

## Press Release of the Salzburg Festival: Obituary for Otto Schenk

(SF, 9 January 2025) "With the death of Otto Schenk, the theatre world has lost one of its greatest luminaries, an exceptional artist, a true legend! One could not help loving Otto Schenk," said Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser in an initial statement.

"Otto Schenk influenced the Salzburg Festival profoundly for decades, in many ways. As an actor, he was a force of nature on stage, an audience favourite in the best sense of the meaning. As a director, he made theatre history and audiences and critics alike celebrated his triumphs. And as a member of the Directorate, he led the drama department successfully through the turbulent era of the late Karajan years," Hinterhäuser continued.

To the audience's delight, Otto Schenk performed an impressive 237 times at the Salzburg Festival.

As early as 1950, when he was still a young student at the Reinhardt Seminar, he was personally selected by Helene Thimig to appear in the banqueting scene of *Jedermann*, making his Festival debut.

His rendition of the role of Francis Flute/Thisbe in William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1966 was legendary. Karl Löbl raved in *Express*: "At first, Schenk has three scenes with very little text. Continuously munching on various edibles, he observes his friends. Even this observation, these unnoticeable, but so very typical changes in his face are wonderful. Then comes the moment when Flute sees Bottom with his donkey's head. It is hard to imagine any other actor but Schenk executing this toneless shriek, this helter-skelter escape. And then finally his Thisbe, a mixture of awkwardness (due to the costume) and high spirits, joyful imitation and clumsiness ... it's heavenly."

For seven summers, from 1978 to 1982 as well as 1991 and 1992, he returned to Cathedral Square, performing the role of the Devil in *Jedermann*.

In 1987, he won the Festival audience's hearts as Fortunatus Wurzel in Jürgen Flimm's legendary production of Ferdinand Raimund's *Der Bauer als Millionär*. Two years later, he gave a brilliant rendition of the role of Schnoferl in Johann Nestroy's *Das Mädl aus der Vorstadt*, alongside Gertraud Jesserer, Karl Merkatz and Louise Martini.



Otto Schenk (left) with Josef Meinrad in 1961 in Ferdinand Raimund's *Der Bauer als Millionär* © ASF/Ellinger

His last performances in 1996/97 remain unforgotten: he appeared alongside his friend Helmuth Lohner in Peter Stein's production of Ferdinand Raimund's *Der Alpenkönig und der Menschenfeind*. The way in which the two antipodes wore the other one's mask, i.e. how Lohner (Alpenkönig) as Schenk and Schenk (Rappelkopf) as Lohner faced off, inspired the audience to rapturous applause.

The Festival also featured Schenk as a highly successful director. Hilde Spiel gave an excellent characterization of the stage director Otto Schenk in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1976: "Frequently acclaimed, not only as a curious figure, a comedian and character actor of high rank – his Thisbe, his Theodor in *Der Unbestechliche* have become the stuff of legend – but mainly as an opera and drama director, Otto Schenk is a phenomenon that is as complex as it is uncomplicated. Accustomed to success and relaxed, he strolls from one production to another where others might rush breathlessly, from La Scala to the Met, in Vienna, Munich, Hamburg, Berlin, London and Paris. Otto Schenk here, Otto Schenk there – a Figaro of the stage, yet never betraying his standards, nor ever losing his inner dignity, as unrestrainedly as he may play the clown. Protean is a word that might have been invented for him, and yet, the man is all of a piece."

His productions of the two Nestroy plays *Der Talisman* in 1976 and *Der Zerrissene* in 1982 are unforgotten. He made Festival history with the world premiere of Friedrich Cerha's opera *Baal* in 1981, a triumph with audience and press alike. Franz Endler wrote in *Die Presse*: "Otto Schenk, to whom the staging was entrusted, created a grandiose image of Baal and his surroundings, turning types into human beings and the 'animal' Baal into a natural oaf whose total passion for himself is as understandable as anything."

From 1986 to 1988, after Boy Gobert's sudden death, Otto Schenk joined the Directorate of the Salzburg Festival with the responsibility for the drama programme.

"With the black flag flying today at the Festspielhaus, we bow in gratitude before Otto Schenk's life achievements and his work for the Salzburg Festival," the Festival's Directorate declared.