

# *Performing migration in Vienna: the Volkstheater Trilogy*

Article

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## **Performing Migration in Vienna: The Volkstheater Trilogy**

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In the recent period, Vienna's Volkstheater has distinguished itself as one of the most cutting-edge venues in Austria, but also, I would argue, in Europe more broadly, when it comes to the representation of concerns relating to migration, multi-/interculturalism and/or xenophobia. In the context of Vienna specifically in the post-migration crisis period (2015 onwards), I propose that the Volkstheater has demonstrated a highly consistent engagement with such concerns, hosting some of the most impactful work to be produced on Viennese stages along these thematic parameters with the exception of Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Schutzbefohlenen*, whose Austrian premiere took place on the main stage of the Burgtheater (director Michael Thalheimer, 2015). A year later, another Viennese staple, the *Wiener Festwochen*, engaged with the topic as part of its annual visual arts event *Into the City*, which, in 2016, ran under the theme of *Universal Hospitality*, opening in the context of Austria's Presidential Election. Due to various technical glitches and the request for a rerun, this election would continue to dominate the Austrian political landscape until the end of that year. Curated by Edit András, Birgit Lurz, Ilona Németh and Wolfgang Schlag and accompanied by an Open Forum for further exploration of the concerns the exhibition highlighted, *Universal Hospitality* offered a sobering experience. Creatively pitched in the fluid space between installation and promenade performance, the exhibition combined fact, testimony and artistic intervention to capture the experience of displacement and engage participants in a process of affective exchange. On the empty floors and vast corridors of the Alte Post (Former Post Office Headquarters), in Vienna's Innere Stadt (the First District), visitors could

wander through fragments of lives and tissues of hope, with loss, dejection and refusal reverberating in the absence of life inside the previously inhabited space and hinting at the desolate and uncertain path of the refugee.

This was a time for institutions to take on the challenge of a shifting social, political, cultural and – of course – national landscape. The Volkstheater is by all accounts an institution: a traditional structure equally in terms of architecture, legacy and long presence in the city. But the Volkstheater is also innovative in terms of overall image: its on-brand publicity campaigns promote a youthful outlook, as well as an internationalist, engaged perspective that invites participation. This article will go on to address the politics in the Volkstheater's recent repertoire through the specific angle of migration. Because of the politicized energy emanating from the theatre's repertoire, with topics regularly explored touching upon identity, memory, history, mass ideology and nationalism, which renders it prominent as a political venue in Vienna, it is important to also remark on the material accessibility of the Volkstheater. Further to its outreach work in parts of the city much less central than its core building as part of the Volkstheater/Bezirke initiative, the Volkstheater also offers a wide-ranging ticketing policy, which makes it reasonably accessible across income brackets. This practical inclusivity is reflective of the theatre's approach to programming. During the tenure of the current artistic director, Anna Badora (2015-16 season onwards), coinciding with an important transitional moment in Austria's history not least following the 'Long Summer of Migration' (2015) [*Der lange Sommer der Migration*], the theatre has developed an agenda that combines bold revivals with frequent commissions of efficacious new work and the range of cultures represented is diverse, with plays drawn from different pools, beyond a strictly, or predominantly Germanic cultural repertoire. In the broader socio-theatrical landscape

the Volkstheater has emerged as an incubatory space for the examination of migration and asylum concerns at the heart of one of Europe's most affluent cities, not least one with a historical record of political influence and collaborative policy formation – the Vienna Congress (1814-15) serves as a recurring point of reference as far as such enduring influence and global image are concerned.

The events that culminated in the 'Long Summer of Migration' and their aftermath rank highly in the range of urgent considerations that have been explored by the Volkstheater. Given the length of this article, I am unable to expand upon the details of this pivotal historical moment in exhaustive detail, but it is purposeful to note that in 2015, according to European Parliament data, Europe saw numbers greater than one million 'asylum seekers and migrants' seek resettlement (European Parliament 2017). At the Volkstheater, a landmark event responding to this activity has been what I describe as the *Migrationstrilogie* [migration trilogy]: three pieces that share the director Yael Ronen and several members of the Volkstheater ensemble as point of interconnection. These shows are: *Lost and Found* (opening at the Volkstheater in the 2015-16 season); *Niemandsländ* [*No Man's Land*] (opening at the Volkstheater in the 2016-17 season, having premiered at the Schauspielhaus Graz, where it was created, in 2013); *Gutmenschen* [*Do-Gooders* would be the closest translation, a point to which I return] (opening at the Volkstheater in the 2017-18 season and remaining in repertoire as this article was being written).<sup>i</sup> Although they could certainly function as individual performance events for a spectator, who might not be familiar with all three, *Lost and Found*, *Niemandsländ* (which, though a pre-existing text, became a thoughtful integration in what emerged as a migration-focused trilogy at the Volkstheater) and *Gutmenschen*, on which, due to length constraints, but also due to its timeliness and formal innovation, this article predominantly

concentrates, are at their most affective when taken as a whole and as a sustained invitation for audience/civic reflection and interventionist socio-theatrical gesture. *Gutmenschen* serves as a bridge between the earlier pieces: at various stages, meta-references are made to the previous shows as such – that is, as theatre events – and to the actors as both themselves, that is, performers on the Volkstheater stage, and the roles they played before, namely the characters in the plays concerned. More broadly, Ronen's work has shown a distinctive social focus, probing concepts of conflict, community, identity, belonging and co-existence (in fraught political contexts). The internationalism of Ronen's practice (who is predominantly based in Berlin's Gorki theatre), beyond the focus of individual pieces, also serves as a message in itself.

In their recent work for *Research in Drama Education*, theatre and migration scholars Emma Cox and Caroline Wake ask:

What modes of envisioning asylum are encapsulated in facts, figures and framework documents? How are we adequately to comprehend what magnitude means outside the context of numerical scales, or grasp its implications for human lives? These questions are paramount – and notoriously difficult – for scholars and artists alike contemplating the connective tissue that binds the aesthetic and political dimensions of asylum.

(Cox and Wake 2018: 139)

In this article, Cox and Wake also survey scholarly discourse on performance and migration as it has developed over the past decade and comment on its growth. As publications including Cox and Wake's have provided an excellent up to date overview, in my reference to the broadening of discourse concerning performance and migration and given the remit of this article I would like to mention work that has been carried out in German-language scholarship. Within a rich field of engagement

with precarity and migration, I would particularly note: Katharina Pewny's monograph *Das Drama des Prekären: Über die Wiederkehr der Ethik in Theater und Performance* (2011); Wolfgang Schneider's edited collection *Theater und Migration: Herausforderungen für Kulturpolitik und Theaterpraxis* (2011); Artur Pelka's monograph *Das Spektakel der Gewalt – die Gewalt des Spektakels: Angriff und Flucht in deutschsprachigen Theatertexten zwischen 9/11 und Flüchtlingsdrama* (2016); Birgit Peter and Gabriele C. Pfeiffer's edited collection *Flucht – Migration – Theater: Dokumente und Positionen* (2017). The expansion of the field is undoubtedly matched by a visible and considerable proliferation of works within the broader domain of migration and/in performance internationally and across different environments, from public spaces to institutional ones, as well as across different theatre cultures – including ones for whom a theatre of migration and/or asylum has been a relatively novel phenomenon.

Reflecting on Anika Marschall's examination of durational performance with a focus on migration in German-speaking Europe (2018), I am conscious of the fact that the repertoire system operational in different parts of Europe, dominant in Austria and also in place at the Volkstheater under its current programming mode, delivers a kind of durationality (not to be confused with durational performance models) – and consequently durability – of its own. Therefore, motivated by Marschall's enquiry, I seek to examine how durationality might, outside of a durational performance context, on which Marschall concentrates, also be a term applicable to methodologies of staging that I am concerned with here. By this I refer to the tradition of theatre shows remaining in programming and therefore available to spectators over lengthy periods so they can be revisited over time, as their relevance changes – and indeed deepens. My own experience of *Gutmenschen* has involved seeing it at two different points in

time in early and late 2018. During this time the Austrian political landscape has continued to shift and the significance and signification of the piece has been shifting along with it. But there is also the factor of what it means to invest in a durational – through repertoire curation – investigation of migration and asylum in the sense of a committed and sustained exploration of these concerns across different pieces and artistic programming that allows a broader narrative, one of resonance and efficacy, to emerge. As it came to be formulated in the Volkstheater in recent years, this narrative greatly benefitted from the suite of performances that I refer to as *Migrationstrilogie*, which has engendered a forum for ongoing conversations and community reflection. An important thread interconnecting the *Migrationstrilogie* is that in all the seriousness and darkness of the subject matter of the individual plays – namely conflict, forced migration and the often awkward integration of individuals with *Migrationshintergrund* [migration background] in contemporary Austrian society – humour is also part of the picture. It materializes primarily as self-satire: the theatre reflecting Austrian society back unto itself with equal dosages of lucidity and sarcasm, as the next part of this article goes on to discuss.

### **Reflections on Migration: Humour, Satire, Darkness**

*Lost and Found*, *Niemandsländ* and *Gutmenschen* are described as ensemble co-creations directed by Ronen. The first of these immediately follows the summer of 2015, when Europe watched the refugee crisis unfold, impacting certain European countries particularly strongly. Austria was one of these, if in a comparatively transient way when contextualized against other countries (not least its immediate neighbour, Germany) that have absorbed refugee populations on a more permanent basis, as can be determined from the figures of successful asylum seeking applications ('Migration in Europe' 2018: n. pag). Given its central geographical position, the fact

that it is landlocked and therefore has borders to several neighbouring countries, as well as that as a wealthy country it presents the possibility of strong philanthropic provision, Austria became a destination unto itself but also passageway, in the latter case predominantly towards Germany. This led to the country's roads and railways experiencing intense pressure and to Austria witnessing dramatic scenes of displacement and crisis, utterly clashing with the everyday norm of a comparatively small, prosperous country that ranks consistently high on global wellbeing charts. *Lost and Found* is a direct theatrical by-product of that eventful summer and its tribulations as they would continue to be evident, not least in the country's political scenery – including its subsequent right-wing turn.

In the 2015-16 season *Lost and Found* represented, as *Gutmenschen* would two seasons later, the vast differences in how facets of Austrian society were coping with these new-found pressures and how, in urban environments especially, centre-, centre-left and left-leaning liberal citizens have striven to maintain the image of Austria as internationalist in an adverse political climate. Certainly, because of the community agenda of the Volkstheater (in terms of outreach and issues informing the repertoire) and the theatre's notional and spatial significance to its city, as I note in the introductory section of this article, the pieces are Vienna-centric. Place names are dropped with regularity and Vienna is where the characters themselves are based. While not intending to reduce the resonance and timeliness of these pieces, it is essential to acknowledge that Vienna, (centre-)/left-leaning politically and cosmopolitan in the Second Republic era, not least because of the strong UN and NGO presence in the city, is not necessarily reflective of the broader attitude towards migration or of the political pulse across Austria, and especially not so beyond the urban centres and into the rural areas, which are traditionally conservative-leaning.



There is, then, a sense that the pieces, as shown at the Volkstheater, were catering to their immediate audience and were therefore largely reflective of their perspectives and expectations. However, as I also discuss further on, *Gutmenschen* made notable effort towards bridging cultural and political chasms through a specific dramatic device – a song – that engaged with a folk/rural artistic tradition. The inventiveness in the mode of appeal was merited: by the time *Gutmenschen* appeared, it was hardly imaginable that the time gap between this and *Lost and Found* could have delivered a more dramatic shift than the one that the world, Europe, and certainly Austria have witnessed since 2016. This included the United Kingdom referendum that produced a result favouring Brexit; the election of Donald Trump in the United States; rising popularity for far-right political platforms across Europe and, in Austria, the transition from an SPÖ-led coalition government [the SPÖ, or Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs is considered centre-left] to an ÖVP-led coalition [the ÖVP, or Österreichische Volkspartei is the conservative party] with strong FPÖ [the FPÖ, or Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs is the far-right party] involvement. Consequently, what began with *Lost and Found* as a conversation on Austria's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers within a primarily liberal governmental context, eventually, with *Gutmenschen*, led to a hard look at the fractures within Austrian society and an attempt at negotiating the country's right-wing turn.

*Lost and Found* asks how a given society, including its well-meaning liberal middle-class (with its own limitations and restrictions, not least financial) might adapt to new political realities that come with the possibility, but also the responsibility, of increased civic agency. Maryam, the lead figure in *Lost and Found*, returns in *Gutmenschen*, where, within the ensemble, her role also emerges as a protagonist, a contemporary matriarchal figure both literally (to her children) and metaphorically (to

the friends and family in her domestic orbit). The role of Maryam is played by the actor Birgit Stöger, a Volkstheater staple in recent years. Stöger also appears in *Niemandsländ*, albeit in a different role, as that piece follows a different group of characters from *Lost and Found*. In *Lost and Found*, Maryam, a lifestyle blogger, is negotiating her own responsibilities towards a precarious family member. This is Yousef, her cousin, who is a refugee. The play projects understanding but also positivity towards non-traditional family structures, again responsive to its local audience base and in recognition of emerging models of co-parenting: Yousef enters Maryam's life as she is negotiating another major event, namely her plan to mother a second child, this time as a single parent. She is already mother to a son from her marriage to her former husband, Jochen.

We learn that Yousef left Iraq for Syria in 2006, returning when military conflict erupted in Syria. He now finds himself in Austria because he had to leave Iraq again when Mosul became a terrorist target – therefore he has been twice displaced from his country. As we transition to *Gutmenschen*, Maryam is now also mother to a small daughter. Her brother, Elias, Yousef, and Maryam's best friend, Schnute, who is also the biological father of Maryam's second child, form her immediate circle along with her son. Like Maryam, these characters return from *Lost and Found* to resume their personal narratives in a changed society. Joining them are Elias' partner, Klara; Schnute's partner and mother, Moritz and Ute respectively; Jochen; and Lukas Nachmann, a lawyer advising on migration issues, previously seen in *Niemandsländ*. We also see a security guard, pointedly appearing in the final moments of the show, as Yousef becomes increasingly isolated and contained, despite the best efforts of Maryam and the main characters.

*Gutmenschen* is generally more light-hearted as a satire than *Lost and Found*, which reveals the refugee's heartbreak and his hope for a new homeland, stunningly captured in Yousef's monologues. For example:

YUSEF. [...] Ich habe das Gefühl verloren, dass ich irgendwo hingehöre.

Ich habe die Möglichkeit verloren, für meine Zukunft zu planen.

Ich habe den Wunsch verloren, über meine Vergangenheit zu erzählen.

Ich will nicht mehr. (Volkstheater Wien, Ronen and Ensemble 2015: 61)

[YUSEF. [...]] I have lost the feeling that I belong somewhere.

I have lost the ability to plan for my future.

I have lost the desire to narrate my past.

I want no more.]

Its overall tone notwithstanding, the turn that *Gutmenschen* takes following the pivotal moment of Klara's song, which I discuss in detail in the final section, is towards an atmosphere even darker than the one that arrives in the final stretch of the earlier piece. This darkness is emphasized literally and metaphorically in the finale of *Gutmenschen*: as Yousef's situation becomes grave, so the stage grows darker – a fact that the main cast of characters comment on. Naturally the darkness also alludes to the shift in political atmosphere. Still, however dark the political context of 2018, it is important to remember that, in 2016, we were also in times of crisis. There was no naïveté back then: if anything, seeds for the right-wing rhetoric that subsequently took hold were already being sown and there was an appreciation amongst liberal communities of the importance of dissent, reason and historical contextualization. Even though in the specific section of her seminal book *The Art of Resistance: Cultural Protest against the Austrian Far Right in the Early Twenty-First Century*

(2019) Austrian Studies scholar Allyson Fiddler concentrates on the events of the fateful ÖVP-FPÖ 2000 coalition and the artistic context in the lead-up to that political period, the following observation is highly applicable here. As Fiddler notes, ‘[...proactive] instances represent the way in which artists have been sensitive to social and political trends and have functioned as cultural warning signals in flagging up extreme-right thinking in society’ (Fiddler 2019: 2). Adapting this comment to 2016, this is the intervention that *Lost and Found* was attempting to perform. At that time, Austria was experiencing two dramatically distinct poles of rhetoric as it was gearing up for its Presidential vote: these poles were represented by Alexander Van der Bellen, a former Green Party politician running on an independent platform, and Norbert Hofer, the FPÖ candidate running on an ultra-conservative one. Responsive to the post-Long-Summer-of-Migration context and anticipating the Presidential election, *Lost and Found* pays attention to different sides of the migration argument, from commitment to *philoxenia* and a certain awkwardness as to how to support the precarious, to covert xenophobia manifesting as self-preservation (‘self-’ denoting here individual as well as country). *Lost and Found*, therefore, reflects a country in adaptation mode to a new reality, whose liberal voices are anticipating the worst, as the piece serves to alert the audience to the popularity of nationalist tendencies, which, are, at that stage, looming, though not dominant.

The character of Yousef, played by Osama Zatar, is, in *Lost and Found*, a recent arrival in Austria, suddenly entering the play’s frame of reference after the midway point when Maryam receives a call inviting her to collect her cousin from a refugee centre. Yousef is about to begin the process of seeking asylum. Later on, while he is resting, now having been brought by Maryam to her home, the group, including the character of Camille (who does not appear in *Gutmenschen*), debate

philanthropic responsibility towards the refugee. It is Camille who voices that ever-disturbing, pervasive rhetoric: the non-outright racist, who argues confidently, whose discourse is already imbued with signs of a changing climate, who emerges as entirely average and therefore frighteningly plausible, and who eventually becomes the dominant voice. For example:

CAMILLE. Ich sage nur: Je früher Menschen ihre Grenzen erkennen, desto besser für alle. Ich schäme mich nicht dafür zu sagen: Ich liebe mein Leben so wie es ist, ich habe hart dafür gearbeitet, was ich jetzt habe, und ich bin nicht bereit, es aufzugeben oder es mit irgendjemandem zu teilen. Nicht jeder ist dafür geeignet, sich um andere zu kümmern.  
(Volkstheater Wien, Ronen and Ensemble 2015: 71)

[CAMILLE. I am only saying: the earlier people recognize their borders, the better off we are all going to be. I am not ashamed to say: I love my life as it is, I have worked hard for what I now have, and I am not ready to give it up or to share it with someone else. Not everyone is suitable to caring for others.]

On the other end of the spectrum, there is the side of over-exertion, teasing at the nuances in European power relations: in a particularly comical exchange, the group persuade Yousef to choose Austria over Germany when he states his intention of continuing his journey, emphatically performing their, and, by extension, their country's hospitality. In fact, juxtaposition is made between the existence of far-right groups active in Germany but no equivalent instances in Austria. This was a satirical point that to me, as spectator, felt particularly poignant considering that on the evening I attended the show (14 April 2016) a group representing the far-right Die Identitären stormed a production of *Die Schutzbefohlenen*, arguably the most

emblematic text on migration to come out of Europe in the recent period, by the company Die schweigende Mehrheit [staged as *Schutzbefohlene performen Jelineks Schutzbefohlene*] at University of Vienna premises (Audimax). The event was widely reported at the time and as Inge Arteel and Evelyn Deutsch-Schreiner have subsequently written, the attack involved ‘xenophobic banners and spattering stage blood while yelling at, punching, and shoving the actors (and some spectators) aside’ (Arteel and Deutsch-Schreiner 2018: 371).

In *Gutmenschen*, as in *Lost and Found*, we spend an evening with the group, but we are only one part of the audience, the meta-representational element particularly strong now as Maryam has transitioned to a new career stage: reality television persona. Her group of family and friends are also her fellow cast members in a show sponsored by Red Bull, which is, of course, one of Austria’s greatest global corporate/commercial hits. The group, then, are characters in the play, characters on the show, and they occasionally make reference to each other as actors as well. Further to a postmodern humorous effect of self-reflection, this meta-referential technique highlights our multiple positioning in our societies, as spectators, citizens and performers of all the nuances within that spectrum as we live our everyday lives on moving ground. The key event of *Gutmenschen*, which is not reserved as a climactic denouement, but, rather, is made known to the audience early, and, more gradually, to the group of characters, as Maryam receives the letter outlining the authorities’ decision, is the rejection of Yousef’s asylum application. The poignancy is extraordinary, not only due to the change in political climate, but also because Yousef is no longer played by Zatar, but by Yousif Ahmad, who, as voiceover narration informs us in the beginning of performance, is the real-life inspiration behind the character, although not the character as such. In *Lost and Found*, we

clearly saw the positioning of Maryam's immediate family towards supporting refugees; in *Gutmenschen* we witness how this family unit has been positively impacted by Yousef's inclusion, so that the adverse development is directly threatening to the equilibrium. The position that the play expresses with the implication of Yousef's imminent deportation is, therefore, a direct theatrical indictment of the detrimental personal and social consequences of what might be described as an insular political system.

### **Capitalism, Nationalism and Pulling at Heart Strings**

As *Gutmenschen* begins, Maryam introduces the premise of her reality show to Jochen via video call: Red Bull sponsoring serves an advertising agenda of promoting an organic range and Maryam's lifestyle following is the ideal target audience/consumer. Two years since she first welcomed Yousef, Maryam has felt the financial strain of hospitality, because, as she informs Jochen, promises of support to refugees in situations like Yousef's have not materialized. Meanwhile, Yousef's pending asylum status (at this stage the rejection has not yet become known) means he has no work permit and any contribution he might be able to make is on a volunteering basis. Another poignant moment arrives when we see a video of Yousef in a nursing home, providing entertainment to Austrian senior citizens with a reading of Thomas Bernhard's *Alte Meister* [*Old Masters*]. The extract shown in the video captures one of the most caustic excerpts in the literary canon for its perceived sense of the Austrian psyche, in the work of a writer who, as is extensively documented, was one of its staunchest critics.

Later in the play, as Maryam's group gather and prepare for the show, we also hear Maryam read from the asylum rejection letter; as the performance progresses, we even glimpse into part of the mentality that has supported the far-right rise in the

shape of Ute, Schnute's outspoken, conservative mother. Ute is shown as dynamic and far from a caricature, but at the same time she is, indeed, the stereotype of a person who lives surrounded by diversity, largely reconciled with it and yet is entirely resistant to it in the broader national framework. The wide-ranging satire of *Gutmenschen* is also self-reflexive, targeting the group itself and, by extension, a part of the audience. The Volkstheater is located in one of Vienna's most politically liberal districts – Neubau, 1070 – with a consistent record of voting for the Green Party. It is therefore particularly important that alongside this kind of discourse developing within the play there should also be some cold pragmatism and self-reflection, which materializes here in the shape of absorbing Red Bull sponsoring as a direly needed injection of cash that cannot be scorned. Therefore, when Elias attacks the Red Bull deal by exposing the company's fraught politics, or when Klara, decidedly unconventional and committed to her art, is revealed to have a very wealthy father, *Gutmenschen* confronts the realities of entitlement, privilege and essential inability to grasp the asylum seeker's plight, but also, of course, the inability, despite ideological convictions and noble intentions, to sever the ties with a capitalist system that has – literally – invaded the private living room, rendering it an arena for more product placement, advertising and profit. After all, the prominent lawyer that the group consult once Yousef's rejection letter has arrived, in order to explore their options for supporting him in the next stages, will also require a fee. In short, income from the show offers the kind of subsidy that Maryam needs to support her family, which includes Yousef – and it comes with strings attached, because it is privately, rather than state-sourced. On those terms, then, *Gutmenschen* explores the limitations of philanthropy – and the extent to which the matter of supporting an asylum seeker, who has no access to income of their own through legal means, might become



crushed in the modern-day *Symplegades* of, on the one hand, goodwill, and, on the other hand, affordability.

If Maryam's show serves income generation, it is also a celebrity vehicle. Without the generalizing intention of assuming that all spectators of the performance would have had the same reaction, but, rather, drawing on the experience of the live production on two different occasions and the response that the event that I proceed to discuss drew from the audience, I would argue that the definitive moment of *Gutmenschen* arrives when Klara, an aspiring musician/performer, delivers a song. At the moment when the song arrives, we have received no indication as to what will follow. As a character, Klara appears sociable, confident and at times superficial in her espousal of ideologies (relating to gender, income, partnership etc.) as a trope of her privilege rather than stemming from profound conviction. Therefore, when she proposes that the group could potentially integrate a moment of singing during the reality show and performs a song to offer an example, we do not expect political commentary. Still, this is precisely when the most affective political moment of the piece lands. The performance Klara offers is a cover of the song *Weit weit weg* [*Far Far Away*] by the Austrian artist Hubert von Goisern, a folk-pop ballad about a lovers' separation sung in heavy regional accent. Klara's [Katharina Klar] delivery is entirely serious from the beginning – and even though she replicates the regional accent in the new lyrics of the song, this does not emerge as derisory, but, rather, as an attempt to communicate in the rural dialect that is most typically associated with right- (and of course also far right-) parts of the country. It is an effort of reaching out captured in the meaning that the song conveys: that all communication between the social groups at either side of the political spectrum has been lost and it has become painfully clear that it must be regained for the fractures to be repaired and for a form

of understanding to be cultivated. Particularly since the election events of 2016 in the UK and the US, we have seen the rise of a rhetoric that condemns urban left-liberal populations as a so-called ‘metropolitan elite’ versus the ‘real people’ of the geographical and political periphery. As theatre scholar Liz Tomlin notes, in potentially problematic contexts [depending on intention and realization, whether in the realm of political discourse or the less suspect, though worthy of examination usage of ‘real people’ in performance events] of the public framing of opinion “‘real people’” are understood in opposition to those who might be said to hold particular professional expertise and also, commonly, to those of a more privileged socio-economic status: the so-called “liberal elite” (Tomlin 2018: 235). Tomlin also provides a helpful indicative log of occurrences of such a neo-right-wing-populist lexicon: from Nigel Farage [reference to ‘real’, ‘ordinary’ and ‘decent’ people] to Theresa May [reference to the ‘patronising members of a liberal metropolitan elite’] and Michael Gove [the targeting of ‘experts’] (Tomlin 2018: 234).

In the Volkstheater version, Von Goisern’s repeated lament of ‘weit weit weg’ is reworked into ‘weit weit rechts’ [far far right] in an attempt at confronting the increasing distance between different political viewpoints, the problematics of derogatory demagogic terminologies that have generated damaging rifts within Austrian society – thought the point of course also translates universally, and the profound fallacy that either side is moved by a stronger desire for the country’s preservation. The song builds bridges of dialogue, appropriating a vernacular that is thought of as ideologically and geographically remote. In doing so it also counteracts what the ‘other’ side has accomplished by appropriating the term ‘*Gutmenschen*’ – whose literal meaning is innocuous [good people] – as a heavily connotative, slang derogatory term that denotes the lofty, soft philanthropy of left-liberal groups.

Indicatively, the song features lyrics such as [quoted to reflect the regional dialect/mode of vocalization, as also shown on the Volkstheater text]:

In echt red ich mit Rechten nie,  
nur hier in meiner Fantasie,  
lass mich dir mal erzählen, was mich quält:  
Du fühlst dich fremd im eignen Land,  
des G'fühl is mia ned unbekannt,  
du bist das Volk, das Volk, es hat gewählt.

Jetzt is mei Ö-sta-reich  
So weit, weit rechts von mir  
Jetzt is mei Ö-sta-reich  
So weit, weit rechts von mir.

Des tuat ma schiach – und wia.

Kumm her zu mia! (Volkstheater Wien, Ronen and Ensemble 2018: 43)

[In reality I never talk to right-wing people,  
only here in my imagination,  
so let me tell you what torments me:  
You're feeling like a stranger in your own country,  
this feeling is not unknown to me,  
you are the people, the people have elected this.

Now my Austria is  
So far, far right from me.

Now my Austria is  
So far, far right from me.  
That hurts me so badly.  
Come here to me!]

The song functions so affectively – intellectually, emotionally and corporeally – to expose the problematics in ‘othering’ rhetoric because it swiftly dispenses with the assumption that it might retain satirical distance, or that it will be over-intellectualized. It remains as direct as the source song and even emulates its heartbreak, but it transposes this unto a national rather than personal issue. The result is once more an expression of lament, though this time for the resulting rift between opposing ideologies, and an admission that what emerges as a common source of dismay is the feeling of strangeness within one’s own country – but for different reasons. The song pursues a dialogical form, growing in intensity, until, towards the end, conceding that there simply exists no prospect of contact between the two sides, because, realistically, that space of interaction does not currently exist.

Therefore, *Gutmenschen* exposes right-wing nationalist rhetoric, depicting it as entirely corrosive for migration in how it stokes fear. The song demonstrates that this fear finds breeding ground in the lack of meaningful exchange between different social, regional, professional, income, class and education groups. As it closes, the song evidences that love of country can exist alongside an inclusive society without one precluding the other. The statement of the song, whether intentionally or not, emulates the act of reclaiming the heavily connotative term *Heimat* [to be translated as ‘homeland’, ‘country’ in the sense of provenance, and closest than either of those options, as *patrís*, the equivalent Greek term] as also observed in Van der Bellen’s election campaign. *Heimat* is a term reminiscent of nationalist discourses and a

troubled past. Promoting a centre-liberal, independent candidate, Van der Bellen's campaign delivered slogans including 'Wer unsere Heimat liebt, spaltet sie nicht' ['Whoever loves our homeland does not split it'] as well as 'Heimat braucht Zusammenhalt' ['The homeland requires solidarity'] featured on posters depicting the candidate against a natural backdrop and appealing to the Austrian sense of national identity and its close connection to nature and the countryside. In the present day of right-wing populist discourses, *Heimat* is a term largely associated with neo-nationalist rhetoric. Interventions materializing through political [as in the campaign occurrence] or artistic [as in the *Gutmenschen* song] actions serve to flesh out the flawed binarism and false hypothesis of division rhetoric: they invest in unification and expose fear culture as profoundly irrelevant and anachronistic, while, at the same time, recognizing the gap, the fissure, *der Spalt*. Whether they can deliver a transformative impact is a question to be answered through time; it is our responsibility, however, as Fiddler notes, to provide the ground for the examination of 'the creativity of cultural resistance and [...] its potentially galvanizing effect' (Fiddler 2019: 9).

## **Conclusion**

In the context of her own analysis and reference to the case study of *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*, Marschall arrives at an observation that I find in equal measure uplifting and realistic: 'that hoping can be understood as a necessary practice for social change which weaves imagination together with stamina' (Marschall 2018: 162). Such a comment strikes me as profoundly relevant to the case of the Volkstheater, a theatre that has in the recent period dealt with significant financial challenges – as well as a chronically belated essential refurbishment – to emerge as a resilient venue represented by an equally resilient ensemble. Such is hope: a projection but also a

tangible act embodied in the creative work of the Volkstheater's company that has co-created timely, resonant, bold and essential work with Ronen. Imagination and stamina indeed belong together: in terms of representing the crises of our time in a way that will keep challenging, surprising, engaging but also transporting spectators to the heart of the issue – even though they might be empirically very far removed from it. In the context of re-examining our own civic and spectatorial privilege, such interventions are essential. And indeed, as Marschall notes, for hope to become embodied – to transition from a vague concept to practical application and drive for change – it requires depth of time, investment, commitment; and it especially does so in contexts of adverse change and of resistance. Within the specific scope of this article, by considering the intervention of the *Migrationstrilogie* and especially the two pieces developed at the Volkstheater, my own hope was to outline the bold contours on which this theatre has imagined its own course under Badora's tenure and in the context of representations of migration – and to show the force and determination with which it has pursued this path, producing, in the current moment, as close to a provocative, reactionary theatre as we have seen in Vienna's institutional spaces.

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