



# qualitalk

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Seeing famous actors on prestigious stages together with a crowd of naked walk-ons seems rather weird. When about 30 undressed men and women display no more than their bare skin, that performance practice is more like a meat inspection than performing art,

perceives

*Oliver Schuster*

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**The Vienna State Opera:** the historic Neo-Renaissance front received a flickering LED light installation in September 2020, reminiscent of the advertisement in the amusement district. The installation can switch the entire alphabet and broadcast messages. It should intensify communication between the opera house and the public and promote interest in art and culture.

Foto © Wiener Staatsoper GmbH/Michael Pöhn

## Naked on a big Stage

### Maria Stuart, directed by Martin Kušej

One might be reminded of Friedrich Schiller's 1784 speech in Mannheim, »The stage of the theatre regarded as a moral institution«, when one sees what is en vogue on the renowned stages at home and abroad.

»We are looking for men between the ages of 18 and 50 who dare to take a standing position on stage for the entire duration of the play, which lasts around 2 hours,« wrote Barbara Rostek, head of the department of-

saw his production of the play Maria Stuart during the corona pandemic. The naked men that the new director placed on the stage could have aroused the curiosity of theatergoers on the one hand, and deterred them on the other.

The freelance costume designer Heide Kastler, who had been working with Director Martin Kušej for a long time, had almost no material consumption for the men of the extra series. Only bare skin mattered. In



**Bibiana Beglau** as Queen Elisabeth of England with men from the extra series in the drama *Maria Stuart* by Friedrich Schiller, staged by Martin Kušej. Foto © Matthias Horn

walk-ons at the Burgtheater in Vienna on their website ([burgtheater.at/search?k=extras](http://burgtheater.at/search?k=extras)). The aspirants were to appear in Friedrich Schiller's classic drama »Maria Stuart« in Salzburg and Vienna, directed by Martin Kušej. The premiere took place at the Salzburg Festival on August 14, 2021. The Vienna premiere was on September 5, 2021, when Martin Kušej was already director at the Burgtheater in Vienna. It is doubtful whether many viewers

one scene, individual letters painted red were applied to the men's backs, which together resulted in the name ELISABETH.

#### **Economized on Costumes**

Not having to make costumes for the extras had a positive effect on costs. What isn't there doesn't consume resources, doesn't take up space to store, and doesn't need to be kept in order.

Other aspects may have played a



**Birgit Minichmayr** as Mary Queen of Scots, in the drama *Maria Stuart* by Friedrich Schiller.  
Foto © Matthias Horn

role in the casting: the request for extras does not mention a nude appearance. So do the applicants have to file naked in front of the selection committee? With a significant proportion of the population already tattooed and pierced, such adorned individuals could be among the applicants. Whether visible body jewelry would be an exclusion criterion? The Burgtheater may be accused of discrimination if it is rejected.

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committee? With a significant proportion of the population already tattooed and pierced, such adorned individuals could be among the applicants. Whether visible body jewelry would be an exclusion criterion? The Burgtheater may be accused of discrimination if it is rejected.

### **The Vienna performance**

The drama lasted two to three quarters of an hour. There was no break outside the auditorium. The most you could do was take a personal break with a nap. Instead of a drink during the break, you could swallow a cough drop. Urgent needs would have to be

suppressed. Due to the difficult conditions, thoughts sometimes strayed from the topic. The intrigues between Elizabeth and Mary Stuart and their entourage were drowned out by concern for the well-being of the naked men: »Aren't they cold?« The idea came up that underfloor heating would be installed at their stand. But suddenly a barefoot man would have to jump up because he had burned the sole of his foot. idea discarded!

It would be better to provide an infrared heater on the back wall of the

stage. Could such a heating source be installed? Despite the opera glasses, nothing could be seen - only naked men from the extra series in detail.

Next distraction: seamlessly tanned bodies from the nudist beach stand next to those with a white swimming trunks butt, fat with rolls of fat, skinny with rickety shoulder blades.

These ulterior thoughts could not be shooed away during and after the performance. Schiller's postulate of the theatre as a moral institution had a different effect in this production. □

## Naked Walks-on in the Staate Opera

Richard Wagner:  
Tristan und Isolde,  
directed by  
Calixto Bieito



*Tristan und Isolde*: in the third act, Andreas Schager sings as Tristan in front of a background of naked women and men, who then come to the fore in pairs. © Wiener Staatsoper GmbH/Michael Pöhn

Richard Wagner's operas are a challenge for visitors who are not outspoken Wagner connoisseurs. Even if you have read the work beforehand, there are still some gaps to be filled.

Therefore, it seems sensible to go to the introduction to the work, which some houses offer before the performance. The Vienna State Opera regularly hosts half-hour introductions in the Gustav Mahler Hall, a 120-meter-

long hall with modern tapestries depicting motifs from Mozart's Magic Flute. This is where the young couples who want to make their dazzling debut at the annual Opera Ball rehearse on the big stage.

Before the opera house was destroyed in 1945, the Gustav Mahler Hall was occupied by the opera management and administrative offices; It was not until 1997 that the magnificent

room with the tapestries was named after Gustav Mahler in memory of Mahler's first conducting hundred years ago and his bust of the sculptor Anna Justine Mahler, his daughter born in 1904, was unveiled.

### **In the Gustav Mahler Hall**

On the evening of the opera, the early visitors sit in this large hall at some distance from the lectern; some of them found space at small tables, where they relaxedly sipped at a glass of prosecco. During the introductory lecture on Tristan and Isolde, the majority of those who were interested stood their feet up in order to hear »relevant information« on performance practice.

The lecture could have shed light on Calixto Bieito's interpretation of Wagner and the Catalan director's intentions. Apart from a summary of the content, which can be read everywhere, little enlightening was offered.

### **Shock treatment**

After the performance, everyone was astonished at what they had seen and heard. The opera as a total work of art fell by the wayside, fragmented into unrelated scenes.

Scandal director Bieito has added more mysteries to Richard Wagner's convoluted storyline. Elevator baskets that moved like a paternoster, swings on long chains on which blindfolded children sat, torn wallpaper and bulky waste were just a fraction of what was expected.

Andreas Schager as Tristan had to trudge through a pool of water. Sea and ship, the defining elements of this opera, were sparsely indicated as projections on the background. The states of mind and fears of the lovers,



Tristan and Isolde (Nina Stemme), did not match the events on stage when Christa Mayer as the servant Brangäne, dressed in a transparent plastic apron, scales a fish with blood-red hands. No, it wasn't blood. Fish don't bleed, but Brangäne wore red cleaning gloves while Isolde rolled around the kitchen table,

Thirty naked walk-ons of both sexes were initially lined up in the background as a butt parade, then spread out in pairs on the stage. The introduction to the work did not address such sights. To some extent, the introduction should give an idea of what to expect, equivalent to »Read the package insert or ask your doctor or pharmacist...«

With the actors on the stage and the orchestra in the pit under Philippe Jordan, Calixto Bieito did not create a coherent total work of art, as one would like to admire in an opera performance. In Wieland Wagner's legendary productions in the 1960s, opera was a place of poetry instead of trash and gags.

### **Bieito's Conception**

60-year-old Calixto Bieito is one of the most sought-after directors. He confidently says that he doesn't believe in faithfulness to the work. He

**Tristan under Isolde,**  
*dying on the upturned kitchen table.*

*Foto © Wiener Staats-oper GmbH/Michael Pöhn*



**Brangäne:** Christa Mayer looks like a fisherman's wife.  
Foto © Wiener Staatsoper GmbH/Michael Pöhn

Foto © Wiener Staatsoper GmbH/Michael Pöhn

does not orientate himself on the guidelines of dead authors, but on what is happening on the street, fashion and music of the present. He says: »If you don't know what to do with it, you shouldn't go to his plays, but rather read the relevant book at home or listen to CDs.«

In the English daily newspaper The Guardian, Michael Coveney wrote about Bietio\*), who lives in Barcelona, that he did have many provocative ideas, but half of them are useless and quotes the opera critic Hugh Canning, who sees the provocative performance practice in the compulsion to create scandals. That was especially true in Germany, where almost 50 houses competed for the favor of the public.

At the dress rehearsal of Tristan und Isolde at the Vienna State Opera, part of the audience was so upset that the opera director Dr. Bogdan Roščić

stepped in front of the curtain and threatened to have the room cleared. He said this was a rehearsal and with the cheap ten euro cards they had no right to bother.

### Contrasting program

How refreshing it was a few days later to meet the heroic tenor Tristan again in his solo recital. Andreas Schager, accompanied on the piano by Helge Dorsch, performed on the same stage to a full house. His performance of Franz Schubert's Die Schöne Müllerin (op. 25, D 795) and Robert Schumann's Dichterliebe (op. 48) delighted the audience, to whom he gave four more encores.

Andreas Schager optimistically said farewell to the concert-goers with »Friends, life is worth living« by Franz Lehar. □

\*) *Weblink*

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2004/aug/07/classicalmusicand-opera>

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## Impressum



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