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My friend

Nestroy Spiele Schwechat, 02.07.2026 [ENA]

In the 54th edition of the Nestroy Spiele Schwechat, Johann Nestroy's late play Mein Freund emerges as a surprisingly dark summer entertainment: a "Posse" that smiles as it lifts the mask from betrayal, cowardice and self deception. Directed by Christian Graf in the courtyard of Schloss Rothmühle, the production embraces both sides of the piece—its sharp comic surface and its underlying melancholy.

It turns them into an evening that feels at once authentically Nestroy and disconcertingly contemporary. Written in 1851, in the long shadow of the crushed 1848 revolution, Mein Freund belongs to Nestroy's "darker" works: popular theatre that trades in laughter yet never fully trusts it. Graf's staging takes this seriously. From the outset, the question "Was bedeutet Freundschaft wirklich?" hangs palpably over the action: every handshake, every protestation of loyalty is tinged with doubt.

The plot pivots on Schlicht, a good natured, trusting man who believes Julius to be his truest friend—a catastrophic misjudgement. When Schlicht entrusts Julius with a love letter to Amalie, Julius pockets the opportunity, suppresses the letter and forges a bill of exchange to get money; Schlicht discovers the fraud and forgives him, a gesture the production plays not as saintly generosity but as a painful mixture of naivety and need.

Graf handles Nestroy's six year time leap with a light but pointed touch. The world has moved on socially, but the structures of power and opportunism remain unchanged. Julius reappears as a bogus baron, slipping into genteel society with counterfeit manners and an ever present eye for profit.
His new schemes centre on two women: the young Marie, whom he cynically instrumentalises, and the wealthy Clementine, whose diamonds he covets. The staging plays these seduction scenes with deliberate ambivalence. On one level they deliver the expected comic pleasure in unmasking a social climber; on another, they expose a disturbing pattern of emotional exploitation which feels remarkably close to modern scams and "gaslighting."

Schlicht's second encounter with Julius becomes the hinge of the evening. He gradually realises that Julius has robbed him not only of money but of his chance at love with Amalie. This time, the trusting man refuses to be the perpetual victim: stepping out of his own role as the "good fool," he actively sabotages Julius's plans, rescues Clementine and orchestrates the final exposure. The production lets this transformation register quietly rather than triumphantly, suggesting that moral clarity comes at the price of

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lost innocence.

What makes the Schwechat Mein Freund particularly pleasurable is its respect for Nestroy's language. The dialogue, full of verbal traps, reversals and pointed asides, is delivered with the musicality and precision that this kind of Volksstück demands; jokes land without being underlined, and the transitions from farce to seriousness feel almost seamless because they are embedded in the same verbal texture.
Nestroy's idiom—apparently casual, yet exact in its social observation—allows Graf to stage the play as a drama about "gesellschaftliche Maskenspiele." The production underscores how figures define themselves through clichés and stock phrases, only to be betrayed by their own slips of the tongue.

Here, language itself becomes a diagnostic tool: the audience hears, often before the characters do, who is lying, who is self deluded, who has begun to see more clearly. Graf is supported by an ensemble that clearly relishes this blend of humour and bitterness. Paul Graf's Schlicht anchors the performance with a quiet, wounded openness: his trustfulness never seems stupid, but rather grounded in a human desire to believe in others, which makes his disillusionment in the second half all the more moving. Opposite him, Manfred Stella's Julius offers an elegant study in opportunism—charming enough to make his manipulations plausible, yet with just enough edge to remind us that his betrayals are deliberate, not accidental.

Around this central pair, Michelle Haydn, Florian Haslinger, Maria Sedlaczek, Bella and Melina Rössler, Franz Steiner, San Trohar and Bruno Reichert sketch a small society where each character's pursuit of advantage contributes to the larger moral climate. The interactions between Marie and Clementine, in particular, highlight different ways in which women navigate a world structured by male calculation—naivety on the one hand, guarded self assertion on the other.

The setting in the courtyard of Schloss Rothmühle, with performances on warm summer evenings, adds its own layer to the experience. Under the open sky, Nestroy's mid 19th century Vienna feels closer than one might expect: the laughter of today's audience mingles with the echoes of an era equally marked by dashed hopes and social manoeuvring. By choosing Mein Freund, the oldest member of Theaterfest Niederösterreich once again proves that Nestroy is not merely a supplier of comfortable Biedermeier fun. This "almost melancholic comedy," as the festival description aptly puts it, foregrounds betrayal, lost illusions and the fragility of trust—topics that resonate powerfully in a present shaped by economic uncertainty and a general crisis.

Graf's production neither modernises aggressively nor embalms the play in nostalgia. Instead, it trusts Nestroy's text and allows its "bittere wie komische Geschichte" to speak across 175 years with remarkable clarity. For audiences in Schwechat and beyond, Mein Freund offers what the best summer theatre can deliver: an evening of wit and enjoyment that lingers in the mind because it dares to ask unsettling

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questions about the price of friendship and the masks we wear to get through life.

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