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Pre-filmed Sequences Fracture Dramatic Cohesion in Elfriede Jelinek's Burgtheater *as Directed by Milo Rau*

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Abstract: A theatrical production is an inimitable visceral art form. One performance can never be identical to another one. Pre-filmed sequences in a theatrical production introduce something fossilized that cannot be modified by the energy level of the live performance and the ongoing attempt of actors to reach their audience. Aristotle in *The Poetics* observes that the action in a staged performance should be single, without diversification or sub-plot. Film sequences introduce diversity and rupture subtle actor-audience communication in the performance. This paper looks at the play *Burgtheater* by Elfriede Jelinek directed by Milo Rau. Using my review as a source (https://playsinternational.org.uk/burgtheatre-vienna-burgtheatre), I contrast the energy levels of the actors on the evening I saw it with the energy level of the actors in filmed sequences involving acts of aggression towards the character called Alpenkönig. The discrepancy ruptures the audience's sense of continuity and their impression that they were seeing one action. The filmed sequences, recorded at a level of intensity that is not equivalent to that seen in the live theatrical performance, diverts the dramatic flow, reducing dramatic enactment to mere polemics.

Keywords: Milo Rau, Elfriede Jelinek, *Burgtheater*, violence, pre-filmed sequences.

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As a critic, I have seen a great number of theatre plays in which film sequences are used, and my general impression is that there has been little dramaturgical attention paid to how or why these auxiliary interventions have been inserted into the heart of the performance. It is as if filmed sequences are a gimmick that have escaped being tested for dramatic worthiness. Do these scenes enhance the original objectives of the drama, its intentions and significance? Do they provide greater understanding and emotional catharsis possibilities for the audience? Often, these questions have been subsumed by the directors' personal biases and are sustained by under-evaluated critical attention to the meaning and effect of having filmed sequences present in the stage drama.

In this paper, I specifically look at the use of pre-filmed sequences in the play by Elfriede Jelinek titled *Burgtheater* that was directed by Milo Rau for the 2025 Wiener Festwochen, officially labelled as "Freie Republik Wiener Festwochen". I argue that particularly brutal pre-filmed sequences introduced by Rau, who is Swiss, are a distraction and an editorial commentary that weakens the impact of the performance and fractures the thematic cohesion of the original play. These sequences are justified as being part of a Podcast which Safira Robens and a young man who accompanies her are making on the "making of" *Burgtheater*, so the filmed insertions are normalized as a realistic intervention which is contemporary and familiar to the audience.

Burgtheater, which Jelinek wrote in the early 1980s and which was published in 1985[2] features characters who are famous Austrian actors, the Hörbigers. They span three generations, all of whom at some time in their career have been (or in the case of Mavie Hörbiger, are) members of the Burgtheater ensemble; the Burgtheater is Vienna's most prestigious theatre and in many ways a national cult: many plays by Austrian writers feature the Burgtheater in them.

To summarize the gist of Jelinek's *Burgtheater*, the actual script into which Rau has made his filmed incursions or onto which he has added or altered dialogue, is as follows:

[2] Elfriede Jelinek, *Theaterstücke* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2024).

There are three dramatic phases in Jelinek's play. In the first phase, it is 1941. Käthe (Birgit Minichmayr), her husband Istvan (Caroline Peters), his brother Schorsch (Mavie Hörbiger), Resi who is an outcast sister (Annamária Láng), and two daughters, who are often pole-dancing and practising acrobatics during the production: Mitzi (Maja Karolina Franke) and Mausi (Alla Kiperman). They are revelling in their success as good Austrian Burgtheater actors. But Schorsch reminds them that times have changed. The German Reich is now calling the tune.

Then, in an interlude, a figure known as the Alpenkönig arrives. In this *Burgtheater* it is a woman, Safira Robens, who plays the role; her ritualized dancing is portrayed through a combination of film projection and stage work. As a character from the works of the Austrian playwright Ferdinand Raimund, the Alpenkönig represents the positive aspects of the Austrians. For instance, he says, "If you are looking for peace and quiet, Austria is where you should be." But in their zeal for conforming to German values, the family ends up dismembering the Alpenkönig.

It is 1945 in the third phase of Jelinek's *Burgtheater*. The Soviet army has invaded Vienna. Istvan and Käthe are handcuffed. Resi and a dwarf (Itay Tiran, whose real-life counterpart was Fritz Hackl, also a Burgtheater actor) are now the dominant figures. Käthe and Istvan free themselves, and Schorsch attacks the dwarf who is trying to grab their daughter Mitzi. Käthe dramatically and half-heartedly attempts suicide. At this point, Rau introduces filmed material which turns *Burgtheater* into a documentary drama asking the actors how they felt about playing their roles.[3]

The play by Jelinek is exclusively about Austrian history and it accuses the Burgtheater and the Hörbiger family of collaborating with the Nazis. However, Rau's filmed scenes expand the range of the original play, opening it up to a general criticism of racism and intolerance.

This is characteristic of Rau's work as a director. It has been said that "What is almost by now a signature aspect of Rau's work is the porousness of his stage. It is not a protecting, self-sufficient and extraterritorial space on which

[3] https://playsinternational.org.uk/burgtheater-vienna-burgtheater/. Rufolo, Dana. Burgtheater at the Burgtheater, Plays International & Europe online, 30 May 2025.

magical events transpire that permit the audience to dream a little, but rather the external world impinges on the theatrical drama and reduces its capacity to seduce."[4] The external world impinges in *Burgtheater* by the introduction of pre-filmed sequences which are projected overhead at the rear of the stage and that have been produced as supposedly part of a Podcast independently of the play shown in performance. In one of the two brutal filmed scenes which I am using as an example, Rau obviously directed his actors to revel in massacring (under a dining room table, hence the justification for using a camera) the Podcast director, actress Safira Robens who is from Angola and represents the Austrian mythical character, the Alpenkönig. The performing actors smash her face and pull her limb from limb; the extremely intense ecstasy and joy over massacring her (in effigy, but a realistic effigy) exceeds the energy of the live performance, where the characters are languishing and waiting for outside forces to change them. Since the filmed sequence is recorded at a level of intensity that is not equivalent to that seen in the live theatrical performance, it diverts the dramatic flow, reducing dramatic enactment to polemics reflecting the director's personal preoccupation with racism in a way which adds no enlightenment or original perspective. *Burgtheater* becomes momentarily Rau's play, and Jelinek's is sabotaged.

Burgtheater is about Austrian compliance concerning the historic embrasure of the Third Reich, and the film sequences seem meant, at least in part, to remind the audience of colonialist racial prejudice and other contemporary events which abuse human rights. Therefore, they are a foreign element that distracts the audience from the theme of the play. Jelinek conceived Burgtheater as one action, in compliance with the nature of dramatic production as observed by Aristotle in *The Poetics* though of course she was not motivated to write her play so as to comply with Aristotelian rules. However, unity of action is something a dramatist strives for, even one like Nobel Prize winner Jelinek, who writes complex and unusual dramas. The intrusion of the pre-filmed sequence disrupts the audience's sense of continuity and their impression that they are seeing one action.

[4] https://playsinternational.org.uk/la-clemenza-di-tito-ghent-directed-by-milo-rau/ Dana Rufolo in Ghent. October 2023. "La Clemenza di Tito", Opera Ghent, directed by Milo Rau.

I believe that the use of film was not clearly thought out. The above difficulties had not been anticipated. The director Rau had not asked himself what the differences are between staged theatre and filmed theatre. If there is a dramaturge for the play, then there must also be a dramaturge for film sequences. That means, someone who analyses the possible implication of film insertions into the drama and who examines potential knock-on effects.

As an audience member, I found the scene of violence against the Alpenkönig to be disturbing. In my review, I wrote,

She "is dismembered underneath the table by a raging Caroline Peters who at this moment is playing a Nazi soldier (she is Istvan in the Jelinek scenes; Istvan represents the husband of Paula Wessely, Attila Hörbiger). With a gleam in her eye that transcends acting and places the entire brief scene into the realm of psychodrama, she rips this woman from Angola, now the Alpenkönig, limb from limb and crushes her skull with a sledge hammer.

> "(O)ur human intelligence is ineluctable because it is a blending of intellectual consciousness and emotional comprehension. Even if we are artists, we need to think about people's involuntary unconscious responses to scenes of violence and words referencing violence. They exacerbate mental centres of either pleasure or pain. Either way, they are stimulants, and the only way to suppress over-excitation is for our brains to eventually normalize violence. So, why have we fallen into the habit of exposing audience members to violence if our performative intention is to make human violence and aggression extinct?
> The hours spent on making sure that the fake blood fans realistically over the costumes of Minichmayr and Peters are hours that might have been better spent on considering how scenes of violence accelerate the extinction of altruistic tendencies in audience populations."

In other words, due to Rau's interference in using film sequences to establish the identity of the actress playing the Alpenkönig, it was not possible (for me as an audience member) to view her dismemberment as revenge on an Austrian mythical and pro-Austrian Alpenkönig creature who is associated with the beloved Austrian playwright Ferdinand Raimund

whose play *Der Alpenkönig und der Menschenfeind* was published in 1830.[5] This had been the function of the Alpenkönig character in Jelinek's play, as is seen above in the quote from my review of *Burgtheater* where I say that the Alpenkönig "represents the positive aspects of the Austrians". The Austrian willingness to assimilate into the Third Reich was, from her point of view, a betrayal of the country's cultural identity.

Through pre-filmed sequences, Safira Robens has given us her biography, including stating that she is Angolan and arrived in Europe via Portugal. She is also filmed in another brutal scene where she has referenced intellectual thinkers (the English surtitles state her words as follows: "Sartre, Fanon, Arendt, Baldwin, authors who advocate violence") and then is subjected to torture by right-wing thugs. Again using pre-filmed footage, her fingernails are extracted in an agonizingly cruel scene, fingernail by fingernail, all in close-up.

The accumulation of filmed sequences giving importance to Robens as a person separate from her role in the play makes it impossible for audience members to not associate her racial origin and political beliefs as a contributing factor to the terrors heaped upon her. The impact of the drama, the lesson to be learned from it that the Hörbigers ought to have been more faithful to their own country and not utterly prepared to support Austria's annexation, has been diluted into a statement which is ambiguous and actions which are brutal but difficult to interpret.

Like Thomas Bernhard's 1988 drama *Heldenplatz*, Jelinek's earlier *Burgtheater* accuses her fellow Austrians of never having properly dealt with the historic fact that they welcomed Adolf Hitler's assimilation of Austria into Nazi Germany in the Anschluss, occurring on 12 March, 1938. Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* recreates the experience of an intellectual Jewish family living on the edge of the Heldenplatz square in the first district of Vienna when the public cheered Hitler's arrival and takeover of their country, and the crowd as one lifted their arms to give the Nazi salute. Jelinek's *Burgtheater* blames the

[5] *The King of the Alps and Peoples' Enemy* is a fair translation of the title. Raimund titled this play a "Posse mit Gesang" or Farce with Singing, which is precisely how Jelinek refers to *Burgtheater*. Johann Nestroy, another Austrian playwright identified with pride and affection as a part of Austria's cultural heritage, wrote many plays subtitled "Posse mit Gesang" as well.

famous Austrian acting family, the Hörbigers, and in particular Paula Wessely for having acted in German propaganda films. This multi-generational acting family includes the young Mavie Hörbiger who plays her grandfather Paul, Attila's brother, in Rau's 2025 interpretation. So, in this production, the link to historic and present-day Austria is emphasised, as is the intersectionality between fictional and factual which is aided by the Podcast scenes.

However, the play is not about race-based violence as a generalized phenomenon. It is specifically addressed to the Austrian people, among whom Jelinek counts herself. The play is described as a farce ("Posse"), not as a political drama. Jelinek described why she wrote the play in the following manner:

> "mit den Mitteln der Sprache zu zeigen, wie wenig sich die Propagandasprache der Blut-und-Boden-Mythologie in der Nazikunst vom Kitsch der Heimatfilmsprache in den fünfziger Jahren, einer Zeit der Restauration, unterscheidet. Dieser Sumpf aus Liebe, Patriotismus, Deutschtümelei ..., der nach dem Krieg nie richtig trockengelegt worden ist, war mein Material, das ich zu einer Art Kunstsprache zusammengefügt habe."[6]

In effect, Jelinek focused on Paula Wessely's nationalistic lines in the 1941 film *Heimkehr* (*Returning Home*) produced by the propogandist filmmaker Gustav Ucicky. It is supposed to have taken place in 1938, in a community of Germans living in Wolhynia, Poland. They are portrayed as an unprotected minority who are being beset upon by the Poles; this is considered historically inaccurate but the narrative serves to justify Hitler's invasion of Poland, which triggered World War Two. The leaders of this German enclave include

[6] https://www.rowohlt-theaterverlag.de/theaterstueck/burgtheater-2674
This is a quote from Jelinek which is on the site of the German theatre book publisher Rowohlt that published *Burgtheater, Posse mit Gesang* in 1985. It justifies her decision to have the characters speak in a somewhat artificialized Austrian dialect. In English, the quotation reads: I wanted "to demonstrate, through the means of language, how little the propaganda language of the blood-and-soil mythology in Nazi art differs from the kitsch of the Heimat film language of the 1950s, a time of restoration. This swamp of love, patriotism, German nationalism..., which was never truly drained after the war, was my material, which I combined into a kind of artificial language."

Maria, the German schoolteacher played by Paula Wessely, who is imprisoned by Poles bent on breaking up their community. Maria makes an impassioned speech from her prison cell to the other German settlers of her village – descendants of Germans who had moved to Poland 150 years previously, following the call of Katherine the Great. It is riddled with Nazi values. Maria says:

> "Heimkommen werden wir bestimmt, ganz bestimmt. …Und warum sollten wir da nicht Heimkehren dürfen? Wenn wir nur wollen. Denkt doch bloss Leute wie dass so um uns rum lauter Deutsch sein werden. Und nicht wenn du in einen Laden rein kommst und da redet einer Jiddisch oder Polnisch sondern Deutsch. Und nicht nur das ganze Dorf wird Deutsch sein, sondern ringsum herum wird alles Deutsch sein. Und wir werden so mitten drin sein im reinen Herzen vom Deutschland. … Auf der guten alten wärmen Erde Deutschlands werden wir wieder wohnen. Da Heim und zu Hause."[7]

Austrian actress Paula Wessely is speaking in the language of the oppressors, embracing their ideology which excludes non-Germanic languages and peoples – in this case, Jews and Poles and their respective languages – and praises the unassailable legitimacy of the German motherland. We understand that Jelinek hones her language as a counter-attack to the nationalism of the Nazi propaganda film. We understand that the Viennese dialect her characters speak (except for one, Istvan who is played by Caroline Peters, a German actress who says – in added lines – that she won't be able to speak the dialect properly because she is German, which is accurate) and which, I have been told, somewhat constructed although the Viennese dialect does indeed exist and is similar, is used specifically to establish an "other" or alternative reality in the play – the Austrian reality. Her characters, the Hörbigers, are finally speaking

[7] The English translation reads: "We will go back home, certainly. Absolutely for sure. And why shouldn't we, if that is what we want? Think what that will be like when all around us we hear German. And when we go into a store we won't have to listen to Yiddish or Polish; we'll hear German. And all around us we will only hear German. We'll be in the heart of Germany. We will again be living off of the good old warm earth of Germany. Back home in our own places."

to one another in truthful words, because they have been filtered through not the language of the oppressor but the language of the Austrian people.[8]

The nature of Jelinek's rebuttal of the false vision evoked poetically in *Heimkehr* is a commentary on the nature of language as communicator of cultural kinship. Physical brutality does not exist on the plain of revenge from which she operates. The transition to Rau's brutalist filmed images of torture and sacrifice, rather Christian in their implications, is not evident when one examines Jelinek's script with all due respect.

Furthermore, the play *Burgtheater* directly references *Heimkehr* when the dwarf (played in this production by Tiran, an actor of normal height and who is therefore not physically a dwarf but who – as stated above – is representing a dwarf who was a Burgtheater actor from 1966 until 1994) is hidden from view. The characters on stage claim to be protecting him from being euthanized, and the implication is that this act of compassion is intended to compensate their participating in *Heimkehr*. The following are the original surtitles in English, provided by the Wiener Festwochen for use in this article:

> "Resi, you will attest upon request that the dwarf has been hidden by us, personally, from euthanasia. This dwarf must make up for our ill-considered Polish movie. This dwarf is worth gold."

At the close of the play, it is indeed the "Burgtheaterzwerg" dwarf who is in command, telling the other characters what to do or not do.

Jelinek wrote a satirical drama and Rau transformed the play into a diatribe. His device of using prerecorded film sequences inserted into the text as part of a Podcast is a bid for naturalism which, in two instances, portray scenes of extraordinary violence and bodily harm reflecting contemporary preoccupations. They not only interfere with the languishing production style of the performed texts but also betray the gentle yet satirically comedic nature of the original play. Therefore, in this case – and perhaps in other

[8] The program for the 18 May through 20 June, 2025 productions of *Burgtheater* in the auspices of Freie Republik Wiener Festwochen state that the language on stage is "Mit einer mischung aus Jelineks Stücktext in verfremdetem Wiener Dialekt und eigens entwickelten Texten". In other words, the Viennese dialect used is referred to as "altered", not precise.

cases where the technique of inserting film into a play has been used by theatre directors without dramaturgical insight –the filmed insertions add confusion to the production, obfuscating the play's profound emphasis on the association of a national language with national identity.

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