

Das Wiener Volksstück
by Irmgard Wagner

The **Wiener Volksstück** (Viennese Popular Play) is a particular type of drama with music that ruled the Viennese stage in the 18th and much of the 19th century. It is Vienna's native forerunner of the operetta, which was imported from Paris in the late 1800s. The *Volksstück's* own roots are manifold. They include baroque opera for the elaborate stagings and the use of music. Another root is the traditional regional festival play that was staged mostly in rural areas at certain times in the church year, such as Christmas, Easter, and Carnival. The Oberammergau Passion Play is the best-known example of this tradition. Yet another origin lies in the Italian Commedia dell'arte that was performed by itinerant troupes all over the German-speaking countries; it is here that we find the stock character of the *Hanswurst* or *Kasperl* type, the funny person who improvised much of his text and who was expected to poke fun at the Establishment, clerical or secular.

The man who started it all was the itinerant actor/ impresario Josef Stranitzky. He came to Vienna (from Graz) in 1706, and six years later was so successful with his new style of comedy that he could open his own theater near the Kärntnertor, the site of the Vienna Opera today. Around 1800, the height of *Volksstück* popularity, there were three *Volkstheater* in Vienna. One of them was the *Theater an der Wieden*, where in 1791 the impresario and librettist Emmanuel Schikaneder put on Mozart's *Zauberflöte*. And yes, this beloved opera stands in the *Volksstück* tradition, with Papageno as a version of the *Hanswurst* character.

When Stranitzky arrived, at the start of the 18th century, Vienna was ready to go on a roll. The last plague epidemic (1679) had spared Vienna – Emperor Leopold erected the *Pestsäule* (Plague Column) as a gesture of thanks – and the danger of Turkish invasion was finally over, thanks to the military genius of Prince Eugen von Savoyen. Vienna heaved a sigh of relief and went baroque in a big way. Famous architects Fischer von Erlach and Lukas Hildebrandt built one church after another. And they designed city palaces for the great noble families who now ventured into the capital to pay and play court: the Palais Lobkowitz, Kinsky, Trautson, Harrach, Auersperg, Schwarzenberg, and the Belvedere for Prince Eugen. (Fischer von Erlach also got to build the Karlskirche for another Emperor, after another plague in 1713 did hit Vienna but wasn't quite catastrophic.)

If the nobles built palaces and attended “court” theaters that staged Italian operas and French ballets, the people flocked to Stranitzky’s new theater that was geared to their tastes. Here they found, at least to look at from up close – on the deliberately illusionist stage - sumptuous “baroque” costumes, interiors, gardens, and landscapes: the playgrounds of the rich. They found upper class characters to feel sorry for or to make fun of; they found the servants or country folk to feel superior to or to applaud for cheating and tricking their betters. And they never tired of laughing at Hanswurst-Kasperl’s jokes, jibes, and antics. Since his was a largely unscripted role, there was always something new and unexpected in each performance.

This character was Stranitzky’s own invention, an innovation with a huge future. Another reason for the popularity of Stranitzky’s plays was their magical component. They were advertised as “Zauberpossen” = funny magic plays, the “Zauber” we still find in the *Zauberflöte*. We could find all sorts of good reasons, including some of the Marxist variety, why the urban populace of the time should be attracted by “magic”. But then, the people of all times as far as we know, have loved the magical realm of fairy tale, myth, and fantasy. And the purveyors of popular entertainment have found ever new ways and media to satisfy the popular craving for the magical.

In the Viennese plays the magical elements appear as good and evil spirits, as in the title of a late example, *Der böse Geist Lumpazivagabundus*, by Johann Nestroy (1833), one of the two *Volksstück* geniuses. Or they take the forms of fairies and magicians with good or evil intentions. These imaginary beings inhabit a separate world, often in the high mountains – the Alps are the model here, of course – and it is in putting that Other World on stage that all the arts of sets and transformation are displayed and expected to amaze, astound, and delight the audience. The spirits and fairies interact with the human world, they use and manipulate humans as tools to achieve their own, often nefarious ends. The title of a play by Ferdinand Raimund, the other master of the *Volksstück*, indicates this constellation: *Das Mädchen aus der Feenwelt oder Der Bauer als Millionär* (1826). It’s a theme of world literature as old as Homer’s *Trojan War*, where the Gods have men fight their battles. Sometimes, however, the spirits act with the good of the humans at heart and use their magical powers to turn around a bad human towards better ways. This type of play is called a “Besserungsstück” with Raimund’s best-known play, *Der Alpenkönig und der Menschenfeind* (1828), a prime example.

Another important reason for the *Volksstück's* popularity was that it imitates the class structure of real life. There existed two distinct and separate worlds within the city of Vienna, and theater-goers could identify with either one, depending on their own respective places in the social order: on one side the middle-class figures, often recent arrivals in the higher echelons of society due to sudden wealth: the *nouveaux riches*. On the other side were the servants or peasants, distinctly marked as different by their use of Viennese dialect and their traditional, ever since Stranitzky, Salzburg peasant costumes. ("Salzburg" apparently meant "provincial" in Vienna.)

And there was music, of course. From simple ditties and occasionally inserted songs, Vienna's love of music made the musical element expand so that it included regular, long, and substantial monologues in the form of songs. One of these sung monologues, from Raimund's play *Der Verschwender* (1834), has become a regular "hit". Here is the first strophe: "Da streiten sich die Leut herum/ Oft um den Wert des Glücks, /Der eine heißt den andern dumm, / Am End weiß keiner nix. / Da ist der allerärmste Mann / Dem andern viel zu reich. / Das Schicksal setzt den Hobel an / Und hobelt s'beide gleich." The hit version includes two more strophes. And an orchestra came to be expected for preludes, interludes, and accompaniments of the spectacular "magical" stage transformations. The place for Mozart's masterpiece was prepared.

Over the course of the 18th century the most notable development occurred in the Hanswurst role. His text had become ever more lowbrow and more vulgar, so that obscenities and raunchy language got to be his outstanding feature. This went against Empress Maria Theresia's efforts at educating her people, and finally, in 1768, Hanswurst was officially banned from the Vienna stage. Inventive impresarios soon found a way around the prohibition. Some other character in the play, usually of the lower-class, servant or peasant rank, took on Hanswurst's function of ridiculing the higher-ups, while moderating his language to an acceptable level. The most important aspect of the Hanswurst role is his otherness, his outsider's perspective on the figures in the main action. He gives voice to the audience's critique of the faulty behavior exhibited by the upper-class personages. A late descendant is Baron Ochs von Lerchenau – the bumbling, bungling country bumpkin - in Strauss/ Hofmannsthal's nostalgic opera *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Another important factor, perhaps more important than obscenity, in Hanswurst's prohibition was his extemporizing, which made him immune to

censorship. You cannot black out language that isn't written on the page. In later 18th century Vienna, educational efforts went hand in hand with increasing government control of the people's words and thoughts. Emperor Joseph II's famous "enlightened despotism" was still despotism. And it got worse in the 19th century. Under the rule of Chancellor Metternich, Vienna was (in)famous as the most spy-riddled police state in all of Europe. The popular stage with its unscripted *Volksstück* tradition was the only place for free speech, certainly until the 1848 revolutionary upheaval.

In the 19th century the *Volksstück* evolved into two distinct varieties: the *Zauberstück* and the *Lokalstück*. The *Zauberstück* (magical play) more or less continued in its earlier form, but with a strong accent on the theme of *Besserung* (moral improvement). Raimund remained the dominant writer/producer of *Zauberstücke*, and the titles of his plays indicate this theme: ". . . *Der Menschenfeind*" (misanthrope) has to be taught not to hate all (wo)men. "*Der Verschwender*" (The Wastrel) has to stop using and losing his wealth for buying friends. "*Der Bauer als Millionär*" (The Peasant Turned Millionaire) has to recognize the evil power of money.

It is indeed the evil power of money that becomes the dominant *Volksstück* theme. This went alongside drastic economic and social changes in the 19th century with the rise of capitalism. The traditional structure of power and wealth was based on real property: land ownership. Now trade, commerce, and finance took over as the primary sources of wealth, which in turn determined power status and social rank. Names of characters such as Herr von Tatelhuber or Herr von Goldfuchs indicate the recent rise to nobility – the aristocratic *von* could be purchased with the requisite sum – of essentially bourgeois persons: the *nouveau riche* phenomenon.

Now that money had become the real magic wand, the *Zauberstück* receded and the *Lokalstück* took first place on the Volkstheater stage. The change happened in the 1830s, at the start of the period lasting until the revolution of 1848 that historians call *Vormärz* or *Biedermeier*. The *Lokalstück's* undisputed master was Johann Nestroy, and his plays take a decidedly realistic approach to social and moral life. Magic is gone; the scene of the action is the real world of Vienna or some fictionally named, but really existing Austrian town. Nestroy's play about the failed revolution of 1848, *Freiheit in Krähwinkel*, is located in "Krähwinkel" = small place in the sticks where roosters hold pride of place. The *Lokalstück*, while still called "Posse" (farce), is intended as strong critique. Its

main features are irony and satire; and it is up to the artistry of the author to frame the satirical intention in actions and characters that engage the audience's interest while at the same time encouraging a distancing and critical view.

In these plays, the Viennese could recognize their neighbors, their neighborhoods, and their language. Dialect in a moderated form is generally used on stage. The figures wrestle with everyday problems and challenges, mostly arising from family or work/ business constellations. There are no great tragic disasters, no unlikely transformations of personality, no blows dealt by fate. The stage characters have to deal with the same kind of difficult situations which the members of the audience potentially face in their own lives. At the end of the evening, the audience can leave the theater feeling happy that this sort of thing hasn't happened to themselves -- so far.

The *Lokalstück* ran out of steam by the 1870s, and while the type continues to this day as "dialect theater" in provincial settings, Vienna's popular stage was taken over by Johann Strauss and the operetta. *Die Fledermaus* in 1874 gave the decisive signal, and as we know, the Viennese Operetta is alive and well today. So is the Hanswurst character in the figure of Strauss's jailer, Frosch, who is drunk and therefore sees things from a different perspective, and who is supposed to extemporize and throw barbs at city and state government, or who-/whatever else rails the Viennese at the moment.