

A Homecoming, of Sorts, for Viennese Plays

Two recent British dramas with Austrian roots made it to Vienna this season: “Leopoldstadt,” by Tom Stoppard, and Robert Icke’s “The Doctor.”



Members of the ensemble in Tom Stoppard’s “Leopoldstadt,” directed by Janusz Kica at the Theater in der Josefstadt in Vienna. Credit...Moritz Schell

By A.J. Goldman

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VIENNA — Leopoldstadt is the name of a central Viennese district with a large Jewish population. It is also the title of Tom Stoppard’s 2020 Olivier Award-winning play, which opened on the West End shortly before the start of the pandemic.

Two and a half years after its London premiere, “Leopoldstadt,” a multigenerational saga of an Austrian Jewish family’s triumphs and tragedies in the first half of the 20th century, has made it to Vienna, where it received its German-language premiere this spring at the Theater in der Josefstadt in a handsome and effectively traditional staging by Janusz Kica. (It will return to the repertoire in December. The London production will transfer in the fall to Broadway, where it will run at the Longacre Theater.)

It is a fitting irony that none of “Leopoldstadt” actually takes place in Leopoldstadt, since many of its characters try — and fail — to escape the perceived stigma of being Jewish by reinventing themselves as Austrians.

When I saw “Leopoldstadt” in London, I wondered how Viennese audiences would react to Stoppard’s fictional exploration of their history and culture. In particular, I was curious whether his re-creation of culturally oversaturated fin

de siècle Vienna, a vanished world that continues to fascinate, would convince an audience more familiar with that glittering epoch. Especially in the first half, set around 1900, Stoppard wears his learning and erudition on his sleeve; at times, the amount of historical and cultural detail that peppers the dialogue threatens to derail the play, with its nearly 30 characters and unusually knotty structure.

The closest thing Stoppard gives us to a conventional protagonist is Hermann Merz, an affluent textile manufacturer who has largely shed the traditions of his rag-peddling forebears and entered high society. The Merz clan is a motley bunch who celebrate Christmas and Passover with both relish and irreverence. Baptized and married to a Catholic woman, Hermann nonetheless boasts of the Jews' colossal contribution to culture, without which "Austria would be the Patagonia of banking, science, the law, the arts, literature, journalism," he says.

Listening to Adrian Scarborough, who played Hermann in the London production, recite Hermann's triumphalist speeches with bluster, I winced a little. Yet the lines sounded considerably less forced in the mouth of Herbert Föttinger, who played the character in Vienna, and in a faithful and fluid translation [by the German novelist Daniel Kehlmann](#). It's largely a question of temperament. Scarborough played Hermann as a nouveau riche climber who is both haughty and insecure, while Föttinger portrayed him as suave and self-possessed. We believe him when he observed approvingly that Vienna's middle-class Jews "literally worship culture."

Föttinger's elegance and poise at the start of the play helped make Hermann's subsequent humiliations and his ultimate downfall all the more tragic. When an Austrian officer who had a fling with Hermann's wife, Gretl, refused a duel with Hermann on the grounds that a Jew is born without honor and hence can't demand satisfaction for an insult, we understood that this offense wounded Hermann more than his wife's infidelity.



Another ensemble scene in "Leopoldstadt," which takes place in Vienna. Credit...Moritz Schell

Hermann Metz epitomizes the worldview of a confident minority who had found acceptance and success in a culture that was an artistic, intellectual, scientific and political hotbed. (Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg and Arthur Schnitzler are all name-checked.) The way Stoppard conjures the milieu of assimilated Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire owes much to writers of the period, including Schnitzler and Stefan Zweig, whose posthumously published memoir, “The World of Yesterday,” is perhaps the most evocative and nostalgia-drenched chronicle of the era.

“Leopoldstadt” leaps from the early 1900s to the years after World War I and from there to Kristallnacht, the anti-Jewish pogrom that the Nazis orchestrated throughout the Third Reich on Nov. 9, 1938. The pinging around is meant to be disorienting as we visit characters we last saw decades earlier — as well as some new arrivals — in radically changed historical contexts.

In its latter half, “Leopoldstadt” finds itself on unsure footing only once. In a scene set in 1924, the family members discuss the Great War, the carving up of Austria in its aftermath, and the messy politics and competing ideologies of the interwar period. In London, I felt that the scene merely struggled to dramatize its themes; here it felt more awkward, and even redundant, as if Stoppard were lecturing the Viennese about their own history.

Stoppard’s masterful final scene, in which the three remaining members of the Merz family reunite in 1950s Vienna, was sensitively directed and acted, but many of its revelations were less persuasive in German than in English.

One of the family members, Leo, has been raised in England and, crucially, has no memory of his early life in Vienna. (Thus it’s a strain to imagine that he would speak perfect German without an accent.) Now a young man, he is a writer of some renown. In a painful reunion with his cousins — a New York psychoanalyst and a mathematician who survived the Holocaust — long-suppressed memories are dredged up and the past superimposes itself on the present in unexpected and haunting ways.

Remarkably, “Leopoldstadt” isn’t the only recent British play with Austrian roots that made it to Vienna this season. Earlier in the year, the Burgtheater mounted the German-language premiere of “The Doctor,” Robert Icke’s 2019 rewrite of Arthur Schnitzler’s “Professor Bernhardt,” which was first seen at the Almeida, the London playhouse that Icke used to run.



Sophie von Kessel, seated at right, as the title character defending herself before a panel on television in “The Doctor,” Robert Icke’s rewrite of Arthur Schnitzler’s “Professor Bernhardi,” at the Burgtheater. Credit...Marcella Ruiz Cruz

Schnitzler’s play, first performed in 1912, is an indictment of the Austrian antisemitism that Hermann Merz naïvely takes to be a thing of the past. The most conspicuous change that Icke, who also directed the production, makes in his version is a gender switch central to his reimagining and updating of the piece.

Like Schnitzler’s prickly male protagonist, “The Doctor’s” lead character, Dr. Ruth Wolff (Sophie von Kessel in a tour de force performance), finds herself under attack for refusing to let a priest administer last rights to a delirious patient who is unaware that her end is near. In the original, Professor Bernhardi becomes the target of an antisemitic media campaign. In Icke’s retelling, Dr. Wolff becomes the victim of virulent social media attacks that smack more of misogyny.

She defends herself against the anonymous online mob by appearing on television to debate a sanctimoniously woke panel. All this gives Icke ample opportunity to skewer cancel culture, identity politics and political correctness, although the satirical and the sincere often coexist uneasily, especially when his supporting characters moralize tediously. At the same time, the colorblind and “gender blind” casting challenges the audience to look past race and sex and reflect on the play’s moral conundrums impartially.

As with Stoppard and “Leopoldstadt,” “The Doctor” feels like something of a homecoming: a Viennese return for a contemporary play rooted in the world of yesterday.

Leopoldstadt. Directed by Janusz Kica. Theater in der Josefstadt.

Die Ärztin. Directed by Robert Icke. Burgtheater Wien, through June 13.

[A Homecoming, of Sorts, for Viennese Plays - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/13/theater/review-the-doctor-wien.html)