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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Facing the Mirror: Milo Rau's Brilliant BURGTHEATER

Burgtheater, 06.03.2026 [ENA]

Milo Rau's long-awaited staging of Elfriede Jelinek's BURGTHEATER for the Burgtheater and Wiener Festwochen is nothing less than a theatrical event of the first order: audacious in concept, razor-sharp in execution, and uncannily precise in its diagnosis of Austria's cultural and political self-image. More than four decades after Jelinek predicted that a Viennese production could become "the greatest theatre scandal"

The piece finally arrives on the very stage it anatomises – and Rau embraces this historical charge with a production that is both a reckoning and a celebration of theatre's power to disturb. From the outset, Rau understands BURGTHEATER as more than a "böse Posse mit Gesang". He takes Jelinek's murderous Kunstsprache – that dense, pun-ridden, self-devouring language – and stages it as a kaleidoscopic "szenisches Panoptikum", in which the boundaries between private and public, art and ideology, family psychodrama and national mythology constantly dissolve.

The famous Viennese "Geraunze und Geraune" becomes here a chorus of ghosts: of star actors, of a theatre tradition complicit with power, and of a country that has too often preferred elegant repression to confrontation with its past. Rau's decision to treat the "berühmte Schauspielerfamilie" at the centre of the text not as a closed domestic unit but as a porous node in a much larger web of references proves extraordinarily fruitful. The family's jealousies, vanities and cruelties echo the history of the Burg itself: a house whose repertoire, personnel and architecture all bear traces of imperial nostalgia, opportunistic adaptation and belated self-critique.

In scene after scene, Rau lets private dialogues bleed into public rituals, rehearsals mutate into state ceremonies, and offhand remarks open abysses of historical implication. The result is a staging that feels at once intimate and monumental. This duality is reinforced by Anton Lukas's set, which functions as both a specific space and a meta-theatrical machine. Lukas conjures a Burgtheater within the Burgtheater – a palimpsest of stage, auditorium and backstage corridors that allows the actors to move seamlessly between performance and commentary.

The architecture itself becomes an accomplice in the evening's argument: arches, staircases and gilded surfaces evoke the weight of tradition, while exposed rigging and open walls lay bare the mechanisms by which that tradition is manufactured. It is a rare design that manages to be symbolic without being schematic. Cedric Mpaka's costumes are equally incisive. He dresses the ensemble in a vocabulary that

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oscillates between period elegance and contemporary sharpness, insisting that Jelinek's critique of artistic and social complicity is not safely confined to the past. Subtle exaggerations – a too-tight frock coat, an absurdly glamorous gown, an incongruously casual sneaker – become visual footnotes to Jelinek's verbal ironies.

They remind us that on this stage, clothing is never merely decorative; it is a medium of class, gender, and ideological signalling. Elia Rediger's music threads through the production like a darkly shimmering undercurrent. Jelinek's "Posse mit Gesang" is here taken at its word: songs and musical motifs do not simply punctuate the action, they complicate it, offering ironic counterpoints, moments of grotesque jubilation, or sudden, disarming tenderness. Rediger's score moves effortlessly between cabaret, hymn and soundscape, amplifying the contradictions at the heart of the text: the way Austria sings while it looks away, waltzes while it represses. It is a sonic world that anchors the evening and gives the language an additional dimension.

Moritz von Dungern's video work and Reinhard Traub's lighting design complete this dense aesthetic fabric. Von Dungern's live camera – operated onstage by Eduardo Triviño Cely, Andrea Gabriel and Mariano Margarit – turns the actors into both subjects and observers, constantly reframing them in close-up, projection and mediated image. This strategy underscores the themes of Öffentlichkeit und Anpassung: what does it mean for a national theatre to watch itself being watched? Traub's light sculpts the stage with extraordinary sensitivity, shifting from harsh, interrogatory brightness to velvety zones of obscurity in which history seems to lurk just beyond visibility.

At the centre of this complex apparatus stands a formidable ensemble. Maja Karolina Franke / Lilian Urbas, Alla Kiperman and Willfried Kovárník lead a cast that handles Jelinek's text with remarkable musicality and precision, turning dense monologues into sharply etched character studies. Around them, Agnieszka Salamon, Marlies Magdalena Nageler, Ortrun Obermann-Slupetzky, Stephanie Gabriele Eipeltauer, Thomas Bäuml, Franz Schöffthaler, Clara Lackner-Zinner and Dora Staudinger form a flexible chorus of voices and bodies, shifting between roles, generations and historical registers. The sheer pleasure they take in navigating Jelinek's linguistic minefields is palpable; so too is their commitment to the piece's ethical demands.

Dramaturgs Claus Philipp and Markus Edelmann have clearly done exemplary work in shaping the evening's flow. They help Rau find a structure that honours the text's associative freedom while giving the audience clear lines of orientation. The production never feels didactic, yet its argument is unmistakable: this BURGTHEATER is not a museum piece but an active intervention in present debates about Europe's memory, the persistence of fascist patterns, and the responsibilities of cultural institutions.

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And yet, for all its seriousness, the evening is anything but dry. Rau embraces Jelinek's humour – corrosive, absurd, often laugh-out-loud funny – and trusts the audience to enjoy it even as it cuts close to the bone. The result is a production that is as entertaining as it is unsettling, as aesthetically rich as it is intellectually demanding. This BURGTHEATER feels, in the best sense, inevitable: a long-deferred confrontation between a great playwright and the institution she dissected, realised by an artist whose own theatre has consistently interrogated power, violence and representation. It is a triumph not only for Milo Rau and his team, but for the Burgtheater itself.

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https://culture.en-a.eu/kunst_kultur_und_musik/facing_the_mirror_milo_raus_brilliant_burgtheater-93146/

Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:

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

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