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# A myth examined, not celebrated

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“Der Bockerer” at Theater Scala, produced by theater zum Fürchten and staged by Bruno Max, proves that this oft beloved Viennese classic can still unsettle an audience when its sentimentality is rigorously pared away. Instead of offering a cosy “Schelmengeschichte” about a lovable butcher outwitting the Nazis, this production foregrounds the discomforting question at the heart of the piece: what does it mean to survive a dictatorship while insisting on one’s own innocence.

Originally written in exile and premiered in 1948 at the old Scala in Favoritenstraße, “Der Bockerer” quickly became part of Austria’s post war self image, helped by a lineage of charismatic stars in the title role. Bruno Max is fully aware of this history and, as critics noted, explicitly names the figure of Karl Bockerer as an “identitätsstiftender, wenn auch etwas zweifelhafter Archetypus.” Rather than embracing the comforting myth of the clever Viennese who never truly succumbed to National Socialism, Max uses the play to show how attractive such narratives remain precisely because they are not true.

This skepticism shapes the entire evening. Gone is the easy, wink and nudge comedy that often surrounds the role; what remains is a stubborn, rough edged man whose obstinacy is less a heroic stance than a mixture of temper, habit, and limited imagination. In this sense, the production stages not a heroic exception to history but a portrait of a milieu that muddles through, adapts, and later rewrites its own behaviour as resistance. Georg Kusztrich carries the evening with a performance that refuses to curry favour. His Bockerer is “echt mürrisch, nicht lustig mürrisch”: a man in whom anger, bewilderment and a buried sense of justice coexist uneasily, and whose occasional outbursts of compassion or courage feel all the more persuasive.

Around this central figure Bruno Max and his ensemble sketch a finely shaded panorama of Viennese society under Nazism. Bernie Feit’s Hatzinger, the best friend, embodies the mixture of loyalty and self preserving cowardice that allows “kleine Leute” to outlast any regime, only to retrospectively tidy up their own biographies. Birgit Wolf as Frau Bockerer credibly charts the seductions of petty power: her enthusiasm for the new order grows out of the possibility to feel important at last.
Thomas Marchart’s son Bockerer represents another historical type: the young man who mistakes ideological mobilisation for career opportunity and must then confront the brutal reality behind propaganda.

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In smaller but telling strokes, Alexander Kuchar's socialist railway worker evokes the mythic "rote Wien" of pre 1934, while Christina Saginth moves with agility between brothel madam and Hausmeisterin, suggesting how quickly roles and loyalties can shift when survival is at stake.
The figure of Rosenblatt, the Jewish Tarock partner who returns from exile in American uniform and who, in the famous closing line "Ihr Blatt, Herr Rosenblatt," accepts a renewed game rather than revenge, is handled with a mixture of theatrical effectiveness and quiet irony. The reconciliation feels both moving and carefully staged, reminding us that theatre, too, participates in the smoothing of memory it portrays.

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