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Glittering, Thoughtful, and Deeply Human Triumph

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Stephen Sondheim's Follies at the Volksoper Vienna is a dazzling reminder of how intelligent musical theatre can be when style, emotion, and ensemble artistry are brought together with real conviction. The Austrian premiere has been welcomed as a triumph, and that response is easy to understand: this is a production that combines musical brilliance, theatrical wit, and emotional depth.

The performance feels both celebratory and quietly heartbreaking. It is exactly the kind of evening that shows why Sondheim remains one of the great masters of the modern stage. What makes Follies so fascinating is its ability to be many things at once. It is a reunion story, a memory play, a nostalgic revue, and a sharp study of disappointment, aging, and self-deception. At the Volksoper, these layers are handled with remarkable sensitivity. The production embraces the glitter of the old Broadway world while also revealing the sadness beneath the sparkle, so that the audience feels both entertained and moved. That duality is one of Sondheim's great achievements, and the Volksoper team understands it beautifully.

Musically, the evening is exceptionally strong. Michael Papadopoulos conducts with admirable clarity and drive, bringing out both the jazzy brilliance and the nostalgic lyricism of Sondheim's score. This is crucial, because Follies depends on a conductor who can balance sophistication with theatrical momentum. The orchestra is a major asset, and the score sounds rich, elegant, and emotionally precise. In a work where style is part of the meaning, this level of musical refinement makes a tremendous difference.

The ensemble is another major strength. Reviews repeatedly praise the Volksoper cast for its vivid characterization and strong vocal standards. That is especially important in a musical like Follies, where there are no throwaway roles: every figure contributes to the atmosphere of faded glamour and emotional reckoning. The production gives each character definition, and that helps the show feel alive from start to finish. The result is an ensemble performance in the best sense — one in which individual personalities shine without disturbing the larger balance.

Among the standout moments are the big character numbers, which are among the richest in all of musical theatre. Sona MacDonald's "I'm Still Here" has been singled out as a highlight, and rightly so. It is one of those songs that can only succeed when performed with both glamour and experience, and the Volksoper production clearly gives it the space and respect it needs. Likewise, the revue-style numbers are staged with precision and flair, giving the first half a burst of theatrical electricity that reminds the audience of the

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show’s Broadway roots.

Martin G. Berger’s staging deserves special praise for the way it makes the work’s shifting time levels understandable and emotionally persuasive. Follies can easily become confusing if the past and present are not carefully handled, but here the transitions appear to be shaped with real intelligence. The use of movement, lighting, and visual ideas helps connect the characters’ younger selves with their present-day realities, turning memory into something visible and dramatically active. That gives the production an added layer of sophistication.

What is especially admirable is the production’s refusal to treat nostalgia as harmless sentiment. Follies is about glamour, but it is also about regret, missed chances, and the pain of looking back. The Volksoper production seems to understand that the show’s true power lies in its emotional honesty. Beneath the sparkle, there is vulnerability; beneath the showbiz exterior, there is real sorrow. That gives the evening its lasting resonance. It is not simply entertaining — it is moving because it recognises the complexity of adult life.

The revue elements, choreography, and visual energy all contribute to a sense of generous theatricality. Yet the production never loses sight of the fact that Follies is also a serious work about time, memory, and identity. That balance is difficult to achieve, but here it appears to be one of the production’s greatest successes. The show can be enjoyed for its glitter and wit, but it also lingers because it speaks so truthfully about what it means to have lived, loved, and lost.

In the end, the Volksoper’s Follies is a splendid achievement: musically rich, dramatically intelligent, and emotionally generous. It honors Sondheim’s genius while giving the material a distinctly Viennese seriousness and polish. This is musical theatre at a very high level — sophisticated without being cold, nostalgic without being sentimental, and deeply human from beginning to end.

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