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Exquisite Ballet of Memory, Love, and Transformation

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John Neumeier's Die kleine Meerjungfrau at the Salzburg Festival is a work of rare emotional refinement, a ballet that transforms Hans Christian Andersen's beloved tale into a deeply human meditation on longing, sacrifice, and artistic imagination. Set to Lera Auerbach's evocative music and brought to Salzburg by the Hamburg Ballet, the production promises an evening of extraordinary theatrical beauty.

At this performance choreography, music, and design are united in one poetic vision. It is exactly the kind of ballet that reminds us how powerful the medium can be when it speaks not only to the eye, but to the heart. What makes Neumeier's interpretation especially compelling is the way it expands the fairy tale into an emotional landscape of memory and self-discovery. The ballet does not simply narrate the story of a mermaid who falls in love with a prince; it interweaves Andersen's own life, his unfulfilled desire, and his inner world of fantasy. That gives the work a profound tenderness.

The ballet becomes a reflection on creation itself: how stories are born from pain, how longing becomes art, and how imagination can transform suffering into something luminous. The Salzburg setting is ideally suited to this production. The Großes Festspielhaus provides a space of grandeur and clarity, allowing Neumeier's large-scale dramatic ideas to unfold with ample visual and musical breathing room. The collaboration with the Wiener Symphoniker adds further distinction, since Auerbach's score requires orchestral nuance, atmosphere, and a strong sense of narrative flow. Under Simon Hewett's musical direction, the ballet's emotional currents can be expected to emerge with great sensitivity and control.

One of the ballet's great strengths is its visual contrast. Neumeier sets the spare, intimate world of the sea against the more elaborate, ceremonial world of human society. That contrast is not merely decorative; it is central to the ballet's meaning. The underwater scenes suggest vulnerability, purity, and inwardness, while the scenes on land reveal social ritual, unattainable desire, and emotional distance. This opposition gives the ballet a strong dramatic pulse and helps the audience feel the heroine's journey as a movement between worlds.

The title character is one of ballet's most poignant figures, and Neumeier shapes her story with deep sympathy. Her love is absolute, but it is also doomed; that tension gives the choreography emotional weight. The sea maid is not presented as a passive victim, but as a being of strength and spiritual resilience. By the end, her transformation into a soul of enduring beauty gives the ballet a note of transcendence that is

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both moving and consoling. It is a rare ending in ballet: not a triumph in the conventional sense, but a quiet victory of spirit.

Auerbach's music is an ideal partner for Neumeier's vision. Her score is rich in color, atmosphere, and emotional shading, creating a sound world that can support both lyric intimacy and dramatic intensity. That is essential for a ballet of this kind, where movement must be carried by music that feels alive to both fantasy and feeling. The combination of Auerbach and Neumeier promises a work of unusual unity: modern in its language, but timeless in its emotional reach.

Another remarkable aspect of the production is that Neumeier serves as choreographer, stage director, costume designer, set designer, and lighting designer. That total artistic authorship gives the ballet a remarkable coherence. Every element of the evening belongs to one imagination, and that unity can create a particularly immersive theatrical world. It is a reminder that ballet at its highest level is not simply a sequence of steps, but an integrated art of movement, image, and feeling.

What makes Die kleine Meerjungfrau so special is its emotional honesty. It does not flatten Andersen's tale into a simple fairy tale of suffering and reward. Instead, it respects the ache at the heart of the story, the pain of loving without being loved in return, and the dignity found in endurance. That is why the ballet resonates so deeply. It speaks to anyone who has ever experienced desire, loss, or the hope that art can redeem experience. In the end, Salzburg's Die kleine Meerjungfrau promises to be a ballet of unusual grace and depth: visually exquisite, musically rich, and emotionally unforgettable. It is a work that lingers because it treats vulnerability as beauty and imagination as a form of survival.

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