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War and peace

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The Festspiele Reichenau production of Krieg und Frieden at the Südbahnhotel Semmering is conceived as a resonant, contemporary meditation on Tolstoy's monumental novel, built around a deceptively small but conceptually rich word: AND. Rather than attempting a simple condensation of the narrative, director Philipp Hauß and dramatist Nicolaus Hagg craft an evening that explores the tension and coexistence of opposites

These opposites are war and peace, love and suffering, light and shadow, beauty and transience—as the fundamental condition of human life. At the heart of this staging lies the idea that Tolstoy's work mirrors our current world "like nobody else" not because war or peace have vanished, but because we now live in the unstable in-between of both. The production embraces this "AND" as a dramaturgical axis: scenes, characters and images are organized around the coexistence of contradictory experiences, insisting that human dignity is rooted in the capacity to endure and navigate these tensions.

This is not a mere slogan, but a principle felt in the rhythm of the evening, where moments of intimacy and quiet are constantly confronted with the looming presence of conflict and loss. The legendary Südbahnhotel Semmering is more than a picturesque backdrop; its fragile monumental architecture and decaying beauty become an active partner in the performance. The building's history—marked by multiple stories "between war and peace"—seeps into the action, lending Tolstoy's characters a spatial and historical echo that is both haunting and fertile. Cracked plaster, long corridors and faded splendour embody the very "AND" that the production examines: the coexistence of grandeur and ruin, of memory and present urgency.

Philipp Hauß's direction balances respect for Tolstoy's breadth with a clear theatrical focus. Working closely with Nicolaus Hagg's dramatisation, he shapes the vast narrative into a series of concentrated constellations, allowing key relationships and moral decisions to emerge with clarity without sacrificing the novel's sense of social and historical scope. Scenes are composed with an eye for emotional geometry: who stands where, who listens, who is excluded, and how the space itself tilts toward war or peace at any given moment.

Dramaturg Rita Thiele supports this approach by threading thematic motifs—history and stories, love and pain, light and darkness—through the evening in a way that feels organic rather than didactic. The result is a dramaturgical fabric that allows the audience to perceive Tolstoy's questions as their own, without being

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forced into one-dimensional contemporary parallels. Su Bühler's work on stage and costumes reinforces these tensions visually. The scenic concept draws on the Südbahnhotel's existing architecture, accentuating its "verfallene Schönheit" with interventions that highlight axes of movement and zones of intimacy.

Costumes trace social hierarchies and personal transformations, shifting subtly as characters move between states of comfort and exposure, privilege and vulnerability. The overall aesthetic is one of heightened realism pierced by moments of poetic abstraction. The musical layer, composed and performed by Julius Dörner and Nils Hausotte, adds an essential emotional contour. Their score navigates between the private and the epic, underscoring battlefields and salons alike with textures that suggest both external events and inner turmoil. At times the music functions as a quiet undercurrent; at others, it rises to frame decisive moments where characters must choose between resignation and action.

Tim Werths as Fürst Andrei Bolkonski and Martin Schwab as Fürst Nikolai Bolkonski form a fascinating father-son axis in which ideals of honour and duty confront the lived realities of battle, disappointment and spiritual exhaustion. Lukas Haas's Fedja Dolochow embodies the volatility of war's moral landscape, suggesting how bravado and ruthlessness can thrive in the cracks of collapsing orders. Dirk Nocker as Graf Ilja Rostow and Emese Fay as Gräfin Natalja Rostowa bring depth to the parental generation, their performances illuminating how familial affection and social expectations collide in times of upheaval.

What distinguishes this War and Peace is its refusal to reduce Tolstoy to either historical epic or moral tract. Instead, the Festspiele Reichenau present a living, breathing "Kosmos of AND," in which contradictions are neither neatly solved nor catastrophically frozen; they are lived, negotiated and sometimes transformed. The Südbahnhotel's "fragile monumentality" and the production's carefully woven artistic contributions—direction, dramatisation, dramaturgy, music, design and acting—combine to create an experience that feels both intimately human and historically expansive.

By inviting the audience to "let yourself get involved, allow it, let go" the production does not offer escapism, but a demanding, rewarding encounter with the complexity of our own time through Tolstoy's lens. In doing so, it honours the novel's grandeur while making its questions—about responsibility, love, power and the fragile coexistence of war and peace—strikingly present in the echoing halls of a once-glorious hotel at the edge of the Semmering.

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