(Re)Politicized and (Over)Sexualized—Wild(e) Treatments on Twenty-First-Century Viennese Stages

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With Oscar Wilde's reinvention as "Our Contemporary" and conveniently adaptable icon of postmodern culture in the last two decades, the author's popular society comedies have evolved into an inexhaustible mine of multiple signification, inviting a broad range of interpretive disambiguation strategies. Inevitably, the diverse textual and dramaturgical schemes of adapting the plays for the twenty-first-century theatre market chiefly rely on what John Stokes has diagnosed as a "quality endemic to the plays: an interplay between performance, audience, and outside world" (171). Thereby engaging their biographical dimension in a "tangled web" of politics, popular culture, and postmodern aesthetics, contemporary Viennese theatrical readings of Wilde ultimately may be regarded as both reflecting and securing the playwright's canonical survival.

Perhaps the most striking example of a distinctly ideological rewriting of Wilde's classic conversation plays is offered by the Austrian Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek's boldly idiosyncratic adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest,* which was commissioned by the Vienna Burgtheater and produced in a collaborate effort with the professional translator Karin Rausch. In this context, it might certainly be argued that Wilde's unorthodox embrace by an author who has been described as a "first-rate figure of provocation" (Janke 7)[1] and whose work routinely calls forth responses of "outrage, vociferous rejection, scandal, laudatory applause, pointed silence – but seldom indifference" (DeMeritt 257) has made an essential contribution to enlivening the dynamics of the Irish author's local theatrical reception. In the theatre programme of *Ernst ist das Leben*—which translates as *Life is Earnest*—Jelinek, who in the 1970s translated Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and, more recently, Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* as well as French farces by Georges Feydeau and Eugène Labiche, freely confesses to the rampant "Jelinekisation" of Wilde's comic masterpiece:

> I usually find that stage dialogues are trivial and absurd, unless they are written by Oscar Wilde. I love Oscar Wilde . . ., I love comedies in general. I have translated French farces by Labiche and Feydeau and now I am translating

1 "Reizfigur ersten Ranges" (Janke 7). All English translations from German are the author's; here, as in the following, the original German quotation will be provided in a footnote.

> – together with Karin Rausch – Oscar Wilde, who, I regret to say, is gradually turning into Jelinek unless someone will save him. ("Dialoge im Theater" 6)[2]

With regard to the substantial quantity of existing Wilde translations into German, Jelinek feels entirely at liberty to conduct a radical ideological and aesthetic monopolization of Wildean comedy. For the eccentric novelist and playwright both esteemed and reviled for her remorseless criticism of modern capitalist society and Austria's post-fascist "cultural amnesia" (Konzett 108; Lamb-Faffelberger and DeMeritt 21), the translator becomes a co-author legitimately entitled to producing an independent work of art that "clings to the original like a lamb to the wolf,"[3] as she declares in a 2004 interview (Augustin 101).

Essentially, Elfriede Jelinek's version of Wilde's "master comedy" turns out to be a veritable orgy of crass humour, riotously anarchic wordplay, and sexual innuendo, which uncompromisingly foregrounds the play's presumed (homo)sexual subtext. It dispenses with all subtleties and drastically eliminates the play's potential of moral and sexual ambiguity in favour of a distinctly political reading that makes no secret of the adaptor's ideological perspective. Set in an ethical no-man's-land of permanent mask-switching and mistaken identities where remnants of Victorian moralism lurk behind the slick façade of neoliberal hedonism, Jelinek's adaptation amounts to a hardcore travesty of modern dandyism. This central theme is also prominently foregrounded in the theatre program of *Ernst ist das Leben*, whose cover image features a male figure turning his back to the viewer and thus displaying the following slogan stitched on his white jeans jacket: "Dandys Rule. Ok?" Notably, the program also contains a section titled "Modern-Day Dandy" ("Dandy heute") with a selection of texts on the subject by well-known writers and artists, followed by Camille Paglia's essay "Oscar Wilde and the English Epicene" in German translation (90-106).

Basically, in their translation-*cum*-adaptation Jelinek and Rausch follow an interpretive strategy of "homophile concretization," ostensibly doing justice to the alleged homoerotic subtext of Wilde's original, which experiences glaring accentuation in the course of quite substantial textual additions, amendments, and specifications (Leitner 114-18). Not only is the two male protagonists' duplicitous scheme of "bunburying" decoded in terms of a dissolute double life of explicitly homoerotic promiscuity, but, in addition, the cynical dismantling of the ideal of romantic love by way of unmasking the marital union as an economically motivated, hard-headed business transaction only serves to underscore the overall scheme of sexual disambiguation that underlies Jelinek's *Earnest*. As their hitherto untroubled,

2 "Dialoge im Theater finde ich banal und sinnlos, außer sie sind von Oscar Wilde. Ich liebe Oscar Wilde . . ., überhaupt Komödien. Ich habe französische Farcen übersetzt, Labiche und Feydeau, und jetzt übersetze ich, gemeinsam mit Karin Rausch, Oscar Wilde, der leider immer mehr zu Jelinek wird, wenn ihn nicht jemand vorher rettet" (Jelinek, "Dialoge im Theater" 6).

3 "Die Übersetzung schmiegt sich an das Original wie das Lamm an den Wolf" (Augustin 101).

comfortable lives, devoted to the maximum gain of sensual pleasure, face a severe downturn in the light of rapidly dwindling funds, the libertine bon vivants—at least for the time being—are forced to trade extravagance and excess for an outward pose of bourgeois respectability. Thus, to all appearances encouraged by the enticing prospect of ample financial reward, Algernon develops a rather sudden attraction to Jack's young ward Cecily, strikingly revealed in the following passage, taken from Act II:

> ALGERNON. . . . I have just fallen in love with Cecily. It took no time at all! As always. And from now on, nothing else counts for me in this world – except for what I'm going to count later on when I'm left in peace. As far as I can see it, I'm going to like the result – in every respect! *Enter* Cecily *at the back of the garden. She picks up the can and begins to water the flowers*. I must by all means talk to her before I leave. Also, I could quickly show her my Bunbury. It's going to knock her off her feet. Ah, there she is. (*Ernst ist das Leben* 37-38)[4]

Unsurprisingly, the corresponding passage in Wilde's original is considerably shorter, as it lacks the additions made for the sake of illustrative specification:

> ALGERNON. I'm in love with Cecily, and that is everything. (*Enter* Cecily *at the back of the garden. She picks up the can and begins to water the flowers.*) But I must see her before I go, and make arrangements for another Bunbury. Ah, there she is. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 59-60)

Jelinek, who shares Wilde's obsession with rhetorics, style, and surface as expressed in the verbal formalism of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Pesl 8), has repeatedly underscored the centrality of language to the construction of the subject. "My characters live only insofar as they speak," thus Jelinek defines the linguistic boundaries of her fictional creations, firmly subscribing to the Wittgensteinian postulate that assumes "the limits of language" to coincide with "the limits of the world" (Bethman 65). Indeed, language is assigned a key role in what the German stage director Falk Richter has intriguingly labelled the "punchline pornography" ("pointenporno") of *Ernst ist das Leben*, which blends grotesque overstatement, comic distortion, and aggressive vulgarism into a veritable "humour explosion," eventually escalating in a "comedy exorcism" (74).[5] The dialogue is full of frivolous word-play, corny jokes, bawdy

4 ALGERNON. . . . Ich habe mich soeben in Cecily verliebt. Das ging ruckzuck! Wie meistens bei mir. Und schon zählt für mich derzeit nichts andres mehr auf der Welt. Außer dem, was ich später in aller Ruhe noch einmal nachzählen werde. Das Ergebnis gefällt mir aber schon jetzt, soweit ich es abschätzen kann. In jeder Hinsicht. *Auftritt Cecily hinten im Garten. Sie nimmt eine Gießkanne und fängt an, die Blumen zu gießen.* Ich muß unbedingt mit ihr sprechen, bevor ich abreise. Ich könnte ihr auch noch schnell meinen Bunbury zeigen. Der wird sie umhauen. Ah, da ist sie ja. (*Ernst ist das Leben* 37-38)

5 "humor explosion – von allem zu viel – keine wohltemperierte komödie, sondern immerzu too much, geschmacklos, die komödienaustreibung" (Richter 74).

double entendre, and revealing slips of the tongue, based, almost invariably, on images of corporeality and sexual acts. Accordingly, Lady Bracknell's visit to Algernon's flat in Act I sets off a train of associations that readily link up Greek mythology with venereal disease and the title of Wilde's short story "The Sphinx Without a Secret" with the more indelicate parts of human anatomy:

> ALGERNON. Didn't it go off all right, old boy? You don't mean to say that Gwendolen refused you? Well, yes, she is a bit bitchy. She is always refusing people. If you ask me, there is something quite malicious about her.
> JACK. Oh no, it's going rather nicely with Gwendolen. As far as she is concerned, we're engaged. But her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a gorgon. I have no idea what a gorgon is. Sounds like gonorrhea. In any case, highly unpleasant. Whatever – that monster, Lady Bracknell, is one. A sphinx without a secret, which is rather unfair. The secret goes with the sphinx as the sphincter goes with the... oh well, nevermind! Can't think of it now. Sorry, Algy, I shouldn't be talking like this about your own aunt. (*Ernst ist das Leben* 22-23)[6]

Needless to say, references to both "gonorrhea" and "sphincter" are conspicuously missing in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which does contain, however, Lady Bracknell's much-quoted likening to a dauntingly fearsome gorgon:

> ALGERNON. Didn't it go off all right, old boy? You don't mean to say Gwendolen refused you? I know it is a way she has. She is always refusing people. I think it is most ill-natured of her.
> JACK. Oh, Gwendolen is as right as a trivet. As far as she is concerned, we are engaged. Her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a gorgon… I don't really know what a gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one. In any case, she is a monster, without being a myth, which is rather unfair… I beg your pardon, Algy, I suppose I shouldn't talk about your own aunt in that way before you. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 44)

6 ALGERNON. Hats nicht geklappt, Alter? Du willst mir doch wohl nicht erzählen, daß Gwendolen dich abgewiesen hat? Ich meine, irgendwie zickig ist sie schon. Sie weist dauernd irgendwelche Leute ab. Das hat schon was Ur-Bösartiges, wenn du mich fragst.

JACK. Aber nein, mit Gwendolen läufts wie geschmiert. Wenns nach ihr geht, sind wir eh verlobt. Aber ihre Mutter ist vollkommen unerträglich. So eine Gorgone ist mir noch nie begegnet. Keine Ahnung, was eine Gorgone ist. Klingt nach Gonnorhöe [sic]. Jedenfalls unangenehm. Was auch immer – Lady Bracknell ist es, das Monster. Eine Sphinx ohne Geheimnis. Finde ich ziemlich unfair. Das Geheimnis gehört zur Sphinx wie der Sphinkter zum… ach was! Wurscht. Fällt mir grad nicht ein. Entschuldige, Algy, ich sollte nicht so über deine eigene Tante sprechen. (*Ernst ist das Leben* 22-23)

When *Ernst ist das Leben* was originally staged by Falk Richter at Vienna's Akademietheater in February 2005, the centenary year of the comedy's Viennese debut, Jelinek's particular interpretation strategy was taken up, uncompromisingly exploited, and even developed further. While Richter's realization concept with its garish visual effects, overdose of slapstick comedy, and crude practical jokes—frequently interrupted by live musical interludes—primarily succeeded in accentuating the conspicuous (homo)sexualization of Wilde's original at the hands of Jelinek, it also aimed at an overall satirical portrayal of a hedonistic and entirely oversexed contemporary consumer society. Hence, in Richter's "reckless orgy of tomfoolery," as one critic noted,[7] Wilde's hyper-elegant Victorian gentlemen were transformed into two lethargic party animals of the 1990s, two merrily queer idlers and decadent fortune hunters who would no longer succeed in disguising the fact that years, if not decades, of excessive self-indulgence had taken a heavy toll. Similarly, Gwendolen cut a striking latex-clad figure as a beguiling dominatrix, Canon Chasuble at one point proceeded to intimate an act of sodomy with one of the wooden sheep populating the rural idyll of Act II, and Lady Bracknell, sporting a fearsomely impressive Cruella-de-Vil mane, made her entry to the tune of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries."

With regard to the substantial freedom accorded to the director in the theatrical realization process of Elfriede Jelinek's own stage texts, which frequently lack clearly identifiable speakers and usually come without stage directions (Honegger 9), one might expect Richter's directorial interventions not to have been limited to the visual representation of characters and setting. "The meaning of theatre is to be without sense, but also to demonstrate the power of the directors to keep the machinery going," Jelinek contends in her 1983 essay "I Want to Be Shallow" ("Ich möchte seicht sein"). In Jelinek's concept of theatre, the director's omnipotence is unsurpassed as (s)he finds her- or himself in the enviable position of transcending both textual constraints and performance traditions:

> Only with his own importance can the director make the empty shopping bags [the actors] glow – those sagging, leaking receptacles with more or less poetry in them. ... When Sir Director reaches into eternity and pulls out something wriggling. At that point he murders everything that was, and his production, although itself based on repetition, becomes the only thing that is allowed to exist. ("I Want to Be Shallow")

In the case of the Akademietheater première of *Ernst ist das Leben*, the "hand of God, the director" (Jelinek, "I Want to Be Shallow") becomes manifest, for example, in the introduction of live music and vocal performances as an additional level of textual interpretation and dramaturgical concretization.

Such distinct traces of drastic adaptational and directorial interference were bound to fall short of critical expectations since they inevitably challenged the

7 "entfesselte Blödelorgie" ("Mehr Elfriede als Oscar" D4).

audience's proprietorial sentiments with regard to a frequently revived, classic dramatic work. What critics particularly objected to was Jelinek's essentialist claim to creating an "authentic" version of Wilde's comedy, to recovering the author's "true" voice from the buzz of textual innuendo, which she repeatedly stressed in interviews ahead of the première:

> This clandestine life of furtiveness and dissimulation ... has brought forth the ambiguity of his language, which points straight towards his deep-seated injuries . . . . I keep those wounds open and squeeze its festering contents to the surface: at the same time, we are trying to show why, in Wilde's day, it was not possible for him to express himself openly. We are emphasising what Wilde was trying to say. . . . I keep the injuries open; Wilde does that too, but he still covers them with a band-aid. We just rip that band-aid off. (Hirschmann-Altzinger 33)[8]

Developed from her own disruptive method of linguistic and aesthetic deconstruction, Jelinek's eccentric reappropriation schemes—advertized in numerous interviews and press releases, which may be considered part of the "paratext of a mise-en-scène" and, as such, crucially determine the theatrical reception process (Pavis 42)—caused quite a stir among commentators in the German-speaking press. Adapted text and performance were perceived to collude in the alleged violation of the comedy's inherent moral and sexual ambiguity, as indicated, for instance, by Ronald Pohl's critical assessment of the production in *Der Standard*: "Where the sphere of ambiguity defies all attempts at specification, a concept which decodes all of life's possibilities of escapism as small acts of fornication is ultimately doomed to failure" (24).[9]

A significant number of critical observers expressed grave concern over what they deemed a virtually sacrilegious treatment of a classic society comedy and a fatal misconception of authorial intent. At the same time, as an ironic twist, the critics inadvertently gave away their own essentialist conceptualizations of the author, the literary work, and what in their estimation qualified as *the* "correct" and solely acceptable mode of interpretation. According to Gerhard Stadelmaier, notoriously polemical theatre editor of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the Irish playwright's enduring audience favourite had fallen victim to Jelinek's "pained pub humour," which had ruthlessly enlisted director Falk Richter as inglorious accomplice:

8 "Dieses Leben der Klandestinität, der Heimlichkeit . . . hat bei ihm diese Doppelbödigkeit der Sprache hervorgebracht, die sehr tief geht, mitten in die eigenen Wunden hinein . . . Ich halte . . . die Wunden offen und drücke dann sozusagen den Eiter heraus an die Oberfläche: Wir versuchen gleichzeitig zu zeigen, warum Wilde das zu seiner Zeit so nicht sagen konnte. Wir verstärken das. Wer hören will, der höre. Ich halte also die Verletzungen offen, aber Wilde tut das auch, nur klebt er immer noch ein Pflaster drauf. Das reißen wir weg" (Hirschmann-Altzinger 33).

9 "Wo die Sphäre der Zweideutigkeit keine Festlegung duldet, muss ein Konzept scheitern, das alle Möglichkeiten der Lebensausflucht in kleine Unzuchtakte übersetzt" (Pohl 24).

> Here . . . gobs of slime are flung at a literary work in a most despicable manner. Jelinek turns Wilde from head to bum, from brain to bowels, from punchline to prick. At the hands of Elfriede Jelinek and the director, Falk Richter, . . . the gay poet is sentenced to queerness: As if he had not suffered enough, his characters appear in drag and are dressed up as poofs. (39)[10]

In the end, the critic judges severely and with more than just a touch of melodramatic overstatement, the author cannot escape execution on the "director's guillotine"[11] for the sake of cheap and lowbrow audience amusement. Without doubt, such condemning evaluations bear testimony to the fact, highlighted by the Dutch translation theorist Theo Hermans, that "the norms of translation in much of our tradition . . . forbid a radical transformation of the original text," as the translation is generally looked upon as "both replica and proxy" (14). However, the air of hostile disapproval pervading such thoroughly dismissive assessments as Stadelmaier's additionally betrays an irrepressible bias against Elfriede Jelinek, whose media reception has been characterized by open antagonism, prejudice, and defamation rather than constructive debate (Janke 7).

Despite, or perhaps rather on account of, the noisy chorus of discordant critical voices, the 2005 production of *Ernst ist das Leben* turned out to be a triumphant success with the audience and ultimately may be credited with keeping alive an ongoing debate on modern stagings of classic dramatic works as either faithful reproductions or creative transformations. In many ways, it appears tempting to subscribe to theatre critic Barbara Petsch's conviction that Jelinek and Richter's "thoroughly tossed and shaken *Bunbury* cocktail" essentially marks a point of no return in twenty-first-century interpretations of Wilde's fin-de-siècle play, rendering any future attempts of realizing it as a "meek British society comedy" a distinctly more precarious task. Thus, in her review for *Die Presse*, which contains a highly perceptive assessment of the production's relevance in the context of the Viennese Wilde tradition, Petsch argues:

> Conservative minds will hardly be pleased about this thoroughly tossed and shaken *Bunbury* cocktail. More liberal theatregoers, however, will be duly entertained by this production, especially those prepared to overlook graciously a few exaggerations, vulgarisms – and a few dragging parts. In the wake of this version it will definitely be more difficult to stage *Bunbury* as a tame English

10 "Hier wird . . . widerwärtig mit Lebensschleimbatzen nach einem Werk geschmissen. Die Jelinek bringt den Wilde vom Kopf auf den Po, vom Hirn auf den Unterleib, von der Pointe auf den Pimmel. Zusammen mit dem Regisseur Falk Richter verhängt Elfriede Jelinek . . . gleichsam die Tuntenstrafe für den schwulen Dichter: Als habe dieser nicht schon genug gebüßt, werden seine Geschöpfe in Fummel gesteckt und aufgeschwuchtelt" (Stadelmaier 39).

11 "Regiefallbeil" (Stadelmaier 39).

society comedy. ("Geschlechter-Gewurl" 15)[12]

Indeed, the harmlessly apolitical, "meek" and unpretentious period Wilde seems to have all but disappeared from the local theatrical arena only to resurface as a most obliging signifier of a whole variety of contemporary intellectual, socio-cultural, and ideological concerns. For example, a revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest*—titled *Bunbury* in most German translations—at the Theater in der Josefstadt in January 2006 employed an illustrious all-male cast of Austrian veteran star actors, which might have been expected to allow for a playfully subversive commentary on the fluid categories of gender identity. In the event, however, the majority of critical observers were in agreement that the multiple interpretive possibilities afforded by this "Wilde-in-drag" approach had been reduced to unspectacular, "long-winded entertainment" (Boberski 15).[13] Since director Hans Hollmann's concept of comical subversion was decidedly lost on the critics, giving way to a boulevard comedy performance style characterized by trivialization and clownish caricature with remarkably little scope for ironic reflection, the production was generally considered exceptionally tame and conventional—a "return to the old, dust-covered Wilde all dressed in plush" (Petsch, "Miss Schenk" 35).[14] According to one critic, the play had been rendered as a "harmless farce straight out of the theatre museum,"[15] and the direct comparison with Jelinek's version triggered some serious speculation on how Wilde's over one-hundred-year-old comedy ought to be performed on the twenty-first-century stage, revealing the reviewer as heir to a long tradition of local critics vigorously debating the chances of Wilde's dramatic works to stand the test of time: "How is the comedy to be realized on stage in the twenty-first century? First option: not at all. Second option: the text will become subject to modernization, as it is done at the Akademietheater, where Elfriede Jelinek's crude adaptation is shown as a grim satire on an exhausted and worn-out hedonistic consumer society" (Tartarotti 33).[16]

There was certainly no lack of ironic reflection in a recent cycle of Viennese Wilde productions masterminded by Hubsi Kramar, outspoken *enfant terrible* of the local fringe theatre scene and left-wing political activist notoriously remembered for

12 "Konservative Gemüter dürften wenig erbaut sein über diesen wahrhaft durch gerüttelten und geschüttelten *Bunbury*-Cocktail. Aufgeschlossene Theaterfreunde dafür um so mehr, vor allem jene, die bereit sind, über manche Überzogenheiten, Ungezogenheiten, hinweg zu sehen – und über einige Längen. Den 'Bunbury' als braves britisches Lustspiel aufführen, das wird nach dieser Version in Zukunft schwerer sein" (Petsch, "Geschlechter-Gewurl" 15).

13 "langatmige Kurzweil" (Boberski 15).

14 "Rückkehr zum alten, staubigen Plüsch-Wilde" (Petsch, "Miss Schenk" 35).

15 "harmlose[r] Schwank aus dem Theatermuseum" (Tartarotti 33).

16 "Wie kann man das also heute spielen? Erste Möglichkeit: Gar nicht. Zweite Möglichkeit: Man holt den Text ins heute, wie das Akademietheater, wo Elfriede Jelineks brachiale Fassung als Abrechnung mit einer ermüdeten Spaßgesellschaft gezeigt wird" (Tartarotti 33).

his grotesque Hitler impersonation at the 2000 Vienna Opera Ball in protest of the Austrian right-wing coalition government. In his interpretations of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (2008), *An Ideal Husband* (2009), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2010) constructs of gender and sexual identity were methodically undermined as part of a larger socio-political agenda. Staged with a mixed cast of trained and amateur actors at the 3raum-Anatomietheater, an alternative performance venue opened in 2006 at what used to be the anatomical institute of the University of Veterinary Medicine, Kramar's productions successfully wrenched Wilde's plays from the monopolizing grip of the cultural mainstream. At the same time, they were inescapably drawn into the ideological orbit of the Austrian actor, director, and political campaigner, whose manifestly tendentious theatrical work is fiercely committed to dissecting the nation's psyche and criticizing right-wing populism, neoliberal socio-economic policy, and tabloid journalism. In this context, it becomes clear why such iconic figures of dissent as Wilde, whose social ostracism Kramar regards as the ultimate blow of Philistine retaliation, conveniently lend themselves to the proselytizing zeal that—in its more or less conspicuous manifestations—is a feature of all political theatre. Thus, the impresario's "Thoughts on Oscar Wilde" ("Gedanken zu Oscar Wilde"), set down in the theatre programme of his production of *Lady Windermere's Fan* and frequently re-encountered as an excessively preached mantra emphasizing Wilde's contemporaneity, in no uncertain terms reveal his uncompromisingly socio-critical reading of the Irish author's successful comedies:

> Wilde saw through and ridiculed the numb and inflexible, disgusting upper-class lifestyles and their hypocrisy and thus entertained the targets of his satirical mockery. Just like his art, just like the protagonist in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde was Janus-faced. While he exposed his contemporaries as hypocrites and dissemblers, he loved being part of the social game of role-play and mask-switching. (n. p.)[17]

Neatly in tune with Richard Allen Cave's insistence that any contemporary realization of Wilde's perennial stage classics ought to take into account "the social, intellectual and political contexts which influenced the conception and writing of the plays" (xxv), Kramar never tires of reminding a twenty-first-century theatre audience of the crucial nexus between the Irish author's life and work. Without doubt, when he considers Wilde's entire literary output practically inseparable from the haunting image of the author cutting a pitiful figure on a "railway platform, handcuffed and spat on by the

17 "Die erstarrten, zum Teil widerlichen Lebensformen dieser Kreise und ihre Heuchelei durchschaute er und zog sie ins Lächerliche. Damit belustigte er wiederum jene, die er verspottete. Durch die gnadenlose Enthüllung der fürchterlichen Scheinmoral der Englischen Society wurde er geliebt und gehasst. Er selbst war doppelgesichtig wie seine Kunst und seine Romanfigur Dorian Gray. Einerseits griff er Zeitgenossen auf das Schärfste an, andererseits liebte er es, dieses Spiel selbst mitzuspielen" (Kramar, "Gedanken zu Oscar Wilde").

mob" (Kramar, Interview),[18] it points towards what has been identified as one of the most striking particularities of Wilde's international reception for more than 120 years. Yet, this tendency has been reinforced by the Irish author's successful recovery as "our contemporary" and the sense of intimacy and personal identification fostered by the cultural prevalence of his myth-encrusted afterlives. Consequently, as John Stokes poignantly observes, "the surprise is less that directors should build in Wilde into their shows than that anyone *other* than Wilde should ever appear in them at all" (173, emphasis added).

For Kramar, theatre is defined by its function as a battleground of ideological debate and thus regularly serves as a platform for his virulent left-wing criticism of the quasi-fascist structures sustaining the apparatuses of state, religion, capitalism, and conservative politics. Consequently, the social panorama presented by Wilde in his conversation plays, populated by a kaleidoscopic mix of fraudulent politicians, outcast women, cunning blackmailers, and debauched aristocrats, is perceived to reveal enough twenty-first-century parallels for Wilde to be enlisted as an accomplice in the didactic mission of Kramar's theatrical work. In quite ostentatiously militant Marxist diction, which makes no secret of the speaker's political sympathies, its objective is summed up as follows: "Even if it seems pointless, it is important to confront the ruling class again and again with its own inhumanity and corruption. This is why I feel particularly close to Oscar Wilde" (Kramar, Interview).[19]

Evidently going along with Terry Eagleton's assessment of the acutely political dimension to Wilde's life and work, which finds expression in his role as a "remorseless debunker of the high-toned gravitas of bourgeois Victorian England" (60), Kramar's interpretations of *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* in particular relied on presenting upper-class culture as a bizarrely comical freak show of oddities. In fact, their strength derived from the cleverly crafted contrast between a conventionally drawn set of main characters and an unruly crowd of grotesquely distorted social zombies. This motley crew of hysterical maniacs, appearing against the background of a bare and unembellished setting which ingeniously exploited the symbolic implications of the green-tiled former dissecting hall, was presided over by a real-life charismatic icon of gay culture: drag artist and chansonette "Lucy McEvil" in the parts of Mrs Erlynne, Mrs Cheveley, and, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, of Lady Bracknell, who was transformed into a forbiddingly imperious, red-haired *femme fatale*. Casting an artfully self-styled diva of the local alternative performance

18 "Letztendlich werde ich Wilde immer vor mir sehen, wie er in Handschellen am Bahnsteig steht und vom Pöbel angespuckt wird: das ist mein Hauptbild von ihm und unter diesem sehe ich seine Arbeiten." Kramar's comment explicitly refers to an incident recorded by Wilde in *De Profundis*: in the course of his transferral from Wandsworth to Reading prison, he was forced to "stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress and handcuffed," exposed to the abuse of a jeering crowd (1040).

19 "Wichtig ist es, die herrschende Klasse, auch wenn es sinnlos erscheint, immer wieder mit ihren menschenverachtenden Abartigkeiten zu konfrontieren. Das ist der Grund, warum ich mich Oscar Wilde sehr verbunden fühle" (Kramar, Interview).

scene in some of the most prestigious female roles of classic comic theatre may indeed be regarded as a clever dramaturgical twist, which allowed for a playfully ironic commentary on the vast spectrum of social masks and guises masterfully exploited by Wilde in his dramatic writing.

Yet, despite his keen attempts to reinvent the Irish author as a prominent figurehead of his anti-establishment propaganda, Hubsi Kramar does not reject the idea that the choice of producing a set of well-proven audience favourites presents a rare opportunity of combining "educational impetus" and the idealistic aspiration to work on "the improvement of mankind," as he calls it, with commercial viability (Kramar, Interview).[20] As theatre manager, director, and practitioner engaged in economic as well as artistic decision-making processes, he is acutely aware of the fact that Wilde's conversation plays, relying on an unerringly successful formula of merging paradoxical wit and good theatrical entertainment with mildly teasing parody, attract a mainstream audience which might not be classified as regular fringe theatre clientele.

Kramar's vehement refutation of Elfriede Jelinek's essentialist claim to uncovering the "authentic" Wilde in her version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Interview)—while he himself engages in a blatant instrumentalization of the author's life and work for his own purposes of delivering a socio-critical message—highlights a familiar phenomenon to be encountered in the international Wilde reception. As Rainer Kohlmayer and Lucia Krämer have observed, "there are thus dozens of . . . Oscar Wildes, each one the result of some . . . translator, writer, editor or theatre director creating an Oscar of his or her own fashion, in response to a specific socio-cultural context" (190). Ultimately, this exceptional degree of adaptability attests to the author's remarkable potential of being everything to everyone, which is securely anchored in a perpetual cycle of critical, scholarly, and artistic reassessment and resignification, presenting the main currency of canonical permanence. Not only has Wilde's steadily advancing degree of cultural iconicity, founded upon a Gordian knot of art, biography, and politics, ensured the continued marketability of his comedies in contemporary boulevard and experimental theatre; moreover, it has rendered them ostensibly ideal vehicles of postmodern self-reflexivity, ideological argument, and a wide range of subjective concerns, which may be considered a vital factor in renewing—and thus preserving—the plays' canonicity. "In this sense," Manfred Pfister perceptively notes, "Wilde 'Our Contemporary' is a radicalized Wilde, a wilder Wilde . . . than the Oscar Wilde who died in Paris a hundred years ago. We are taken to wilder shores of Wilde, or Wilde is taken to wilder shores than he dreamt of" (158). This frequently witnessed tendency to explore the "wilder Wilde" and his widely appropriable deconstructive potential is once more evidenced by the author's continued absorption into the linguistic, aesthetic, and ideological universe of Elfriede Jelinek. Yet again produced in collaboration with Karin Rausch, her newly completed

20 "Es gehört zu meinem Theaterverständnis, dass man versucht, an der Verbesserung des Menschengeschlechts zu arbeiten" (Kramar, Interview).

adaptation of *An Ideal Husband*, meaningfully retitled *The Ideal Man (Der ideale Mann)* and premièred at Vienna's Akademietheater in November 2011, has sparked another flurry of critical attention.

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