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Schnitzler's Der Reigen: Serial Seduction

Arthur Schnitzler's *Der Reigen* as a 'pas-de-deux' at the newly renovated Theater an der Josefstadt

by Dana Rufolo and Dardis McNamee on May 1, 2008

Saved under **On Stage**

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Vienna's theatrical activity is a passion and a belief but like daily drinking of water it is also part of life's habits here. I am newly resident in Vienna, and so it is possible that you will hear otherwise in future, but at first sight it appears that the Viennese theatres' system of lengthy repertory seasons and the Viennese addiction to Austrian authors stems neither out of a protective nationalism nor from a paternalistic cultural policy as is the case with some other European countries. This feels rather like a great thirst to see one's personality through the eyes of those very dramatists whose joking self criticism and quest for a form to shape experience most closely match their own secret thoughts.



Sandra Cervik and Herber Föttinger playing the couples in *Der Reigen* | Photo: Sepp Gallauer

One of these favourites was Arthur Schnitzler, whose *Der Reigen* is in repertory at the recently renovated Theater in der Josefstadt, continuing on selected nights in May and June (see Info Box, below).

Der Reigen is a play of serial seduction that caused outrage in Vienna when it first appeared. Published in 1903, it was banned for its sexual content and not performed until 1920 at the Kleines Schauspielhaus in Berlin, after the World War I had wrenched European society from its moorings. The title is hard to translate into English: Literally it refers to a dance in the round and is most often translated to the French title *La Ronde*, or sometimes to *The Circle Game*.

Well, times have changed, and it is difficult to arouse much outrage today with what *Der Standard* critic Isabelle Habert called "a protocol of sexual preferences," off-hand encounters as lust-less and involuntary as a sit-com. But this small-scale masterpiece of dialogue is well suited to the newly renovated Theater in der Josefstadt, Vienna's oldest theater, built in 1788. Its intimacy – built in the same horseshoe pattern of other Viennese theatres, as well as elsewhere – la Comédie Française in Paris, for example – remains unspoiled, and is a perfect setting for this close on up-offhand sexual encounter.

Director Stephanie Mohr has interpreted this fin de siècle Viennese work in the shadow of *The Blue Room* a 1998 adaptation by contemporary English playwright David Hare. Here as there, both the men and the women who meet, mate, and move on are played by just two actors, Herbert Föttinger and Sandra Cervik. Cervik is less successful at transformation than Föttinger, perhaps intentionally: in this dramatic world a woman is always a woman.

The play is a sequence of ten liaisons in all that move up the social classes, starting with a

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Sandra Cervik and Herber Föttinger
playing the couples in *Der Reigen* |
Photo: Sepp Gallauer

prostitute in a urinal area and finishing with a count in an actresses' boudoir. In one of the earliest scenes, the woman is a balloon seller at a fairground, and when the man catches her up and puts moves on her, she sinks to the ground dejectedly, exactly as if she were a balloon that has just deflated. The man the cruelly pops all of her balloons, leaving her empty-handed and bereft. Here she has black hair, and in later scenes blue, as she becomes a frivolous teenaged virgin, and the man is older, imposing and authoritative. She cries like a child after they have made love, and he irritably discards his condom in a standing ashtray. He is impatient, intolerant, but then humour takes over as the young woman hastily turns a nearby statue of Madonna to face the wall, so the sexual sin will go unobserved. The as social standing rises, the liaisons become warmer and gentler. At the end of the play, the two characters have reached an understanding, softening to rapprochement by the final curtain.

With all this coupling, though, there is no explicit sex – much to my own relief, I must admit. The imagination is more powerful. Postures of coitus were more dance-like than physical – there was no blood or sweat, no groans and moans, and hardly any tears. And the clothes stayed on. A child in the audience giggled during one scene – sex is after all a little ridiculous. And the adults in the audience roared with laughter in one scene where the duo grope at romance perched on a large inflated beach toy of the proverbial desert island with one silly, green-tipped palm tree. As they shift about on their inflated paradise, the wooing is mimicked by the movement of the palm tree, which sometimes stands erect and at other times sinks dejectedly at various angles towards the stage.

The stage is flanked by several advent-calendar style doors that open to reveal a lamp or a stag's head that signalled a new setting. The most amazing of these re-creates a bed along the length of a wall. Two doors drops open with pillows attached; the windowsills become night tables; lamps appear; and the two actors are suddenly covered by a sheet hooked to both sides. Fairly simple, if they were lying down, but indeed the two actors remain standing sharing this intimate pillow talk while backed literally – and figuratively – against a wall. With their skill and timing, it is absolutely convincing. Meanwhile, the public toilet signs stage left and right (Damen/Herren) remain like Palaeolithic vestiges throughout the entire déroulement of the interlocking events, permanent characteristics of the setting, as if to remind us not to forget our vulgar origins.

Thus Mohr hints that *Der Reigen's* view of sexuality as a cheap commodity may be dated, even the work deserves respect. Although Schnitzler was a medical doctor and he wrote the play as a sardonic comment on the spread of syphilis through the social classes, the absence of alternative gender groupings limits any modern overlay of our more openly complex sexual world.

Der Reigen
Theater in der Josefstadt
8., Josefstädter Straße 26
May 4, 8, 10, 16, 19; Jun. 1,13, 15, 2008
All performances 19:30
Tel. 01-42 700 – 300
www.josefstadt.org

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