scenes, Perry shapes the ensemble into living tableaus of social hierarchy and confusion, so that even in moments without dialogue, the stage is eloquent. Marcus Loran's lighting sculpts these images with warmth and clarity, shifting from sharp contrast to softer, more melancholic hues as the fortunes of the house turn.

Underlying the laughter is a sharp, unsentimental intelligence. Nestroy's satire on speculation, property, and the precariousness of status feels eerily close to contemporary concerns, and Kraft leans into this without heavy-handed updating. The famous line "Wer kein Geld hat, soll auch nix essen" hits with bracing force in a time of widening inequality and debates about social safety nets. Yet the production never

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succumbs to moralising; it trusts the audience to perceive the parallels between Goldfuchs's fall, Schlucker's ascent, and our own era's cycles of boom and bust.

Dramaturg Jeroen Versteele's hand is evident in the clarity with which the social and philosophical stakes are articulated amidst the bustle. The "verkehrte Welt" of the house becomes a model of a wider dialectic between abundance and deprivation, privilege and vulnerability, chance and responsibility. By the end of the evening, one has laughed heartily, but also absorbed a surprisingly nuanced meditation on the ethics of fortune.

In sum, this Zu ebener Erde und erster Stock is a triumph of ensemble theatre and conceptual coherence. Every department – direction, design, music, choreography, dramaturgy – pulls in the same direction, revealing Nestroy not as a dusty Viennese classic, but as a playwright whose biting humour and keen eye for social contradiction speak vividly to today's audiences. It is a production that delights in the theatrical possibilities of a two-storey stage while never losing sight of the human stories flickering within it – and that combination of technical ingenuity and emotional truth makes for an outstanding night at the Burgtheater.

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