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## Terrace Talk on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* “I realized I had to start playing immediately.”



Left to right: Bettina Hering (Director of Drama), Valery Tscheplanowa, Ulrich Rasche (Director/Sets), Sebastian Huber (Dramaturge)

Returning to Salzburg after his Nestroy Theatre Prize-winning 2018 production of Aeschylus' *The Persians*, **Ulrich Rasche** now directs this year's new production of Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*. **Valery Tscheplanowa**, who also joined Tobias Moretti one year later as the Paramour in Michael Sturminger's *Jedermann* production, won over audience and reviewers with her performance in *The Persians*. **Sebastian Huber** is no stranger to dramaturgy at the Salzburg Festival either, and happy to be back. Behind the somewhat “mixed” reputation of *Nathan der Weise*, the dramatic poem by Lessing which is occasionally criticized for being naïve, too fairy-tale-like or overly constructed, and often reduced to the plea for tolerance in the parable of the ring, Sebastian Huber recognizes something quite different, a potent postulate: “It's not about tolerance towards everything, but about one's own insight – about remaining open to dialogue and entering into competition with other views, attitudes and convictions,” he says, adding that especially today, when such a form of competitive dialogue has been lost, examining what might lead to better human behaviour has once again acquired extreme relevance. “There is not one truth, but only ever a striving for truth,” says Huber.

To Ulrich Rasche, the decisive question is who embodies the role of Nathan, so that the notion of tolerance encapsulated in the ring parable is restored to the rank it occupies in Lessing's work. Especially in a place symbolizing high culture like Salzburg, which is also linked to certain positions of power, he finds it important to ask oneself: “What right do we have to tell others what to do?”. In casting Valery Tscheplanowa in the role of Nathan, his hope and aim is to

move from a superannuated perspective to another vantage point. To him, the decisive question regarding performers is: “Who speaks which lines in which location?”. Such decoupling is essential for a critical approach, further supported in this production by the fact that the characters surrounding Nathan are not cast with one player, but by a group acting as a chorus. “This approach has been developed from the piece itself,” Sebastian Huber adds, especially as the final resolution means many characters are no longer who they thought they were. Their identities have proven fragile. This effect is achieved by divorcing speech from the characters, preventing identification with only one of them. Thus, the director’s concept is a step into our own present, bridging a historical distance separating us from *Nathan der Weise* while also giving this so-called “play of theories” its own space, Bettina Hering, Salzburg’s director of drama, summarizes.

Valery Tscheplanowa comments on the beginning of rehearsals only one week after agreeing to take on the title role at short notice: “I realized I had to start playing immediately”. Having only known the piece from the audience perspective, she finds Ulrich Rasche’s approach particularly interesting: “To me, playing a male character is less charged with meaning; I expect myself to be able to play any character.” Therefore, she was also grateful to Ulrich Rasche when he offered her the role of Franz Moor in Schiller’s *Die Räuber* years ago. “To me, texts are like scores, and I approach them from the musical side.” The character of Nathan is fascinating to her in the way he solves conflicts with people rejecting him through his use of language. “I am almost irritated at how modern this language seems to me,” she says; therefore she believes the text can be abridged without problems. Sebastian Huber agrees: “Lessing receives too little credit for his freedom in dealing with rhythm and language.”



Valery Tscheplanowa

He describes the first weeks of the rehearsal process: “We thought about what it actually means to be a Jew and to deal with the corresponding resentments.” Even during the period of enlightenment, this debate was not free of antisemitism, he says, adding that it is important to reflect upon the pressure to assimilate exerted upon Jews at the time. Ulrich Rasche agrees: “I think it’s great how the figure of Nathan, who has no institutional protection – as he would in Christianity or Islam – reacts in this situation when he feels antisemitic pressure, not only through his language, but also by facing people with human warmth”. Valery Tscheplanowa has a similar view: “There is resentment here from the enlightened faction as well”. The staging reinforces this through the element of the chorus. “The chorus characterizes representatives

of the Christian majority in society who reproduce antisemitism,” Ulrich Rasche explains. With a view of the choral bodies, his goal was never purely choral marching, but rather moving people in the spirit of Pina Bausch’s dance theatre, making language a rhythmic, physical experience, a choreographic element. Asked about the insights gained during rehearsals so far, Huber responds that he has learned this: “Wisdom is not something you can claim for yourself; wisdom is a social capability, a kind of social magic.”



Bettina Hering (Director of Drama), Sebastian Huber (Dramaturge)

Valery Tscheplanowa is performing in a production at the Perner-Insel for the first time. Asked by Bettina Hering about her experiences so far, she says: “I feel that the hall and Ulrich Rasche’s installation form a unit, his structures and the place seem to merge. If you allow it to, it has an enchanting effect, framing everything. You can experience feelings and thoughts in a decelerated process; together with the audience, we are thinking through the ring parable.” Sebastian Huber agrees: “The audience is the decisive factor,” and Ulrich Rasche adds: “In order for Nathan to take the time he needs, despite everything that is affecting him, the artists have to offer courageous resistance – in rehearsal, this is working incredibly well.” He describes the working conditions in Salzburg and at the Perner-Insel as “phenomenal”.

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