

Styrian Autumn Festival: A City Revisiting Its European Heritage

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Fifty years ago during one of the most turbulent times in modern European history a new festival opened its gates in Graz, the second largest city of Austria and capital of the District of Styria. Then as now contemporary performing and visual arts inhabited the center of a festival that overnight was to become a hub for the cultural and social debate in the center of Europe. Describing the reaction to the programming of the Styrian Autumn as turbulence would be a rather mild description

During my years of working with the Institute of Evaluation Research at the Music Academy in the early 70's to arrange the annual conference connected to the festival – The Musikprotokol- I became aware of the dormant cultural and political tensions that the festival brought to life for every new theme brought up for public debate.

It all came to mind when receiving the first announcement of the main challenging theme or slogan for the 2018 Styrian Autumn festival - Volksfront. It was not before reading the Guidebook and hearing the welcoming remarks by the new Fes-

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tival Director Ekaterina Degot that I fully understood the background for selecting a seemingly provocative festival title.

We were right at the start reminded of the popular fronts of the 1930's, the broad antifascist political coalitions that soon became perversely appropriated along the line of European political history up until "Volksfront" became the name of a neo-nazi supremacist group in the United States of the 1990s.

Pointing to the overall need for a united front to stand up against an encroaching fascism on the European political horizon, the arrangers emphasize the historical function of the Styrian autumn in "addressing urban and regional narratives, presenting a new way to inhabit the city's social spaces"

And so from the very opening at the city's Europe Square it became evident that the festival committee was committed to follow up on its intent to explore "issues...understood and experienced as a single expanded exhibition spread through town and over many venues." And the explorers would this year be given three long weeks for investigating and hopefully gaining new insight through the artistic media.

And so at the Europe Square that evening of September 21, after her welcoming address Director Degot gave the signal for the legendary performing arts group Bread and Butter Theater to lead the procession into the city "presenting a new way to inhabit the city's social spaces".

"Art is not a luxury, but a necessity like bread" was the adopted slogan of the famous parading theatre group founded in New York in the 60's and known for its protest against the Vietnam War and what they perceived as the social injustice perpetrated by the US government. At the opening they had already been working with local groups discussing how to counteract nationalism and xenophobia influencing European urban life.

And so the urban stage was set for the most important festival in Europe today using artistic argumentation in the midst of urban Europe in a Town Hall style debate on the burning issues of the day, above all the stiflingly nationalism holding countries like Poland and neighboring Hungary in its grasp.

In a Play for Two Loudspeakers by the Russian poet Roman Osminkin performed on the opening night at the famous staircase leading up to the City Castle, the author through a team of performers gave a poignant picture of the media war by adversaries shouting senseless political statements and slogans at each other and a confused public caught in the middle.

A similar demonstration of the deterioration of productive discussion avenues and lack of intercultural communication skills even in the academic fora had been prepared for the simulated session in the Aula of the Karl-Franzens-Universität in Graz of The Iran Conference, a stage play by the Russian poet Ivan Vyrypaev

The introduction in the Festival Guide Book sees the play as a critical comment to the self-confirming and all too predictable outcomes of present day academic panel discussions on overreaching themes like “clash of civilizations” by a presenter labelled as a clash between “Allah and Coca-Cola.” Vryypaevs play is rightfully labelled as a critique of the crisscrossing of today’s debates, even in the academic media, with all-too-personal exchanges driven by narcissistic aspirations, drawing today’s ideological frontlines through surviving contradictory stereotypes

Through the variegated landscape of performance arts. Singular artistic theme-related presentations stand out like the Slovenian Music group Laibach’s critical musical response to the stage musical and the Hollywood film *Sound of Music*, that was especially commissioned for performance at this festival. The group has received international fame through what the Guide Book describes as “their ability to discern its (totalitarian aesthetics) traces and ideologies in seemingly innocent contexts.” Fans of the iconic film or stage musical might find Laibach’s performance bringing out inherent contradictions between aesthetic idyll and social reality, quite disturbing. On this background it is well worth to revisit Adorno’s in-depth analysis of the birth of the modern cultural industry

Among the main performances on the opening program special credit is due for the “choreographed sound piece” created by the young Dutch choreographer, curator and writer Michiel Vandevelde based on the epic poem *Human Landscape* from *My Country* by the Turkish dissident poet Nazim Hikmet. Five actors speak and move out what has been termed “a social history in verse” interpreted through creating a “human landscape” of interactive and pensivelike abstract movements.

From the very start the Styrian Autumn Festival invites to a multi-dimensional exploration and critical self evaluation of the European cultural and social heritage as also mirrored in the history of nations from outside Europe affected by this very heritage. This relationship could not have been more clearly demonstrated than through the European premiere of the inclusive exposition on Congolese culture (*Congo Stars*) mirrored through its art

We have of course come a long way since natives of Asian and African countries were placed on exposition in European zoos alongside the fauna of their colonized homeland. And still, as pointed out by the exposition guide. The racist attitude proclaiming the need for these nations and peoples even to the point of violent extremism to accept our involvement as a “cultural and civilizing mission” lingers on. It is even found in our statesmen proclaiming the supremacy of Western culture (President Trump in his Poland address) In times of a developing “clash of civilizations” the Styrian Autumn Festival has shun no effort to bring to a widest possible public the warning call heard from artists all over the world.