

Review: ‘Die Monosau’ Revives Chaotic Energy in Berlin

Chaos also plays a role in a new play at the Volksbühne theater that delivers on its pledge of a director-free evening.

By A.J. Goldmann

A.J. Goldmann attended the premiere of “Die Monosau” in Berlin.

Feb. 20, 2023

Theatergoers at the opening night of “Die Monosau” at the Volksbühne in Berlin on Friday, were promised a “guaranteed director-free evening,” and that is exactly what they got.

The play was inspired by texts that the German artist and enfant terrible Jonathan Meese penned in the 1990s, but the production is attributed to no one in particular. Or rather, the program cryptically credits the acronym “K.U.N.S.T.” (the German word for “art”) as director. It remained vague, however, whether this was a collective name for the artists who had brought this work to freakish, twitching life, or whether this was an abstract affirmation of the cosmic power of art.

Whatever the case, “Die Monosau” blew into the Volksbühne like a revitalizing gust of badly needed oxygen. Through its dynamic performances, gleeful anarchy and insistent embrace of nonsense and mayhem, “Die Monosau” restored a chaotic energy to a venerable company that has stumbled repeatedly in recent years.

In a country that deeply venerates theater directors — and especially at the Volksbühne, a house where, historically, cults of personality have formed — it was refreshing, and unexpected, to find a collaborative model of artistic authorship that succeeded.

How much exactly did Meese contribute? His artistic fingerprints were all over the production in the fiendishly rambling texts and the staging that burst with high, low and pop cultural references (from Wagner to James Bond to the campy 1974 sci-fi flop “Zardoz”) and plain silliness. Despite the various scenery flats of mountains and waves, the inflatable plastic furniture and a frequently rotating stage, the production remained uncluttered and gave space to the seven actors, among them several Volksbühne veterans, who let loose with a series of delirious monologues that were often near incoherent, but grandly, epically declaimed.

Between them, there were lusty renditions of songs and sitcom-like sketches that were often confounding and exhilarating in equal measure. What it all meant was impossible to say, but the fiercely committed cast, supported by their hard-working onstage prompter, Elisabeth Zumpe, and backed by a three-piece band, ensured that the evening had sustained theatrical power and musical flow.

At the start of the performance, Martin Wuttke delivered a mock-epic speech in the chiseled tones of a grand thespian. Later in the evening, he executed a Hitler salute before falling into the orchestra pit: a reference to both Meese, who was taken to court in 2013 for making the banned gesture during a performance (he was later acquitted), and to Wuttke himself, who is best-known internationally for playing the führer in Quentin Tarantino’s “Inglourious Basterds.”

Franz Beil, dressed in a ridiculous white costume, made a memorable appearance as a mussel having a manic episode. Susanne Bredehöft started out as some version of Jane Fonda’s Barbarella and spent the second half of the evening nude and smeared in golden paint, like Jill Masterson’s corpse in “Goldfinger.” Between cigarettes, Kerstin Grassmann, a tough, gruff Berlin actress, belted out the schmaltzy 1969 West German hit “Mr. Paul McCartney.”

An increasingly unhinged monologue, delivered by the Belgian actor Benny Claessens about a gang of friends in swinging London, sounded a lot like the drivel a crazy person on a park bench might spout, but the alacrity of Claessens’s rendition turned his confusing and lurid narration into a gripping display of verbal athletics.

As for Meese, he was not onstage. Not in the flesh, at least. He appeared periodically, Oz-like, as a video projection on a floating egg, making oracular pronouncements, from claiming, “The weapon is good; the penis is bad,” to predicting that 2023 will be the year when Germany becomes a Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art. I was disappointed that he didn’t take a bow at the curtain call. Perhaps he was being modest.

In the end, “Die Monosau” was not so much a renewal of the Volksbühne as a throwback to an era of artistic pell-mell at the theater, albeit one without any ideological underpinning or much dramaturgical focus. There was no theory here and nothing to deconstruct. It was anarchistic without being revolutionary, explicit and in-your-face without being provocative. This isn’t a show that will change the world, let alone the world of theater. As a 130-minute freak out sustained by the high-wire performances, it was thrilling, at times exhausting, at times baffling, but almost always interesting. Most crucially, it was joyfully, mischievously entertaining, a performance whose wheels spun in a wonky, wild way that has been all too rare at the Volksbühne in recent memory.

Die Monosau

Through March 19 at Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin; volksbuehne.berlin. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/20/theater/die-monosau-review-volksbuehne.html>